

Making the Sphere Handbook

2018 edition • Overview

Universal minimum standards put people firmly at the centre of humanitarian assistance and provide a framework for what people can expect of humanitarian action. They contribute to professionalism in the sector and are a basic tool for fundamental accountability.

The Sphere standards turn rights and humanitarian principles into practice and are adaptable to any operational context. Sphere provides a shared framework which enables local leadership with international support. Sphere builds a common language for the vast number of humanitarian actors and facilitates the coordination of quality programmes.

The Sphere Handbook has evolved since the 1998 pilot version, moving from a focus on disasters to broader complex crises, refining the Humanitarian Charter, developing Protection Principles and gathering evidence from thousands of experts to improve sectoral standards.

The Handbook is one of the most widely recognised and used humanitarian references. It is owned by the humanitarian sector and beyond, written by respected practitioners and widely adopted by national and international NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies and increasingly by national governments and municipal authorities.

The Handbook is being revised through broad consultations in 2017 and a new edition will be published in 2018, marking its 20th anniversary and the important steps taken over two decades to ensure the right to humanitarian assistance and protection with dignity.

Why now: Drivers of change

- **Fundamental shifts in how assistance is provided:** The increased use of cash transfers for multi-sector programming requires us to consider how to find the right balance between service delivery, in-kind programming and cash. We will also need to reflect on the implications of cash-based programming for protection, accountability and quality monitoring.
- **Operating contexts are evolving:** Sphere must go beyond rural and camp-based contexts and take into account the rapid worldwide urbanisation (particularly in some of the poorest and most at-risk regions) as well as protracted crises with emergency spikes.
- **Accountability and participation:** More attention is paid to supporting accountability to affected populations. With the full integration of the Core Humanitarian Standard into the Sphere Handbook, we will build linkages with sectoral standards and strengthen a coherent approach to accountability.
- **Users are more diverse:** With 30 language versions available, a growing number of national and municipal authorities, civil defense, military, and non-humanitarian actors use the Handbook for coordination and capacity-building. Use by national NGOs and CBOs is on the rise. Adapting language, approach and learning to serve these actors is essential.
- **Access to the Handbook and related tools across multiple platforms:** While hard copies remain a valued resource, a growing number of users access the Handbook in electronic format. Cloud-based platforms for source materials, updated guidance and learning will complement the paper Handbook, along with a variety of tools and smartphone applications.

Demographics and application

A recent survey of Handbook users (in English, Spanish, French and Arabic) as well as feedback from authors and contributors to the 2011 edition have shown the sustained reach and use of Sphere. Survey responses came from 2800 individuals working in 149 countries.

- **Field-based practitioners:** More than 40% of respondents are in active crisis or watch list countries.
- **Frequent use:** While 75% reported to having used the Handbook within the last six months before the survey, nearly 30% of the Arabic language respondents reported using it in the last *week* before the survey.

- **Diverse users:** International NGO staff represent 37% of the users, national NGO and RC/RC delegations account for 22%. Approximately 40% are national authorities, civil defence, academics, private sector or other affiliations.
- **Multiple phases of use:** While 66% are using the Handbook for response operations, fully 60% are using it for preparedness globally.
- **Practical tools for effective delivery:** The Handbook is used at many points along the programme cycle: needs assessment: 60%, design: 50%, monitoring and evaluation: 45%, coordination 38%.
- **New professionals:** Globally about 1/3 of the respondents have been in humanitarian work for less than five years, with that number rising to 45% for Arabic speakers.

What will be different in 2018?

Different components of the Handbook will require varied degrees of review and revision. The Sphere foundations (Humanitarian Charter, Protection Principles and Core Standards/CHS) support all minimum standards yet are relatively under-used. The revision will strengthen the links between these principles and processes with the sectoral standards.

Substantive new work or significant redrafting

Introductory Chapter: *What is Sphere*: Full revision with the following additional sub-chapters:

- **Choice of response modality**, with specific focus on cash-based and multi-sectoral programming.
- **Contextualising indicators and actions**, drawing on examples of urban response.
- Stronger guidance on **using Sphere throughout the programme cycle** will be developed, complementing existing guidance in the CHS and reducing redundancies in the sectoral chapters.

Strengthening

Protection Principles: At a minimum, this chapter will refer to new developments and tools, in particular, the ICRC Protection Standards, IASC policy, etcetera.

Core Humanitarian Standard: Two years after its development, the CHS will be fully integrated into the Sphere Handbook, replacing the Core Standards. At the same time, the CHS guiding questions, guidance notes and indicators will be submitted for consultation and review (as agreed by *Groupe URD*, the CHS Alliance and Sphere).

Minimum standards in WASH, Food Security/Nutrition, Shelter/NFI and Health: Review and stronger consideration of context and cross-cutting themes as explained above, and stronger cross-referencing between sectoral chapters and the Sphere foundations (Charter, Protection, CHS).

No updating

Humanitarian Charter

The Humanitarian Charter was significantly strengthened in the 2011 revision. It provides a bedrock foundation which draws on legal and ethical bases as well as humanitarian principles. There is no indication that a significant revision is needed.

Cross-cutting themes

Thematic experts work with chapter authors to include and refer to the following themes in the Handbook:

Gender	Monitoring and evaluation	Protracted conflict situations
Gender-based violence	Environment	Disaster risk reduction
Children	Climate change adaptation	Links to SDGs
Older people	Cash transfers	Logistics
Persons with disabilities	Resilience and recovery	
HIV and AIDS	Urban contexts	
Psycho-social support	Civil-military relations	

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