



# The 2017-18 Sphere Handbook revision process

## After action review

This report is an abridged version of an internal after action-review and lessons-learned document.

### **Publication of the fourth Sphere Handbook**

The fourth revision of the Sphere Handbook was the most consultative process in Sphere's history. Between January 2017 and May 2018, over 500 experts in their respective fields came together and worked almost entirely *pro bono* to update the Handbook in line with changes in the sector since 2011, when the last Handbook was published. In order to benefit from the broadest possible input, over 60 consultation events were convened around the world, bringing together around 1200 people from all levels and sectors of the humanitarian community. On the two Draft versions of the Handbook that were circulated prior to finalisation, more than 4500 comments were received<sup>1</sup>.

The time and effort invested in this process was on a scale not seen before and the new Handbook, which was published on Sphere's 20th anniversary on 6 November 2018, should be seen as a great achievement and credit to all those who contributed.

### **After action review**

As the process of finalising the publication reached its final stages, an After action review (AAR) was commissioned to compile and draw out key learnings from the experience of putting together the new Handbook content. The production phase, which took place between May and December 2018, is not included in this AAR. The lessons learned from the AAR should help inform the planning process when the Handbook is next up for revision, in a few years from now. This Public Report is a synthesis of the main AAR.

### **Drivers of the Handbook revision**

Since 2011, there have been fundamental shifts in the way humanitarian assistance is provided. The use of cash transfers moved from representing a small proportion of aid to becoming a mainstream modality. This is reflected in the Grand Bargain commitment made by donors and international organisations in 2016, to increase the use and coordination of cash-based programming in humanitarian responses<sup>2</sup>. The implications of this shift have required the fuller integration of cash transfers into the Sphere Handbook to be able to guide practitioners.

<sup>1</sup> Drafts 1 and 2 were shared online and Draft 3 was finalised internally.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861>

Humanitarian operating contexts have continued to evolve and the majority of the world's population are now concentrated in urban settings in some of the poorest and most disaster-prone regions. This shift in demographics is having a major impact on the way that aid is delivered, with less aid being directed to rural areas and refugee camp settings and more towards cities with diverse and densely populated communities.

Aspects of accountability and participation require renewed attention and there is a need to integrate more effective tools for accountability to affected populations into Sphere. The full integration of the Core Humanitarian Standard into the Sphere Handbook has presented an opportunity for this strengthening, and to review linkages to sectoral standards and strengthen the coherence of the Handbook.

The users of Sphere themselves have become more diverse and a growing number of national and municipal authorities, civil defence organisations, military, and non-humanitarian actors now use the Handbook for coordination and capacity building at technical levels. Uptake by national NGOs and CBOs is also on the rise. With 31 language versions already in circulation, there is a need to further adapt Sphere's language and approach to serve these actors.

While the paper Handbook remains a valued resource, a growing number of users are accessing open source and free versions of Sphere in electronic formats and in different languages. New Cloud-based platforms for source materials, updated guidance and learning continue to complement the paper Handbook, along with tools for smartphone applications, assessment and monitoring.

## **Key roles in the revision process**

**The Sphere Secretariat** has always provided managerial oversight and direction of the Handbook Revision in terms of accountability and reporting back to the Sphere Board. To execute this fourth Revision, the Secretariat, staffed in early 2016 by the Executive Director and an Advocacy and Networking Manager was complemented by a Revision Coordination Team, led by a Handbook Revision Coordinator and including the two new roles of Editor and Web Editor.

The **Handbook Revision Coordinator** role was originally designed as a full-time external position but became a part-time role after the first few months of the process, when it was felt there needed to be more project management of the Revision process from within the existing Sphere Secretariat staff.

The **Editorial functions** were outsourced to Translators without Borders. Initially, one person was hired for the Editing role to bring coherence across the contributions, however, by the time Draft 2 was being prepared, a team of people was brought on to do the editorial work as it became clear that more staff were needed.

**Chapter Authors**, identified through Board member organisations and 'networks', were assigned responsibility for each of the main areas of the Handbook revision; Protection, Core Humanitarian Standards, WASH, Food Security and Nutrition, Shelter and Health. Chapter Authors were considered to be 'in-kind' contributions from their respective agencies therefore they were not remunerated by Sphere but their working days on the Handbook Revision were paid for by their own agencies. Each area had two or more Chapter Authors (as opposed to one in previous revisions) and the Health Chapter had three Authors.

Like the Chapter Authors, **Thematic Experts** were identified by recommendation from Sphere Board agencies and through 'networks' or otherwise they put themselves forward. They were selected to

represent the fifteen thematic areas<sup>3</sup> to be integrated throughout the Handbook. Thematic Experts were tasked with a) providing technical briefs on the topic of their expertise to inform the revision process b) continuously working with and supporting the Chapter Authors in the drafting of the Chapters.

**Writing groups** were convened by Chapter Authors and Thematic Experts to assist them in the drafting process. The Writing Groups comprised between 5-7 people. In some cases, the Writing Groups did actual Chapter writing, in other cases, they served as a sounding board for the Chapter Authors and the Thematic Experts.

**Peer Review Groups** were the larger groups of about 30 experts and whose role it was to peer review each draft before it went public and to provide advice. Most Peer Groups worked virtually.

**Forty-five Sphere focal points** in different countries held 70 consultation events around the world bringing in feedback from a range of local Sphere implementers as well as a range of different language and cultural backgrounds.

**Sphere Translation Groups** served as sources of feedback regarding the language challenges that were faced in the 2011 Handbook Revision Process.

**The Humanitarian Standards Partners and Companion standards** provided input to the Thematic experts.

There were many **spontaneous consultations** by users with a specific interest in contributing to this process.

A variety of **tools and guidance** to assist the Chapter Authors and Thematic Experts in the consultation, drafting and writing process were provided both by the Sphere Secretariat and by two outsourced agencies, Translators without Borders and International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection.

## **Consultation milestones**

### **Preparation Phase (March-December 2016)**

The Revision process began with a 'preparation phase' between March-October 2016, during which the Sphere Secretariat commissioned a global online survey in four languages (between 16 March and 13 April 2016) to obtain user feedback on the third Sphere Handbook and to feed these results into planning for the new Handbook.

Responses to the survey came from 2800 individuals working in 149 countries. The results of the survey, combined with feedback from authors and contributors to the 2011 Handbook, were then analysed in a Consultants report<sup>4</sup> which also laid out options for developing the new Handbook, in terms of both content and structure. These options were then considered by the Sphere Board and decisions were taken in a Sphere Board meeting in November 2016<sup>5</sup> on the main content revisions for the new Handbook as well as the form of the consultation process and its timeline.

### **Towards Draft 1 (January to April 2017)**

The first Revision Workshop was held (from January 31 to 2 February 2017) in order for Chapter Authors (CA) and Thematic Experts (TE) to agree the principles and steps of the Revision process in more detail

<sup>3</sup> Thematic Expert areas were; Gender, age, environment, disability, resilience and recovery, preparedness, urban response, multi-purpose cash transfers, psychosocial, monitoring and evaluation, civil-military, logistics, linkages to SDG's, cash transfer programming, DRR and CCA.

<sup>4</sup> Framing the next Sphere Handbook revision process, Ben Mountfield, 22 April 2016

<sup>5</sup> Sphere Board Meeting discussion Paper, November 2016

and to get to know each other and their working counterparts in the Sphere Secretariat and in the partner agencies.

The Workshop aimed to establish a consensus on the overall framework for the Revision process, which included; the format for the standards, actions and indicators; discussions on the length of the new Handbook; the Handbook structure, in particular what information should go into the Handbook introduction and what information needed to stay in the technical chapters.

By the end of March 2017, 500 humanitarian experts (in their functions as Working group and Peer review group members for each Chapter) had contributed to the development of Revision Draft 1, which then went public in mid-April 2017 for an online global consultation through the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) platform.

### **Towards Draft 2 (April to October 2017)**

The consultation on Revision Draft 1<sup>6</sup>, received over 2500 individual comments and 56 consultation events were held in 40 countries, making it already at this stage, the most consultative process in Sphere's 20 year history.

From June, the summer months were spent incorporating feedback and developing a Revision Draft 2, which was opened for global online and in-person consultations between the beginning of September and the end of October 2017.

During this time, a second Revision Workshop was held for Chapter Authors and Thematic Experts between 13-15th September 2017 to review the Draft 2 and to look into more detail at the cross-cutting themes.

By this point, it had become clear that further consultation would be needed on Draft 2, meaning that a new Draft 3 would have to be developed and the timeframe of the overall revision extended.

### **Towards final draft (October 17 to June 2018)**

A third Draft was prepared, in the run-up to Christmas 2017 and a third Revision Workshop was held in at the end of January 2018 to validate the text, to work with the designer on graphics, and to finalise links between the technical Chapters.

Validation and sign-off from the Chapter Authors, the Core Humanitarian Standards Management Group took place in April 2018 and in its meeting in early May 2018 in Barcelona, the Sphere Board signed off on the full Handbook text with a few provisos, in particular, the request for a final copy edit of the WASH and Health chapters which were too long in terms of word count and which were felt to not focus sufficiently on the 'emergency phase'.

The last round of editing took place in May and June 2018, after which it was agreed that the length of the four technical chapters was better balanced, meaning that the Handbook text was ready to go to production in early July 2018.

## **What worked well and what were the main challenges**

The Revision process was extensive and while initially thought of as a 'tweaking' of the 2011 Handbook version, it turned out to be a radical overhaul. The number of people around the globe involved in the process was extensive, and the plan was highly ambitious. The approach worked in as far as the main drivers of the Revision process were integrated into the new Handbook; the budget for the Revision process was respected and the timeline, while extended, was not radically different from what was

<sup>6</sup> This consultation took place from mid-April-end June 2017

originally conceived. There were however challenges in the Revision process and these can be broadly grouped together in the following ways.

**Secretariat staffing** - There were frequent changes in staffing and feedback from the Chapter Authors and the Thematic Experts said that this made their work more challenging. What compounded the leadership gap was the absence of the Sphere Director at critical points in 2017, due to unavoidable personal issues. There was a strong consensus in the feedback that a full-time Handbook Revision Coordinator was needed and that a part-time role was an underestimate of the responsibilities and time required. Furthermore, this position needed to be invested with clear decision-making authority on Handbook issues from the beginning of the process.

**Preparation period** - Feedback suggested more time should have been allocated at the planning and early drafting stage of the Revision Process, before preparing Draft 1. The Lessons Learned report from May-October 2017<sup>7</sup> says; 'More practical guidance (both written and through one to one consultations) on style, tone, and terminology would create a more cohesive document earlier in the process and reduce the editing burden in later stages'<sup>8</sup>. It was felt there was a need to provide clearer guidance to Authors at the start of the Revision process on key issues and expectations, such as word count.

**Revision timeframe** - There were often last minute requests to Authors for feedback and in some cases, this caused undue stress and challenges. There was a need to establish a strict Revision timeframe and stick very conscientiously to it when requesting feedback from Authors. Overall, the Revision timeframe should have been of a longer duration to make allowance for changes and delays.

**Editorial functions** - The Editorial function needed to be reinforced with a full-time Content Editor to work alongside a full-time Handbook Revision Coordinator for the duration of the Revision Process. A Proof reader and a Copy Editor should be brought in at specific points for language and style edits.

**Thematic Areas** - There were differences in expectations around the extent to which the Thematic Areas would be included into the whole Handbook. Thematic Experts were told to 'be bold' in the first Revision workshop but many felt that their boldness was then subsequently not taken into account, either because the Chapter Authors for some reason resisted (time pressures, lack of understanding, miscommunication, for example) or because the way the Revision process was organised did not allow for enough time and attention to be given to the Thematic Experts contribution.

**Consultations** - Writing Groups and Peer Review Groups were very useful, one noted 'invaluable'. Feedback indicated that Chapter Authors and the Thematic Experts went to considerable effort to form the Groups with as diverse a representation as possible. However, there were challenges in getting feedback from the private sector and another feedback noted that 'they had a good gender balance but not such a good geographical spread, it was too much western oriented'<sup>9</sup>. Where there were multiple Authors working on one Chapter, it was felt it would have been good to nominate one person to be the lead.

**Tools and guidance** - While the new tools introduced were good, for many, they created extra work, as people had to first learn how to use them. As a result, people tended to favour face to face consultations and workshops and in terms of online tools, webinars and Skype were the preferred options, which also worked well for different time zones.

**Ownership** - As was the case in 2011, the Revision process would have benefited from Revision Principles which all Chapter Authors and Thematic Experts sign up to and the commitment to these Principles could then be reinforced at regular points throughout the revision process to help bring everyone on the same page.

<sup>7</sup> 2018 Sphere Handbook Revision: Lessons Learned, Lynnette Larsen, Revision Coordinator, May-Oct, 2017

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Quotation from the feedback forms

## **Conclusion**

The Sphere Secretariat would like to acknowledge and thank the Chapter Authors, the Thematic Experts, Sphere focal points and the consultants together with the thousands of people who provided input into this Revision process.