Humanitarian standards matter

The Sphere community sets standards for humanitarian action and promotes quality and accountability

spherestandards.org
Sphere Annual Report 2020

1. Annual Priorities 2020

Sphere’s priorities for 2020 were as follows:

A. Sphere network
To support humanitarian actors and first responders to develop greater capacity to put principles and standards into practice, upholding the rights of vulnerable and affected communities.

B. Training and learning
To support humanitarian actors and first responders to deepen their knowledge, acquire skills and increase their commitment to humanitarian principles and quality standards.

C. Policy, practice and advocacy
To promote greater relevance, usability and innovation in humanitarian standards, including focus on tools that empower community-based accountability.

D. Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP)
To promote coordinated action among partner standards to build greater ownership and influence humanitarian responses.

2. Context

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Sphere’s plans for the year were promptly reviewed, adjusted for remote work and additional activities incorporated to support the application of Sphere and other humanitarian standards for responses to the pandemic.

Overall, all planned activities were successfully implemented. Some activities (training, General Assembly, Board meetings, focal points meeting) had to be reformatted. Sphere responded to the new reality by stepping up its capacity to deliver virtual training, meetings and webinars. There were no major technical challenges to the new way of working, and the team continued to operate effectively. Funding pressures on some members accelerated the need for Sphere to review its membership arrangements.

3. Key achievements

Sphere successfully delivered all planned activities and implemented additional ones in response to demand. Key achievements include:

3.1. Sphere produced and updated technical guidance to consolidate learning from the Sphere Handbook 2018. The first thematic sheet on reducing the environmental impact in humanitarian response was published in late 2019 and disseminated in 2020. Guides on urban settings and disaster risk reduction were published.

3.2. The Sphere Handbook was translated into Portuguese, Nepali and German to support greater local uptake of the standards.

3.3. The ‘Sphere in Practice’ online training course was developed and tested.

3.4. Sphere delivered 8 workshops and 1 training of trainers in Burkina Faso and Niger for practitioners responding to the Sahel crisis, in partnership with Sphere’s focal point in Niger and the H2H Network.

3.5. Sphere released guidance on using standards in the COVID-19 response, which was translated into 10 additional languages – including Chinese, Farsi and Italian – by the Sphere community. This was complemented by comprehensive guidance developed in collaboration with the HSP and CHS Alliance. Our COVID-19 webpage was the most popular of 2020, with 46,100 visits.


3.7. Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS) and the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) handbooks were added (in English) to the Interactive Handbook.

3.8. Sphere welcomed 4 new member organisations, including 3 from the global South, and 3 additional focal points (Brazil, Zimbabwe, Colombia).

3.9. Sphere’s General Assembly and global focal points meeting were successfully conducted by videoconference in May and July 2020, respectively.

3.10. Sphere developed its strategy for the next 5 years. Members, focal points and a wide range of external stakeholders contributed through extensive consultations to formulate the strategic priorities.

2020 highlights

- Global network of 100,000 subscribers, 44 organisational and 60 individual members.
- 57 focal points across 49 countries.
- Global community of 116 trainees.
- Sphere Handbook 2018 available in 9 languages.
- New guidance on urban contexts and disaster risk reduction.
- 7 webinars on humanitarian standards in the COVID-19 response, with 1,467 participants.
- 7 HSP handbooks available on interactive platform.
- Pilot of ‘Sphere in Practice’ Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) tested.

Global COVID-19 webinar series

- Humanitarian standards matter. COVID-19: Local and global perspectives
- Palliative care and COVID-19. Challenges for the humanitarian sector
- Human mobility and COVID-19: Lessons from South America
- Complex emergencies in COVID times: MENA region in focus
- Listening, learning, applying. From Ebola to COVID-19: Lessons from DRC
- Leaving no one behind: Inclusion in COVID-19 responses in South Asia
- Fighting COVID-19 in Indonesia
4. Progress on annual priorities

A. Sphere network
i. Sphere welcomed 4 new member organisations and 3 additional focal points in 2020 and continued targeted outreach to expand its network. At the end of 2020, Sphere had 44 organisational members and 57 country focal points.

ii. An indicator of the global interest in Sphere is the number of Handbook translations; 3 were completed in 2020 (German, Portuguese, Nepali), on top of the existing English, French, Korean, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese versions. Discussions were initiated between Sphere and local partners to translate the Handbook into Urdu, Nepalese, Sinhala, Tamil, Turkish, traditional Chinese and 4 local languages in DRC.

iii. Sphere engaged with its focal points network through virtual meetings – one global and one regional. Discussions focused on the latest resources available, as well as opportunities and challenges faced by focal points. Lessons learnt and regional coordination efforts were also discussed. Sphere co-hosted a learning event to review the role of standards in the COVID-19 response with focal points in Latin America.

iv. Between June and November 2020, Sphere hosted a series of 7 webinars to support people-centred COVID-19 responses based on humanitarian principles and standards. The webinars drew on the inputs, expertise and participation of Sphere focal points, local partners and experts. The webinars had a total of 1,467 participants and featured live captions and simultaneous interpretation into various languages – including sign languages. According to an independent evaluation, 99% of participants found their awareness and knowledge of humanitarian standards, community-led approaches and practices improved because of their involvement in one or more webinars.

v. Sphere held 2 global consultations with its community in 2020. Members, focal points and a wide range of external stakeholders were invited to contribute to the development of the Sphere Strategy 2025. The strategy was launched in February 2021 and will guide Sphere’s activities over the next 5 years. Sphere also consulted its members, focal points, partners and key external stakeholders on its membership model. The purpose of this review is to address the question of whether the current membership arrangements best serve Sphere’s mission. Potential changes will be presented to the membership in 2021.

B. Training and learning
i. Sphere delivered a training of trainers workshop in collaboration with the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe. Phase 1 of the programme (a series of 3 pre-training online workshops) was completed and 50 participants who graduated have been invited to apply for phase 2.

ii. In partnership with Sphere’s focal point in Niger and the H2H Network, Sphere delivered 3 workshops in Burkina Faso and Niger for practitioners responding to the Sahel crisis. These events were followed by a training of trainers programme and 5 programme graduates are on their way to becoming listed Sphere trainers. This programme created a great deal of appetite for Sphere training in Burkina Faso and a new pool of trainers to meet demand.

iii. Sphere trainers participated in a half-day refresher training on the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), delivered in partnership with the CHS Alliance. It was a successful pilot and 2 more training of trainers programmes are planned for 2021.

iv. Work on the new ‘Sphere in Practice’ online training course advanced during the year. A 2-week pilot MOOC was delivered in November with 100 participants in preparation for a full launch of the MOOC in 2021.

v. The ‘How to be a Sphere Champion’ e-learning course was localised and translated into Japanese by Sphere’s focal point in Japan. Sphere supported this by upgrading the learning management system to include a Japanese interface.

vi. Sphere’s website was upgraded, with enhancements to the world map on the homepage, locations page, country pages, and individual trainer and focal point pages. These changes enable trainers and focal points to showcase their activities and content better, and make it much easier for practitioners to identify the main Sphere actors in their country or region.

C. Policy, practice and advocacy
i. One of Sphere’s major contributions to the humanitarian sector is to bring the collective wisdom of thousands of humanitarian actors into each new Handbook edition. While the core content will not change between revisions, Sphere is committed to continuing the discussion between revisions and keeping pace with changes and best practices in the sector. In May 2020, Sphere launched a new function that allows users to submit comments to the Sphere Handbook digitally. Practitioners can post links to newly published resources, share case studies and success stories or simply alert Sphere to inaccuracies.

ii. Sphere continued to update existing Sphere implementation guidance. The first thematic sheet on reducing the environmental impact of humanitarian response was published in late 2019 and disseminated in 2020. Further guides on urban settings and disaster risk reduction were also published. More than 320 participants attended the online launch of the guide on urban settings on 15 December.

iii. Sphere developed and released COVID-19 guidance in March 2020 and this became one of the most popular resources ever to be published by Sphere. This was expanded during the following months through contributions from partners in the HSP. Sphere’s webpage dedicated to COVID-19 guidance and resources was the most popular page on the website in 2020. It has been visited some 44,800 times since its publication in February 2020.
iv. Sphere and its partners have supported COVID-19 efforts from the outset and have consistently highlighted the role of humanitarian standards in the response. These efforts informed the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, which stresses the importance of applying Sphere standards in the global COVID-19 response. It specifically calls for dedicated funds to support training, capacity building and technical guidance on humanitarian standards, including through Sphere’s global network.

D. Humanitarian Standards Partnership

i. Sphere continued to strengthen the HSP, updating the terms of reference of the HSP Steering Committee and application guidance for new members.

ii. Sphere actively supported 3 potential HSP members in the development of standards in logistics, camp management and agriculture.

iii. Collaboration with the CHS Alliance and Groupe URD (who jointly manage the Core Humanitarian Standard with Sphere) intensified, looking into first steps for reviewing and revising the Core Humanitarian Standard from 2021.

iv. Sphere continued to engage with its donors.

v. Sphere has a database of 100,000 subscribers to disseminate news and updates.

6. Reflections and insights

6.1. Sphere stepped up its capacity to convene, deliver and manage online training, briefings, webinars and meetings (including for governance) in response to the pandemic. This enhanced accessibility and widened participation in general where online connectivity is reliable and readily available.

6.2. Whilst Sphere has continued to build its online presence over the past 3 years, the challenges in 2020 accelerated the expansion of its online offerings, including training packages and the launch of a new function enabling users to submit comments to the Sphere Handbook digitally.

6.3. With webinars and online events becoming important means to promote global uptake and the impact of humanitarian standards, Sphere invested considerably in accessibility – translation of resources, simultaneous interpretation, sign language interpretation and live captions. Adequate resourcing of accessibility must be a priority for humanitarian organisations and donors, to ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalised are not further marginalised and disadvantaged.

6.4. Our engagement with the Sphere community was more frequent in 2020, reached more members, focal points and humanitarian practitioners, including those in the global South, and contributed to a greater sense of connectedness. Online connectivity in some parts of the world remains a challenge and requires the attention of humanitarian actors and donors.

6.5. Whilst online training and services can reach more users, the benefits of in-person contact must not be underestimated. The vital role of human contact in humanitarian action remains undeniable. Our experience emphasises the importance of local actors delivering training and services where feasible.

6.6. Sphere’s way of working is based on a small secretariat working closely with, and delivering training, services and technical support with and through, our global Sphere community of members, focal points and practitioners. This underscores the importance of localisation, where local actors make decisions, are equipped with the resources required and deliver the services.

6.7. Humanitarian NGOs have been experiencing challenges to their economic survival and this accelerated with COVID-19. The challenges for membership organisations such as Sphere are even greater, as existing members face tough decisions about where to allocate scarce funds and prospective members weigh the cost-benefit of membership. Some long-standing members questioned the value of paid membership versus free use of Sphere resources and others had to make funding cuts. No matter how valid the mission, relevance and need for Sphere, funding enables it to deliver on a globally valued commodity – humanitarian standards. Sphere will continue to engage with new and existing donors to ensure that funding for standards development, training and use is protected or even expanded, including for Sphere to continue its important work on expanding the reach and institutionalisation of standards.

6.8. Sphere has experienced challenges since introducing its membership model in 2018. The added challenges of the pandemic accelerated a review of Sphere’s membership model in 2020, with phased changes likely from 2021, including a simplification of membership categories, more inclusive membership, a lowering of fees and governance changes.
Statement of Income and Expenses
01.01.2020 to 31.12.2020 with comparative year figures in Swiss francs

INCOME

Board contributions and donations
- Membership Fees 274,020 298,330
- Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 70,977 72,525
- Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 150,000 150,000
- German Ministry of Foreign Affairs 190,456 143,288
- U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population and Migration 247,559 277,171
- U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance 406,028 319,391
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies - 40,000
- Danish Refugee Council / H2H 153,219 -
- Other general grants and donations 111,810 13,259

Total Board contributions and donations 1,604,069 1,313,964

Other income
- Handbook sales 5,648 19,667
- Miscellaneous income 3,774 5,971

Total other income 9,422 25,638

TOTAL INCOME 1,613,491 1,339,602

EXPENSES

- Handbook direct sales expenses -12,467 -39,994
- Personnel expenses -913,024 -881,247
- Premises charges -46,232 -89,927
- Administration and office costs -10,665 -3,971
- IT expenses -27,272 -9,035
- Professional fees -79,053 -75,817
- Consultancies & development fees -349,968 -377,315
- Travel, representation & meetings -3,197 -46,187

TOTAL EXPENSES -1,441,878 -1,523,493

NET OPERATING RESULT 171,613 -183,891

Financial income 2,740 3,550
Financial expenses -20,407 -12,546

NET RESULT BEFORE CHANGES IN RESTRICTED FUNDS 153,946 -192,887

Allocation to restricted funds -1,068,240 -812,375
Use of restricted funds 1,048,765 1,019,175

NET RESULT BEFORE ALLOCATIONS 134,471 13,913

Allocation to Operational Reserve and specific project balances -43,944 -26,066
Use of Operational Reserve and specific project balances 5,028 13,575

NET RESULT FOR THE YEAR 95,555 1,422

Percentage of income 2020
- General grants 7%
- Membership 17%
- Other income 1%

Percentage of expenses 2020
- Programmes 30%
- Handbook direct sales expenses 1%
- Operations 69%
### Management, governance and donors

#### Sphere team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr Balwant Singh</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romain Benicchio</td>
<td>Partnerships Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tristan Hale</td>
<td>Learning and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wassila Mansouri</td>
<td>Membership and Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aninia Nadig</td>
<td>Policy and Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barbara Sartore</td>
<td>Communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loredana Serban</td>
<td>Finance and Operations</td>
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#### Sphere Executive Committee

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT Alliance (Alwynn Javier)</td>
<td>BIFERD (Jonas Habimana Seruvugu)</td>
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<td>Caritas Internationalis (Suzanna Tkalec, Vice President)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concern Worldwide (Ros O’Sullivan)</td>
<td>Humanitarian Standards Partnership (Natalie Brackett)*</td>
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<td>International Council of Voluntary Agencies (Ignacio Packer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Nelson Castano, Treasurer)</td>
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<td>Plan International (Colin Rogers, President)</td>
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<td>RedR International (Tanaji Sen)</td>
<td>Save the Children (Michelle Brown)</td>
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<td>Somalia NGO Consortium (Nasra Ali Ismail)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sphere India (Vikrant Mahajan)</td>
<td>* Until November 2020</td>
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<td>** Until May 2020</td>
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<td>Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
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<td>Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs</td>
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<td>Danish Refugee Council / H2H</td>
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<td>Aktion Deutschland Hilft e.V.</td>
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*Sphere full, associate and individual members*