



Humanitarian standards matter

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

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.

3.6. Sphere hosted **a series of 7 webinars** to support people-centred COVID-19 responses.

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 trainers.
- 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

- ① **Humanitarian standards matter. COVID-19: Local and global perspectives**
- ② **Palliative care and COVID-19. Challenges for the humanitarian sector**
- ③ **Human mobility and COVID-19: Lessons from South America**
- ④ **Complex emergencies in COVID times: MENA region in focus**
- ⑤ **Listening, learning, applying. From Ebola to COVID-19: Lessons from DRC**
- ⑥ **Leaving no one behind: Inclusion in COVID-19 responses in South Asia**
- ⑦ **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.

Sphere resources published in 2020

- 🔗 **Using Sphere standards in Urban Settings**
- 🔗 **Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction in Emergency Response**
- 🔗 **Sphere standards and the response to Coronavirus**
- 🔗 **Applying humanitarian standards to fight COVID-19**

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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.
- iii. **Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS)** and the **International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)** handbooks were added to the **Interactive Handbook**, completing the full set of 7 documents (in English) on the platform.

5. Communications and other activities

5.1. Sphere continued to disseminate information, resources and materials on humanitarian standards and to advocate for their application globally. During the year, Sphere's website was visited 281,416 times (+21% in comparison with 2019) by 184,523 unique users; 81% of these visitors were first-time users and almost 60% of website users were aged 18–34. Sphere continued to expand its reach, especially to younger generations of humanitarian practitioners.

5.2. Sphere published 11 **blogs** during the year, including one on the hierarchy of humanitarian standards and guidance which proved very popular. It helps

practitioners navigate the often-confusing system of humanitarian tools and standards, and was read more than 1,300 times during the year.

5.3. Sphere continued to engage with its global community through digital platforms. The number of social media followers continued to increase at a regular pace, reaching 16,980 on **Facebook**, 9,040 on **Twitter**, and 3,070 on **LinkedIn**. Sphere has a database of 100,000 subscribers to disseminate news and updates.

5.4. Sphere developed expertise in the organisation and delivery of webinars, with a particular focus on accessibility for people with visual or hearing impairments (simultaneous interpretation, sign language interpretation, live captions). Sphere webinars were described as setting “the gold standard for online events” in a survey.

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.

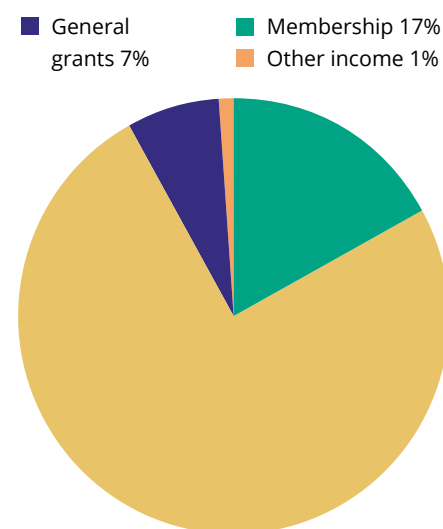
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Statement of Income and Expenses

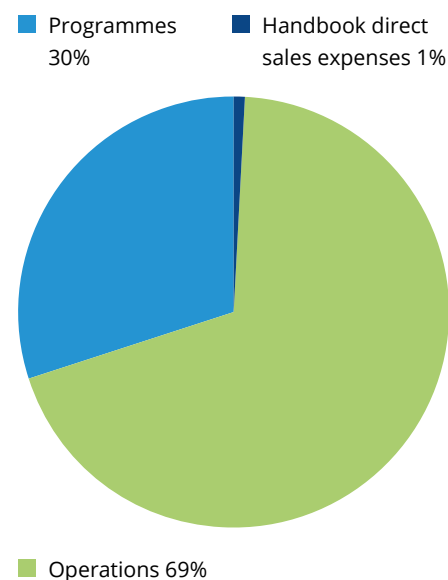
01.01.2020 to 31.12.2020 with comparative year figures in Swiss francs

	2020	2019
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



Percentage of expenses 2020



Management, governance and donors

Sphere team

Dr Balwant Singh
Executive Director

Romain Benicchio
Partnerships Director

Tristan Hale,
Learning and Development

Wassila Mansouri
Membership and Network

Aninia Nadig
Policy and Practice

Barbara Sartore
Communications

Loredana Serban
Finance and Operations

Sphere Executive Committee

ACT Alliance (Alwynn Javier)

BIFERD (Jonas Habimana Seruvugu)

Caritas Internationalis
(Suzanna Tkalec, Vice President)

Concern Worldwide (Ros O'Sullivan)

Humanitarian Standards Partnership
(Natalie Brackett)*

International Council of Voluntary Agencies
(Ignacio Packer)

International Federation of Red Cross and
Red Crescent Societies (Nelson Castano,
Treasurer)

Plan International (Colin Rogers, President)

RedR International (Tanaji Sen)

Save the Children (Michelle Brown)

Somalia NGO Consortium
(Nasra Ali Ismail)**

Sphere India (Vikrant Mahajan)

* Until November 2020

** Until May 2020

Sphere Donors

Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

German Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Swiss Federal Department of Foreign
Affairs

U.S. Department of State, Bureau of
Population and Migration

U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance

Danish Refugee Council / H2H

Aktion Deutschland Hilft e.V.

Sphere full, associate and individual
members

Cover picture: Yaoundé. The residents of the Foyer Colonel-Daniel-de-Rouffignac for the blind support each other a lot, especially during this period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: DANIEL BELOUMOU/ICRC. **Below:** Assam. Indian Red Cross Society staff and volunteers carry out distribution of tarpaulin, mosquito nets, kitchen sets, hygiene kits and dry food to flood affected people in several districts of the region. Credit: BIJU BORO/ICRC

