



STRATEGIC PLAN

2026 – 2028



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Summary

The Sphere Handbook sets the standard for principled humanitarian action. Rooted in human rights and humanitarian principles, it guides aid workers to contribute assistance effectively while protecting the dignity of every person in crisis. Trusted by thousands of humanitarian stakeholders and decision makers worldwide, Sphere is a universal compass in a changing world.

Some people inside and outside the humanitarian system are questioning whether quality and accountability are still critical or achievable. But three decades of work to promote, advocate for and train the sector in Minimum Standards must not be lost to shifting trends or the ill winds of change. Sphere will not let that happen. Together as members, focal points, and champions, we will stand firm, speak out, and act, to ensure that every person affected by crisis can live with dignity, no matter their situation.

Over the next three years, Sphere will sustain its role as the leading guidance for principled, people-centred humanitarian action. Building on almost thirty years of experience, Sphere will update its flagship Handbook, innovatively enhance digital tools, and strengthen global network to ensure that crisis-affected communities receive effective, accountable, and dignified assistance. Sphere has delivered substantial, sector-shaping impact and this strategy is as much about building on our past successful impact as planning what will we do in the next three years.

The primary focus is a comprehensive update and development of the 2018 Sphere Handbook, fully aligned with other Minimum Standards, and delivered through the transformational Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) platform. This interactive, digital-first resource will provide frontline workers, local leaders, and technical experts with accessible, context-specific guidance, while printed editions will remain available where needed. Sphere will pursue sustainability through strategic partnerships with donors, universities, regional networks, and private sector actors committed to humanitarian principles.

The Sphere Association, legally registered in Switzerland, will continue its ongoing evolution from a central 'Secretariat' team to a hybrid global 'support' team while retaining the central office in Geneva. This reflects Sphere's commitment to localisation, decentralisation, and efficiency. On behalf of the General Assembly, the Governing Board will continue to oversee the Sphere Association's mission, strategic direction, and fiscal integrity. The next governing Board will be elected by a General Assembly in December 2026.

A key priority is the restructuring and broadening of Sphere's network to ensure it is truly representative of all humanitarian stakeholders. It is this network that will deliver a holistic revision of the Handbook, strengthen the relevance and legitimacy of Sphere's work, and support the fundraising efforts that are essential to Sphere's long-term sustainability. Sphere will strengthen regional and national leadership through its network of Focal Points, Members, and Trainers, who serve as key actors enabling the contextualisation and local ownership of the guidance.

Amid growing global crises, funding cuts, and overstretched capacities of many people, Sphere's role is more vital than ever. As the humanitarian sector faces shifting power

dynamics, Sphere will continue to serve as the trusted, unified source of standards and tools to support principled, high-quality humanitarian response worldwide.

Structure

This strategy is founded upon the four focus areas of Sphere's Theory of Change. These areas reinforce one another: the Handbook provides the normative content; the Network ensures ownership and dissemination; Policy and Advocacy amplify the impact; and Strategic Partnerships strengthen the sustainability and legitimacy of the Sphere system:

1. **Sphere Handbook**
2. **Champions Network**
3. **Policy & Advocacy**
4. **Strategic Partnerships**

Overall Purpose

To enable principled and locally-led humanitarian action through innovative, trusted and actionable guidance.

Strategic Focus Areas

1. Sphere Handbook

Objective

To increase the awareness and effective use of the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards.

Context

As humanitarian needs rise against stretched capacities and funding declines, the Sphere Handbook continues to be one of the most recognised tools for principled and accountable humanitarian action. However, the 2018 edition is becoming out of date. It was written before the COVID-19 pandemic; new vaccines; recent advances in Artificial Intelligence; the break-up of USAID and 'humanitarian reset'; and increased scale and scope of conflicts around the world. Some of the content needs revising and the way people interact with content is changing rapidly. The Sphere Handbook serves both as a technical reference and as a living process of learning, dialogue, and ownership of humanitarian principles across diverse cultural and operational contexts.

Between 2026 and 2028, Sphere's strategic priority is to revise and reposition the Handbook so that it remains accessible and fully relevant. This includes reaffirming the Protection Principles and the Core Humanitarian Standard, embedding climate and digital ethics, and transitioning to a more modular and dynamic model of content delivery.

Sphere's leadership role in standard-setting must be actively reinforced. The Handbook revision will reassert its global relevance, not just as a technical manual, but as a people-first, principled foundation for humanitarian operations in complex contexts.

New Handbook content and revision approach

The revised Handbook will reflect strategic shifts in both content and approach:

1. **Humanitarian Charter.** The Humanitarian Charter will be refined and reaffirmed as the cornerstone of Minimum Standards guidance, especially in extremely fragile and conflict-affected countries where standards support both service delivery and rights-based advocacy. Sphere will explore, with the network, the possibility of having signatories to the Humanitarian Charter, tied in with network restructuring (see [Champions Network](#) below).
2. **Inclusion.** Sphere will collaborate closely with the IFRC and the 'Minimum standards on protection, gender and inclusion in emergencies' and with HelpAge & CBM and the 'Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities.'
3. **Climate action and environment.** Guidance on climate-smart programming, ecological impact reduction, anticipatory action and resilience-building. Sphere will continue to advocate for the protection and restoration of the environment including, for example, through collaboration with NEAT+, IUCN FEBA Working Groups, and the Climate & Environment Charter. Sphere's Nature-based Solutions (NbS) guidance will be transformed from an 'unpacked' guide to being incorporated into Sphere and other Minimum Standards. The earth emergency demands that Sphere will work closely with environmental groups and collaborate as much as possible.
4. **Responsible digital innovation.** Sphere will add a new cross-cutting theme around technology and data including AI. The nature of humanitarian assistance is evolving. Many agencies are adopting a 'digital first' approach in response to limited financial resources. Sphere's stance on technology will remain neutral (neither discouraging nor encouraging its use), but Sphere guidance must recognise the growing prevalence of technology in the sector.
5. **People-Centred.** The 2018 revision was extensive, with more consultations, more contributions, and more comments than any previous revision. The next revision will be people-centred, with people affected and people at risk as the primary focus. Promotion of equitable partnerships with civil society and 'local' organisations will also be a strategic focus. Sphere's hosting of the CHS, and strategic partnerships with People-First Impact Method (P-FIM) and similar community engagement actors will help to ensure that the minimum standards reflect the lived realities of communities affected by crises and first-line responders, while integrating the important contributions of other actors.
6. **Stronger partnerships with Authorities, civil society, UN, academia, private sector and emerging actors involved in aid delivery.** In line with International Humanitarian Law, Sphere will continue to advocate for the State's (or de facto Authority's) primary responsibility for humanitarian assistance, protection and security. In doing so, Sphere has been working with governments and National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs). The revision will be co-led by the global Clusters which have already been requested to fulfil this key role in updating each of the technical chapters. Sphere standards are based on the three pillars of **rights** (captured in various legal instruments), **evidence**, and **experience**. Sphere will reinforce the evidence pillar by partnering with academic

institutions. The revision will incorporate the relevance of humanitarian standards to diverse actors who are not considered humanitarian but are nonetheless involved in the delivery of aid, including private sector companies, technology/connectivity and logistics providers, civil society organisms, and others. Sphere will work with those inside the sector reaching out to those *outside* it to promote dignity and principled action in all aid operations. There will be a focus on simplified, culturally appropriate indicators to enable vulnerable communities to assess and monitor assistance quality using their own capacities.

- 7. Collaboration & Coordination.** The revised Sphere Handbook will include clear, actionable guidance on how collaboration and coordination can be operationalised at multiple levels. At the global level, Sphere will continue to engage with SCHR and the IASC on targeted topics, and we are actively contributing through ICVA's Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) Working Group, the Humanitarian Coordination Working Group (HCWG), and the ICVA-convened Principled Humanitarian Action Task Force. Direct engagement with UN OCHA, including at ERC level, with the Emergency Response Section, with the Strategic Prioritisation & Practices Branch, and through our role on the HNPW Steering Committee will continue. These avenues ensure Sphere's principles, minimum standards and perspectives are represented in UN reform conversations even where standards initiatives are not formally at the table.

Specific HSP Handbooks will remain available in print on demand or bespoke, as well as possibly braille, but in smaller quantities, reflecting changing user needs. Interactive platforms and AI are rapidly replacing static formats and traditional search engines, and Sphere is adapting accordingly.

Transformed Handbook Platform

A major innovation will be the relaunch of the Interactive Handbook as a unified digital-first publishing platform and content management system (CMS) for the humanitarian sector. This will serve as both a state-of-the-art digital library and a practical tool. It will:

- Host minimum standards alongside case studies, contextual examples, impact stories, and other evidence and grey literature related to the standards. This will enable users to adapt international standards to local social and economic realities.
- Recommend content based on user location, profile, and activity, thereby helping users to contextualise global humanitarian standards for their reality.
- Offer content in multiple languages and multiple formats, including formats adapted for accessibility, inclusivity, low-bandwidth and no internet settings.
- Integrate with partner platforms, replacing outdated PDF-based libraries with a shared digital ecosystem.
- Reduce publishing and content management costs for content providers.

Sphere's XML-first publishing approach, adopted in 2018, will be central to this transformation, supporting structured content that is AI-ready, semantically searchable,

and accessible across devices. This prepares Sphere for future modes of engagement, particularly among younger humanitarians and digital-first responders.

2. Champions Network

Objective

To inspire and support local ownership of humanitarian standards.

Context

Over the past 25 years, Sphere 'Champions', including focal points; members; listed and unlisted trainers and other known advocates, have evolved into an influential and trusted network and presence worldwide. It includes over a hundred organisations as members and focal points, almost two hundred listed trainers, and other ambassadors of the Sphere Handbook and the Humanitarian Charter. This network is one of Sphere's most valuable assets; deeply rooted in communities, professionally diverse, and all committed to principled humanitarian action.

The network has grown both organically and strategically. Roles are often informal, levels of engagement vary, and key geographies or sectors remain underrepresented. As humanitarian localisation accelerates, the Champions Network will evolve from a community of practice into, where appropriate, a more structured and strategically deployed engine for Sphere's influence and relevance, while retaining the passionate and inclusive spirit that has carried the movement since inception.

Strategic Direction: Consolidate, Clarify, Broaden

From 2026 to 2028, Sphere will focus on restructuring, broadening, and strengthening the Champions Network to make it truly representative of the global humanitarian community and better aligned with Sphere's Theory of Change. This will include:

- **Clarifying roles and expectations** across focal points, trainers, members, and new thematic or regional Champions through linking, learning, and connecting.
- **Filling gaps in underrepresented regions, sectors, and stakeholder groups** including local responders, women, youth-led and refugee-led organisations, and groups in fragile and climate-vulnerable contexts. Encouraging existing focal points to mentor and support new groups.
- Formalising engagement through an **updated membership strategy**, clearer pathways for participation, and a **refreshed focal points framework**.
- Supporting the establishment of **regional partners** in Europe, MENA, and LAC, in addition to the existing regional partners CWSA in Asia and AHSN in Africa. A regional partner in the Pacific may also be considered.
- Working with the network to implement a **MEAL framework** for the Theory of Change, including running an annual network survey with public dashboards to expose content.

The aim is not to centralise control but to enable agile, decentralised leadership, ensuring that Champions are well-supported, visible, and enabled to lead contextualisation, training, advocacy, and feedback loops into Handbook development.

Championing the Handbook Revision

Sphere will rely heavily on the Champions Network to deliver a holistic and relevant revision of the Sphere Handbook. Champions will play a critical role in:

- **Facilitating consultations** and collecting insights from frontline actors; and ensuing meaningful participation through adapted consultation mechanisms including structured feedback loops to return results to communities consulted.

- **Testing and contextualising** draft guidance.
- **Advocating** for rights-based, climate-smart, and locally led approaches to humanitarian response.
- **Promoting accountability** to communities throughout the revision process.

Investing in this network is therefore not just capacity-building, it is mission-critical for the legitimacy and quality of the upcoming fifth edition of the Handbook.

Improved engagement with network and stakeholders

To support and scale the Champions Network, Sphere will invest in:

- **Decentralised learning:** Training or Trainers (ToTs), webinars, podcasts, and peer-led workshops tailored to regional needs and languages.
- **Recognition and visibility:** Showcasing Champions' work through storytelling, national platforms, media, and policy dialogues.
- **Digital-first community engagement:** A modernised platform for collaboration, discussion, and knowledge exchange; moving beyond email groups and static contact lists, while guaranteeing multilingual accessibility, offline tools, and data security to enable participation in low-connectivity contexts.
- **Partnerships:** Building regional hubs and alliances, particularly where Champions are driving systemic uptake of standards.
- **Network-led initiatives:** Sphere is dependent on its network for strengthening local ownership and outreach to communities, including local and national NGOs, CBOs, local government, academia, and civil society actors. Sphere focal points and members will lead on initiatives such as bringing Sphere closer to communities through community-based contextualization of standards; and participatory training and facilitation models that enable local responders and affected populations, including organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs).
- **Network led innovations:** Beyond the key network-led initiatives (e.g., training, including ToTs; advocacy; community outreach; contextualisation/translation of standards; etc.), the network is actively encouraged to pilot innovations and develop new content, e.g., new advocacy messages for disaster preparedness and risk reduction and alignment checks with the Humanitarian Charter. The Sphere team is committed to providing platforms for network constituents to share their innovations and latest content. The Sphere team also commits to searching for new funding sources to allow the reinstatement of grants to focal points for key initiatives and piloting/scaling innovations.

3. Policy and Advocacy

Objective

To engage, advocate and influence for greater commitment to the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in humanitarian assistance policy and practice

Context

The global humanitarian policy landscape is increasingly fractured; shaped by geopolitical interests, misinformation, shrinking civic space, and growing pressure to compromise humanitarian principles. The climate crisis, technological disruption, and shifting donor priorities are further testing the boundaries of what humanitarian actors can and should do.

In this divided and polarised world, Sphere's neutrality, credibility, and rights-based approach offer a powerful foundation for principled leadership. The revision of the Sphere Handbook presents an exceptional opportunity to work even closer with global policy and advocacy forums, reaffirming the relevance of humanitarian standards to influence the future of crisis response at every level.

Strategic Direction: Advocacy Anchored in Standards

Over the next three years, Sphere will position the Handbook revision process as a global convening moment. The revision is an opportunity to draw together governments, donors, UN agencies, academia, national and local actors, and civil society around a shared vision for principled, people-centred humanitarian action. Sphere will promote inclusive engagement throughout this process, ensuring that community voices, local civil society organisations, frontline responders, and humanitarian coordination platforms contribute meaningfully to shaping the standards that guide humanitarian response globally. The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards will increasingly serve as advocacy tools and technical benchmarks for:

- **Protecting humanitarian space** in conflict and politicised environments, including promoting understanding of humanitarian principles and ethical duties and advocating for the recognition and integration of Sphere standards within national policies and frameworks.
- Helping **National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs) and other government actors/ministries** to embed Sphere into their policies and guidelines, including by doing more to share the success stories, outputs, impacts, challenges and lessons learned from the many Sphere members and focal points that have already advocated for such policy changes. This includes promoting coherence across humanitarian, development, and peace agendas, supporting the triple nexus approach to strengthen resilience and national preparedness frameworks.
- Enabling that **quality and accountability are considered non-negotiables** and upheld through shared ethical commitments, peer accountability, and collective adherence to humanitarian principles, even in underfunded or high-risk settings.
- Promoting **inclusive** humanitarian action that recognises and addresses the diverse needs of people affected by crises, including persons with disabilities, women, children, older people, and displaced populations, using disaggregated data and intersectional analysis across gender, age, disability, and other factors.
- **Linking dignity to sustainability**, through climate-conscious programming and environmental responsibility.

Sphere will re-activate and build new alliances, across the UN system and 'Humanitarian Reset'/UN80, IASC, the cluster architecture, donor groups, and civil protection networks, to make sure that the updated Handbook is not only used operationally, but integrated into policies, funding frameworks, and preparedness plans.

The revision of the Sphere Handbook is not only a technical process; it is a strategic lever for global policy influence. At a time when humanitarian values are under threat, Sphere will assert itself as a standard-setter, thought leader, and principled voice in international and national policy arenas including humanitarian diplomacy. Sphere will also defend the

Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards if misappropriated by actors whose motivation is political, primarily for-profit, or otherwise without concern for dignity and humanitarian principles.

4. Strategic Partnerships

Objective

To streamline, promote and support complementary minimum standards.

Context

Humanitarian standards are critical infrastructure for effective, principled response. Yet in a sector under strain, from increasing complexity, politicisation, and climate-driven emergencies, there is a risk that standards become fragmented, underutilised, or inaccessible. At this turning point, Sphere's ability to lead through collaboration is both a necessity and an opportunity. With humanitarian standards increasingly used to contribute to long-term resilience and sustainable recovery, new potential partners are emerging in e.g. poverty alleviation, disaster risk reduction, and migration.

As coordinator of the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP), Sphere is strategically placed to transform how standards are created, accessed, and applied across the humanitarian system. In a time of system-wide reset, Sphere will advance strategic partnerships that not only improve operational coherence and efficiency but also elevate the role of principled standards in humanitarian action.

Strategic Direction: Beyond Partnership – Towards Shared Governance

Now in its tenth year, the HSP is poised for a step change. Working with the HSP partners, Sphere will explore options for closer operational integration and shared governance across the HSP and beyond. There is clear interest among partners, some of which are facing extreme financial precarity, to evolve the collaboration into a more structured and strategic entity. To support this, Sphere will lead a consultative review of governance models drawing on lessons from existing networks and federations.

As a longer-term goal, Sphere will explore the creation of a global learning core for Humanitarian Standards; a digital and institutional home for cross-sectoral knowledge, co-investment, and principled guidance. The vision is a globally recognised platform that serves frontline responders, technical specialists, and policymakers alike with seamless access to quality standards covering every aspect of humanitarian work.

To build towards this vision, Sphere will:

- **Transform the HSP platform:** Sphere will implement an innovative evolution of the HSP's digital infrastructure, enabling smart search, content recommendations, cross-content mapping, and contextualisation tools. The integration of additional HSP members, for example connectivity and logistics related standards, will further enhance the portfolio.
- **Promote shared content, services, platforms, and development models:** Sphere will encourage co-investment in joint digital tools, interoperable formats, and collaborative case study and innovation repositories. Thematic areas such as crop-related livelihoods (SEADS), markets (MERS), and livestock-based livelihoods

(LEGS) will be prioritised for joint implementation tools and approaches. Communities will be combined where appropriate and possible, for example a shared platform for trainer rosters and events which will provide a better experience for training and people looking for trainers. Sphere leadership will continue to work closely with the CHS Alliance, HQAI and Groupe URD as core partners in Quality, Accountability and Safeguarding.

- **Champion the Humanitarian Charter across partners:** As a unifying foundation for principled action, Sphere will promote the Charter's adoption and referencing across HSP standards, reinforcing its ethical and legal relevance in today's crises.
- **Expand partnerships for innovation and reach:** Sphere will continue to build partnerships with universities; regional platforms; disaster management authorities; intergovernmental organizations such as ASEAN, African Union, and Pacific Islands Forum; and humanitarian innovation hubs. New actors in standards, including standards for data & AI, logistics, connectivity, research & innovation, climate resilience, and anticipatory action will be engaged to keep the HSP portfolio future-facing.