The Sphere Handbook for humanitarian response

1.   Meeting the needs of people affected by crisis

The *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* – commonly known as *The Sphere Handbook* – is designed to be a universal resource for those providing life-saving humanitarian aid in crisis response. The Handbook provides a practical translation of **Sphere's two core beliefs**:

1) People who are affected by disaster or conflict have a right to a life with dignity and, therefore, a right to assistance; and

2) Related to these rights, all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict.

The Humanitarian Charter, Protection Principles, Core Humanitarian Standard, and minimum standards in four life-saving sectors were developed to support these core beliefs and humanitarian principles. Since the first Sphere Handbook in the late 1990s, humanitarian organisations have used this integrated approach to improve assistance for millions of people affected by crisis.

Any humanitarian response should recognise, respect and build on people's **agency** – their capacity to act independently, make choices and influence outcomes that affect them. Recognising people's capacities and enabling them to make choices related to humanitarian assistance and protection is essential.

The Sphere Handbook is designed for anyone providing humanitarian aid. It is intended for use throughout the different phases of humanitarian responses and all stages of the programme cycle. This includes analysis, planning, strategy development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The Handbook, in its entirety, is also a valuable advocacy tool. While primarily intended for humanitarian responses, it has increasingly proven useful in preparedness, contingency planning, crisis risk reduction, early recovery, and even in some development contexts.

What is different in the 2018 Handbook?
This fourth edition of the Handbook reflects the various changes in humanitarian response since 2011. Those familiar with the previous edition will notice a number of changes in this version:

- **A new structure for the minimum standards.** The modified format ensures greater consistency, clarity and ease of use within and across the chapters.

- **Updated content reflects changes in the context and ways of delivering humanitarian response**, including:
    o the increasing need to respond in **urban areas;**
    o the cumulative effects of **climate change;**
    o the need for better support of **local and national actors** in delivering humanitarian response.
    o increasing use of **cash** in place of in-kind assistance, giving affected populations greater choice and control over how to meet their needs.

- **Designed for a broader range of users.** This new edition has been written to be more accessible to the different users, whether they are from non-governmental organisations, national disaster management authorities, governments, militaries, or new humanitarian workers.

- **Updated Protection Principles provide greater guidance.** In response to feedback, the Protection Principles now provide clearer suggestions for applying a protection lens in all aspects of humanitarian response.

- **The Core Humanitarian Standard replaces the Core Standards.** The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) was launched in 2014. It sets out nine commitments for organisations and individuals to improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian response, and to facilitate greater accountability to affected people.

- **Simpler language is used throughout the Handbook.** Plain English makes the Handbook easier to understand and translate.

2. Eight equally important and linked chapters

The Handbook has two interdependent parts: four foundational chapters and four technical chapters.

The **four foundational chapters** provide the ethical, legal, and moral basis of humanitarian response. They include the commitments and processes necessary to ensure a quality humanitarian response, which is accountable to those receiving assistance.

The **four technical chapters** cover key life-saving sectors and the minimum standards agreed within those sectors. The standards reflect the core content of human rights, including the right to water and sanitation; the right to adequate food; the right to housing; and the right to health.

The four foundational chapters are integral to each technical chapter: They help you apply the minimum standards more appropriately and effectively. Reading a technical chapter without also reading the foundational chapters risks missing essential elements of the standards. It is also important to understand the links between the technical chapters. For example, access to appropriate cooking fuel must be considered by all four sectors, given the implications for health, water and sanitation, shelter, and food security and nutrition.

The **foundational chapters** are**:**

i) **The Sphere Handbook for Humanitarian Response** (*this chapter*): An introduction to the Handbook, its use, and the beliefs on which it is based. It also explains; the structure and application of the standards, lists complementary standards to Sphere, and describes the history and philosophy of Sphere.

ii) **The Humanitarian Charter:** A statement of established legal rights and obligations and shared beliefs. The Charter provides the moral, ethical, and legal backdrop to the Protection Principles, the Core Humanitarian Standards, and the minimum standards. It explains why assistance and protection are both critical to humanitarian action.

↳ **The Code of Conduct:** The Humanitarian Charter builds on the humanitarian principles laid out in the 1994 *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief*. The 10 principles in the Code and its three Annexes (with recommendations to the governments of disaster affected countries, donor governments, and inter-governmental organisations) are integral to the Sphere Handbook.

iii) **Protection Principles:** A translation of the legal principles and rights outlined in the Humanitarian Charter into strategies and actions that should inform humanitarian response.

iv) **The Core Humanitarian Standard:** Replacing the previous Core Standards, the Core Humanitarian Standard's nine commitments describe essential processes and organisational responsibilities to ensure quality and accountability, as well as achieving the minimum standards.

> ### The Code of Conduct's Core Principles
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> 1. The humanitarian imperative comes first.
> 2. Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.
> 3. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.
> 4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.
> 5. We shall respect culture and custom.
> 6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities.
> 7. Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.
> 8. Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs.
> 9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources.
> 10. In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.
>
> *The Code of Conduct: Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes*

The four technical chapters cover:

i) **Minimum Standards in Water Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene Promotion:** The standards are focused on hygiene promotion; water supply; excreta disposal and management; vector control; solid waste management; and drainage.

ii) **Minimum Standards in Food Security and Nutrition:** The standards are focused on food security and nutrition (FSN) assessments; infant and young child feeding; preventing and treating malnutrition; food security; food assistance; and livelihoods, which impact on food security.

iii) **Minimum Standards in Shelter and Settlement:** The standards are focused on strategies and assistance options; the enabling environment; and habitation and physical living space.

iv) **Minimum Standards in Health Action:** The standards are focused on health systems and essential health services, including communicable diseases; child health; sexual and reproductive health; injury; mental health; non-communicable diseases; and palliative care.

Further on-line information, resources, and tools (such as training material) complement the foundational and technical chapters.

3. Getting the most out of the standards

3.1 The purpose of the standards

The minimum standards describe the conditions that must be achieved in any humanitarian response for crisis-affected populations to survive and recover with dignity. **They promote a consistent approach to humanitarian response and reflect inalienable human rights**, which is why they can be universally applied. They are informed by available evidence and represent a sector-wide consensus of what constitutes best practice, therefore providing a reference based on global experience.

The standards are not intended to provide a definitive "how to" guide to humanitarian response, as every situation is different. The context in which response is taking place must be monitored and analysed in order to apply the standards effectively and appropriately. "Context" includes a range of interrelated elements, including culture, language, the capacity of responding actors, security, access, and resources. It also refers to the willingness and ability of State or non-State actors to provide humanitarian assistance or to facilitate unrestricted access to affected women, men, boys, and girls, of all ages and diverse backgrounds, including language, ethnicity, religion, disability, caste, gender, sexual orientation, among others. Humanitarian organisations must also consider what impact their presence and activities will have on the context and population and find ways to mitigate any potential negative effects.

The standards represent the *minimum* to be achieved. Sometimes, local or national coordination bodies, authorities, or individual organisations may set thresholds that are higher than the Sphere standards. In other cases, you will need to work progressively towards the minimum standard.

There are some cases where the minimum will exceed the living conditions of the host community. In such cases, it is particularly important to thoroughly analyse the situation. Consider what impact meeting the minimum standards might have on the dynamics between those directly affected by the disaster or conflict, and those who have been indirectly affected. Providing services to both refugees and the host community, for example, is one strategy to help mitigate potential negative effects on community dynamics. The provision of humanitarian aid should not create conflicts, so consider the impact on those not receiving aid.

When the minimum cannot be met, it is important to understand and explain why that is the case – not only for accountability, but also to identify actions that may help eventually to meet the minimum for that standard. It is also essential to clearly state the potential consequences on the population of not meeting the minimum and taking any possible steps to minimise the potential harm.

3.2 All standards have the same structure

The standards have a new format and structure: they should be easier to understand, with greater consistency between the standards.

- **The Standard**: Defines a universally accepted minimum for assistance and quality humanitarian response, based on human rights.

- **Key actions**: Outline the necessary steps or activities to achieve the standard.

- **Indicators:** Outcome and output indicators measure key elements related to the standard to understand if the standard is being achieved.

- **Minimum requirements:** Linked to indicators, a minimum threshold to reflect on what is being provided – or could be provided – in the context. Not all indicators include minimum requirements. In such cases, work with others to establish appropriate targets to meet the standard.

- **What Else Do I Need to Know:** Provides technical and other information specific to the standard.

> **The Minimum Standard and its components:**
> **Structure and definitions**

Most responses are multi-sector, so standards in one technical chapter need to be addressed with standards in other chapters. The Handbook contains cross-references to help make these links.

The standards have been developed to be **universal, but they must be contextualised** to ensure appropriate responses, so consider:
- **the setting** in which humanitarian response is being delivered;
- **the differences across populations and diversity among individuals**, which will impact **how and what kind of humanitarian response is delivered**; and
- **how to operationalise indicators** in different contexts, including defining key terms and setting targets.

Section 4 of this chapter provides further details on these essential considerations.

3.3   Applying the standards throughout the response

The Sphere Handbook and its minimum standards are meant for use at each stage of a humanitarian response. The focus is on life-saving response and informs the work of humanitarian responders before, during, and after a crisis. As a result, the standards can be used immediately in the first few days of a response, over months, and even years, especially given the increasing number of protracted crises. They can also be used in preparedness, early recovery, crisis/disaster risk reduction, and development contexts.

During every stage of the programme cycle and when applying each standard, it is essential to ensure the involvement of, and consultation with, women, men, girls, and boys of all ages and of diverse

backgrounds, including those often most marginalized within the specific context. There are several other thematic issues that cut across all sectors, which must be considered and addressed during each stage of the response and when implementing every standard. (*See section 4 of this chapter for more details*.)

Each organisation approaches the programme cycle in a particular way, but the basic elements are similar. Numerous tools and guidance focus on the different aspects of the programme cycle, so they are not covered in detail here. These other resources should be used to complement the Handbook.

The Handbook should be used in each stage of the programme cycle:

● **Assessment and analysis**: Analysing the situation and context helps to promote an understanding of how to apply the Protection Principles, the Core Humanitarian Standard, and specific technical standards in a response. Interventions should start by analysing how the crisis impacts individuals of all ages and backgrounds differently. In urban settings, context tends to change rapidly, so your context analysis will need to keep pace with those changes to adapt your programming accordingly. (*See Humanitarian Charter section 9 related to Do No Harm; Protection Principles; and Core Humanitarian Standard Commitment 1 on programme design*.)

    ↳ **Recognise, respect, and build on existing national standards** and the work of authorities, government ministries, and municipalities when possible. Where State authorities are unable or unwilling to provide aid humanitarian actors should consider how they access, and deliver humanitarian aid to, affected people.

    ↳ **The Sphere Minimum Standards provide a basis for needs assessments in each sector**, with assessment checklists available for each sector. Whenever possible, needs should be assessed on a multi-sector basis. Depending on the crisis, a rapid assessment or needs analysis may be necessary before more detailed analysis and assessments can be done. When possible and appropriate, humanitarian assistance should be market-based (that is, work through markets or support them) or, at a minimum, be aware of available markets. **Market analysis** is an important element for defining response options and determining if local, national, regional, or global markets can help meet needs. Market analysis also has a significant influence on the design of supply chain and logistics functions needed to support programme delivery. The Minimum Standard for Market Analysis (MISMA) outlines the key actions for a quality market analysis. (*See Annex X on 'Delivering Through Markets,' which outlines the synergies between supply chain management and cash-based assistance.*)

● **Strategy development, planning, and programme design:** When planning interventions, it is important to provide the right assistance at the right time to those most in need. Appropriate responses are often multi-sector responses that should be integrated through coordination and collaboration between the different components. The Sphere minimum standards – despite being separated into four technical chapters – support multi-sector analysis and response, as they are framed to support an inclusive and people-centred approach.

    ↳ **Develop a response strategy** at regional, national, or community level, which is appropriate to the level of operation and organisational capacity. A strategy will guide key decisions towards achieving the goal. It will inform programming, management, and fundraising decisions. Develop response strategies with the participation of the affected population and in coordination with multiple sectors and major stakeholders. A strategy should continue to develop and evolve as circumstances change and should always consider exit options. When possible, an exit strategy should ensure a hand-over to local authorities and/or

communities.

> ↳ **When planning and designing programmes**, consider what interventions and delivery modes best meet the needs of and build on the capacities of the people affected by crisis. For example, analysis of which response is most appropriate at certain times can determine whether cash-based assistance, including multi-purpose grants (MPGs) may be more appropriate and effective than providing direct assistance. (*The Core Humanitarian Standard's Commitments 1, 2, 3, and 7 are important reference points during this stage of the programme cycle. The Minimum Standards in Market Analysis (MISMA) are also relevant.)*

● **Implementation/delivery:** When delivering humanitarian aid, **constantly work towards meeting the minimum standards**. If the standards cannot be met, understand why and explain the gaps, as well as what needs to change. Assess the negative implications for the affected population and look for appropriate ways to minimise the harm caused by these implications. Wherever possible, humanitarian assistance should be delivered through local markets. (*See Protection Principles; Core Humanitarian Standard; the technical minimum standard, and Annex X on "Delivering Through Markets" are all relevant to implementation/delivery.*)

● **Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL):** MEAL systems are essential throughout the response. They will evolve in their complexity during different phases of the response. By measuring the impact of programmes, MEAL supports timely and evidence-based management decisions, allowing humanitarian programmes to be appropriately adjusted in rapidly changing contexts. **MEAL helps you to know if the standards are being achieved or how much more needs to be done.** (*Refer to the Humanitarian Charter; Protection Principles, particularly Principle 1; CHS Commitments 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7; and the technical minimum standards. Also see the Sphere Unpacked guide: Sphere for Monitoring and Evaluation.*)

> ↳ The standards have been modified in this edition to further support MEAL efforts in humanitarian response, with clearer indicators and minimum requirements. The indicators included do not represent a comprehensive list, but are the key ones that will help measure if you are moving towards achieving the standard.

> ↳ **Effective monitoring** of the context, processes, and performance informs decision-making, improves programmes, and leads to high-quality outcomes for those affected by disaster or conflict. **Evaluation** supports **learning** to improve policy and future practice and also **promotes accountability**. MEAL systems also contribute to larger learning efforts related to effective humanitarian action.

> ↳ Continuously collecting data (without undertaking a heavy data collection process) can help to ensure that monitoring informs ongoing learning and improvements to the response. Good practice encourages that, **at a minimum, data is disaggregated by sex, age, and disability**, and, where possible, should be further disaggregated by other diversity or risk factors. Disaggregating data is important to understand the impact of actions or situations on different groups. Disaggregated data can indicate those most at-risk, if they are able to access and use humanitarian assistance, or if more needs to be done to reach them. Contextualise MEAL activities by considering any additional factors by which data should be disaggregated. Such disaggregation must be balanced with safety and protection concerns around collecting sensitive data.

> ↳ **Accountability:** With the inclusion of the Core Humanitarian Standard, this edition provides clearer strategies to strengthen accountability to affected populations. Humanitarian processes need to be inclusive and transparent. Other accountabilities, for example to

national governments, donors, and other humanitarian actors, should also be considered as part of humanitarian response.

↳ **Establish feedback mechanisms:** Providing safe and responsive mechanisms to enable feedback (including complaints) is essential for accountability and for adjusting programmes accordingly. Such mechanisms also help to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) by humanitarian workers or other forms of exploitation and corruption.

Cash-based assistance (CBA) and the Sphere Standards

Background

CBA is increasingly being used across sectors to meet humanitarian needs. CBA is a form of market-based programming (MBP), which is an important link to supply chain management. Understanding the supply chains that underpin local markets is key to successful MBP. CBA can be used to meet a set of multi-sector basic needs and sector-specific needs. Gender and protection issues should be considered with all CBA, including strategic interventions to address socio-cultural restrictions women may face in decision-making about the management of cash transfers. Considerations for positive and negative outcomes on the well-being of all family and community members should be built into the planning and monitoring stages of any CBA.

Major developments in CBA include an exponential increase in the volume and scale of CBA since 2011, the increasing use of multipurpose grants (MPGs), and a growing evidence base on the efficiency and effectiveness of CBA across sectors.

How CBA is integrated in the Handbook
CBA and MBP are integrated throughout the Handbook. The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) chapter provides guidance on how CBA can be used to meet CHS commitments. Where appropriate, each technical chapter highlights how market analysis informs response analysis, the mode of delivery for their sector, and the relevance for specific standards. The Annex on 'Delivering through Markets' provides specific guidance on using markets, both for the delivery of CBA and for supply chain management.

Multipurpose grants and the Sphere standards
The Sphere standards underpin the inherent multi-sector nature of MPGs. For MPGs to adequately meet multi-sector needs, in accordance with Sphere standards, the following is required:
1) sufficient justification for MPGs, including the identification of which humanitarian needs to address, as well as understanding contextual dynamics, market functionality, and the feasibility of cash;
2) an evidence-base that helps determine the transfer value, frequency, and duration of distribution to meet needs;
3) adequate monitoring and evaluation systems to determine what needs are met, and how well they are met, by MPGs; and
4) sufficient quality control.

Definitions

Cash-based assistance (CBA): *all programmes where cash (or vouchers for goods or services) is provided directly to beneficiaries. CBA can be delivered through electronic or direct cash, or via paper or e-vouchers. In the context of humanitarian assistance, CBA refers to the provision of cash or vouchers to individuals, households, or community recipients. It does not refer to cash or vouchers given to governments or other state actors. "Pre-requisite or qualifying conditions" are activities or obligations that must be met before receiving CBA. "Restrictions" are limitations on what a transfer can be spent on once received.*

Market-based programming (MBP) *or market-based interventions are projects that work through, or support, local markets. The term covers all types of engagement with market systems, ranging from actions that deliver immediate relief to those that proactively strengthen and catalyse local market systems or market hubs.*

Multipurpose cash grants (MPGs) *are explicitly designed to fully or partially cover a set of basic multi-sector and/or recovery needs simultaneously. They are a regular or one-off transfer corresponding to the amount of money a household needs to cover – fully or partially – a set of basic and/or recovery needs.*

4. Essential considerations when applying the minimum standards

Each standard defines the *minimum* for an affected population as a whole. These minimums must be applied in a way that is appropriate for the context, as the circumstances and enabling environment will vary between contexts.

In any affected population, there will be a diverse range of individuals whose varying needs must be considered when applying the minimum standards. Each individual has different capacities, abilities, characteristics, needs, and potential vulnerabilities, but every human being shares the right to a life with dignity. The inclusion of diverse views, consultation, and involvement of the diverse individuals within an affected population are essential in humanitarian response.

This section outlines essential considerations when applying the standards throughout all stages of humanitarian response.

4.1 Differences across populations

People are affected differently by a crisis; the capacities, needs, and vulnerabilities of individuals or particular groups are constantly changing. Not all individuals within a crisis-affected population have equal power, influence, or control of resources. Given these differences, it is important to ensure the inclusion of all individuals and groups within a community by considering age, gender, and diversity. Systematic dialogue with women, men, girls, and boys of all ages and backgrounds – both separately and in mixed groups – is fundamental to good programming. When different demographic groups are involved in programme design, humanitarian responses are more comprehensive, inclusive, and can have more sustainable results.

The universal determinants of age and gender apply to every individual and need to be considered in all aspects of response. There are also several other distinguishing characteristics to consider, including ethnicity, disabilities, religious or political affiliation, language, sexual orientation, poverty, or education, among others. Factors such as age, ethnicity, or disability, combined with various barriers, may hamper the participation in – and access to – humanitarian aid for some individuals.

All efforts must be made to so that each individual can access appropriate humanitarian aid in a timely manner. When individuals or groups require assistance beyond the scope of a specific programme, humanitarian responders must take steps to refer them to appropriate organisations, such as organisations working with children or survivors of sexual or gender-based violence, using referral pathways or the information-sharing protocols in place.

There are several different themes that must be considered throughout all stages of the programme cycle and in all sectors of response. Otherwise, some people risk being excluded, receiving inappropriate aid, or being further disempowered. These themes should not be considered in isolation: they cut across all aspects of humanitarian response and are often inter-related. **None of these groups are homogenous: there will be a great range of diversity within each of the groups.**

- **Children** – defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child as all persons below 18 years of age – form a significant proportion of any crisis-affected population. Timely and child-sensitive humanitarian aid across all sectors can enhance children's safety and wellbeing. Actively seek

the views of girls and boys of all ages and backgrounds, so they can influence how assistance is delivered, monitored, and evaluated.

During emergencies, children face specific risks – such as separation from their families; trafficking; recruitment into armed groups; psychosocial distress; or physical or sexual violence and abuse – that require life-saving interventions. Children's needs, capacities, and the protection risks vary greatly depending on their **biological age and developmental stage** (for example, a young child versus an adolescent (11-18 years)). The type of intervention and the form of children's participation should be informed by these different needs and capacities.

Factors such as **sex** and **disability** affect vulnerability to protection risks. For example, boys are more likely to be recruited by armed forces and groups as soldiers, while girls are more likely to be recruited as sex slaves. **Children with disabilities** are more likely to be left behind, abandoned, or neglected during emergencies. Girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable and at greater risk of sexual violence, transactional sex, and malnutrition.

- **Older people** are a fast-growing proportion of the population in most countries, but are often neglected in humanitarian responses. In many countries and cultures, being considered old is not necessarily a matter of age, but is linked to circumstances (such as being a grandparent) or physical signs (such as white hair). While many sources define old age as 60 years and older, 50 may be more appropriate in contexts where humanitarian crises occur.

  Older people can be key participants in humanitarian responses. They bring knowledge and experience of coping strategies and act as caregivers, resource managers, coordinators, and income generators. Isolation, physical weakness, disruption of family and community support structures, chronic illness, functional difficulties, and declining mental health can all increase the vulnerability of older people in humanitarian contexts. Ensure that older people are consulted and involved in each stage of humanitarian response. Consider age appropriateness and accessibility of services, environments, and information, and use age-disaggregated data for programme monitoring and management.

- **Gender** refers to the social differences that exist between women and men, and girls and boys throughout their life cycles. These differences are context and time specific, but are also changeable. Gender – together with age, sexual orientation, and gender identify – significantly determine social roles, social power, and access to resources. Gender equality is central to human rights and underpins the Humanitarian Charter. Humanitarian responses must be adapted and made accessible to women, men, girls, and boys. By promoting equal participation in all aspects of the programme cycle, humanitarian response becomes more effective and comprehensive. Humanitarian responses can further reinforce traditional gender roles. However, carefully considered humanitarian programming can contribute to greater gender equality by addressing some of the structural causes or consequences of gender inequality and gender-based violence, where appropriate.

- **Survivors, and those at risk of, gender-based violence (GBV):** The term GBV describes violence based on socially ascribed (that is, gender) differences between males and females. Crisis situations will exacerbate many forms of GBV which existed prior, including intimate partner violence, child marriage, sexual violence, and new forms may arise because of the crisis itself, including trafficking, sexual exploitation. Activities to integrate GBV prevention, risk reduction, and response in humanitarian action reflect and reinforce the Core Humanitarian Standard. Addressing GBV can contribute to strengthening equity in emergencies, upholding a 'do no harm' approach, and improving humanitarian outcomes across all sectors.

- **Persons with disabilities:** About 15% of the world's population live with some form of disability. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, psychosocial, intellectual, or sensory impairments. In interaction with various barriers these may hinder people's full, effective and equal participation in society. In humanitarian contexts, persons with disabilities are at higher risk of facing barriers and obstacles to the physical environment, transportation, information and communications, and humanitarian facilities or services. Emergency and preparedness programming should consider the diverse needs and capacities of all persons with disabilities. Seek opportunities to remove physical, communication, and attitudinal barriers to their access and participation.

- Many **people living with HIV** who are affected by humanitarian crises suffer life-threatening service disruptions. Vulnerability to HIV can increase during a crisis, particularly if protection measures are not put in place to prevent sexual and other forms of gender-based violence, or if people are forced to adopt negative coping strategies, such as engaging in transactional sex. However, factors such as a reduction in mobility over time and greater access to humanitarian services can decrease the risk of HIV. Dispel any possible misconceptions about the presence of people living with HIV and an increased HIV prevalence to avoid discriminatory practices. People living with HIV are entitled to live their lives in dignity, free from discrimination, and should enjoy non-discriminatory access to services.

  Continue essential HIV prevention, care, treatment, and support services and consult and involve people living with HIV throughout the response. Adolescents remain one of the highest at-risk groups for new cases of HIV. Address other factors that can increase the risk of HIV infection, including: gender inequalities; differential access to services for women; behavioural changes; inadequate coverage or poor quality of services for those most at-risk (including men who have sex with men, people who inject drugs, sex workers, transgender people, people with disabilities, and people in prisons and other closed settings); or a reduction in health, education, and community services.

- **Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)** is essential to alleviate suffering, to promote and maintain a life with dignity, to enable good decision-making, to cope with disaster, and to contribute to community life. People react differently to the stress of a humanitarian crisis. Some are more likely to be overwhelmed by distress, especially if they have been forcibly displaced; separated from family members; survived violence; or experienced previous mental health problems. Emergency situations lead to increased rates of mental health problems, which may be directly or indirectly related to the emergency. Pre-existing mental health problems may worsen and increase associated protection risks, such as stigma and discrimination against people with psychosocial disabilities. MHPSS responses require complementary support and coordinated responses across different sectors (*see MHPSS pyramid in Mental Health Standard*).

  Social and cultural considerations in the provision of basic services and security are essential to reducing distress among affected populations. Strengthening community psychosocial support and self-help creates a protective environment, allowing those affected to help each other towards social and emotional recovery. Focused individual, family, or group interventions – including clinical interventions – are important, but do not necessarily have to be provided by mental health professionals. They can also be provided by trained and supervised non-specialists. if

4.2   Differences in settings and timeframes

Humanitarian response takes place in different settings, over varying timeframes, with a range of factors

that can affect the effectiveness of the response. **The Sphere standards are applicable in humanitarian responses that can last a few days, weeks, months, or even years, when displacement or conflicts become protracted.** The delivery of humanitarian response should change and adapt over time, and should also avoid creating aid dependency whenever possible. A continuous analysis of the context and situation will help to flag when things are changing, which should lead to a shift in the response.

Enabling environment
Whether a humanitarian response takes place in an area controlled by a government or a non-state armed actor can have a significant impact on the provision of humanitarian response. The willingness of authorities to facilitate the access of humanitarian actors to affected populations will also have a significant impact. The enabling environment will vary depending on factors such as the type of crisis (disaster or conflict, and where in the country it takes place); the national government or authority controlling the area of the country; the physical accessibility of the area; as well as other factors (see *The Humanitarian Charter and the Code of Conduct*).

Modes of delivering humanitarian aid: Who provides aid, what kind of aid, and how that aid is delivered will be changing continuously.
In the initial days of an acute emergency, the modes of delivering humanitarian assistance are likely to be different compared to how aid is delivered several months or years later.
- The first responders to a crisis are often **local or national responders**, including individuals, authorities, Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, or NGOs.
- In other cases, **international humanitarian organisations** will also respond.
- **Military forces** may also be involved in the response (for example, under bilateral agreements as forces deployed under a UN mandate, a regional organisation, or as part of a coalition). In some cases they may be a party to the conflict.
- **Aid can be delivered in-kind, as cash-based assistance, through service delivery, or through the provision of technical expertise.** The type of aid is likely to change over time from the early days of an acute response (*see box above on cash*).

When it is evident that a humanitarian response will last over several months or years, consider different means of meeting needs and supporting life with dignity. Assess opportunities to work with existing service providers, local authorities, social protection networks, or development actors to help meet needs. Assessments need to consider the context, protection concerns, and how the rights of the affected population will be impacted by involving individuals of all ages and diverse backgrounds in the analysis, assessment, and decision-making.

The Handbook is designed for use in all types of settings, including the following:
- **Urban settings** provide a range of opportunities and challenges for humanitarian response. Urban contexts often have more actors, existing coordination mechanisms, and services that can be supported and strengthened. People in cities and towns use cash to pay rent, buy food, and access health care. Households may be different, too, for example, with multiple people living together, with each earning an income.
Towns and cities offer multiple entry points for providing assistance. This includes, through settlement/neighbourhood or area-based approaches or communities of interests (such as schools, clubs, women's groups, taxi drivers). Working with local actors (such as the private sector, neighbourhood leaders, and community groups) can be vital in restarting, supporting,

and strengthening existing services, instead of replacing them. The municipality will often be the key government authority, with links to other government actors and departments, such as line ministries.

As in any setting, a context analysis in urban environments should look at the existing resources and opportunities, such as commerce, cash, technology, public spaces, people with specialised skillsets, social and cultural diversity, alongside risks and protection aspects. The analysis should inform response options and the final choice of delivery mode, such as deciding to provide in-kind assistance or cash (and the best way for doing so). The cash-based economy of towns and cities provides increased opportunities for partnerships with actors in markets and technology, which may facilitate the use of cash-transfer programming.

- **Camps and other communal settings,** such as collective centres or (spontaneous) settlements, are home to millions of displaced persons. The Sphere standards apply in a camp or rural setting the same way they do in any other context, such as an urban context. Informal camps and displacement settings, may lead to limited protection, substandard services, and gaps in assistance. In camp environments, camp management can contribute to greater accountability, but camps pose several protection risks that must be mitigated. In any communal setting, a context analysis must inform the response. When the right to freedom of movement to leave the camps is denied, displaced persons may be unable to access markets or pursue livelihoods. In such cases, advocating for an alternative to camps can help to ensure that affected populations are able to fulfil their right to a life with dignity.

- **When humanitarian organisations respond in the same area as domestic or international military forces**, it is important to be aware of each other's mandates, modus operandi, capacities, and limits. In disaster and conflict settings, humanitarian organisations may find themselves working closely with a range of militaries, including host government forces, non-state armed groups, and international peacekeepers. At times, humanitarian organisations will need to use the unique capabilities of militaries for lifesaving humanitarian assistance. Military support to humanitarian organisations should be limited to infrastructure support and indirect assistance; direct assistance is a last resort.

Humanitarian principles must guide all humanitarian-military dialogue and coordination at all levels and stages of interaction. Information-sharing, planning, and task division are three essential elements to effective civil-military coordination, with the weight of each varying depending on the setting. While information sharing between humanitarian and military actors can occur, it must depend on the context of operational activities. Humanitarian agencies must not share information that gives one party to a conflict a tactical advantage or endangers civilians.

In different contexts, the interaction between humanitarian actors and the military ('**civil-military engagement**') ranges from coexistence to coordination to cooperation (*see box*). Cooperation with militaries has an actual or perceived impact on a humanitarian organisation's neutrality and operational independence, so must be carefully considered in advance. Internationally agreed guidance documents should inform and guide any humanitarian-military

coordination arrangements (*See Annex on Further Reading*) .

Operational civil-military interaction: Militaries have a range of unique capabilities, including emergency communication infrastructure, and logistics, with which they can support humanitarian efforts. **Direct assistance by the military should be avoided and done only on an exceptional basis.** Militaries can contribute capabilities and capacities to meet specific needs, including for example:

- **Infrastructure support to f**acilitate general humanitarian activities, such as re-establishing infrastructure, providing communications networks, operating airfields, or power generation.
- **Indirect assistance** from military units or personnel that are at least one step removed from the population. They can assist with activities, such as transporting relief items, building camps/shelters, or clearing mines or ordnance.
- **Direct assistance (a last resort)** with services such as providing face-to-face distribution of relief items, providing medical assistance, or locating families.

> **The Spectrum of Civil-Military Engagement**
>
> **Coexistence:** active engagement between humanitarian and military actors is either inappropriate or impossible, but interaction is unavoidable.
> **Coordination:** dialogue between humanitarian and military actors is appropriate when it is possible to promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, and minimise inconsistency in a relief operation.
> **Cooperation**: generally, occurs only when military involvement in a traditionally humanitarian activity is required in order to save lives and alleviate suffering.

4.3   Reducing risk and environmental impact in humanitarian response

Integrating environment, risk reduction, and climate considerations into humanitarian response reflects **people's dependence on the environment.** Environmental sustainability and positive natural resources management are **important components of a quality humanitarian response.** (*See Core Humanitarian Standard Commitments 3 and 9 all Sphere minimum standards*).

> *Definition of Environment: The environment is understood as the physical, chemical, and biological surroundings in which disaster-affected and local communities live and develop their livelihoods. It provides the natural resources that sustain individuals, and determines the quality of the surroundings in which they live. It needs protection if these essential functions are to be maintained.*

Environmental degradation and climate change impact humanitarian response in sudden onset and protracted settings.

The relationship between the environment and humanitarian action is twofold:

1. **Crises often arise from mismanagement of the environment** or from environmental emergencies, such as technical/chemical incidents. Humanitarian responses should not contribute further to these causes.
2. **Humanitarian operations affect the environment**. They can either damage the environment further, or they can improve current environmental conditions. The latter can potentially reduce the risk of future crises. **At a minimum, humanitarian response should consider the**

environment as part of a "do no harm" approach.

By addressing environmental issues during the early phases of a crisis, **numerous positive benefits** can be realised**,** including through the following actions:

- Address underlying environmental issues that may have contributed to the crisis, and reduce the risk of recurrence.
- Protect livelihoods by safeguarding the natural resources upon which those livelihoods depend.
- Improve affected communities' health and safety through the reduction of pollution (air and water)
- Protect people and the environment from future hazards through mitigation activities.
- Slow or reverse trends that lead to deforestation, desertification, and pollution by proactively addressing environmental issues. These trends can impact significantly on community resilience, biodiversity, food security, and economic development.

Effective humanitarian response must **assess environmental risk** alongside wider assessments and situational analysis to inform quality programming. Numerous tools exist that **help consider the environment** in humanitarian programming. (*See Annex on Further Reading*)

Climate change increases risk and vulnerabilities to natural hazards such as storms, drought, and floods, and affects livelihoods, health, and food systems. Climate change can add to the complexity and intensity of humanitarian crises. It can also erode the economic base of societies through slower changes,such as desertification and increasing conflict over scarce resources. Weather-related events result in millions of displaced persons every year, and most refugees originate and live in climate change hotspots. The humanitarian impacts of climate change are likely to worsen, with women and children (already at least five times more likely to die in a crisis) being most affected.

Ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change is the use of ecosystem services as a part of an overall adaptation strategy. Humanitarian response should, seek to adapt operations to climate change to help protect communities against the adverse effects of climate change. Examples include: not rebuilding houses in areas exposed to increasing climate-related risks; providing seeds that are appropriate to future climate change; or supporting livelihoods activities that are climate smart, for example duck farming instead of chicken farming in flood prone areas.

It is **mutually beneficial for humanitarians and environmentalists to work together in humanitarian response:** better coordination and finding common solutions leads to improved lives and livelihoods for disaster-affected communities. Countries and regions with fragile ecology and poverty are at higher risk for natural disasters and for instability, creating a vicious circle of degradation. The relationship between crisis and the environment is characterised by environmental deterioration due to misuse and conflicts. The result can be a breakdown of livelihood and life supporting systems, as well as depletion of natural resources. Such situations affect those most at-risk, make the environment unattractive, and contribute to a sense of passivity and lack of concern about the land.

Environmentally resilient humanitarian programming improves the overall quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action. It is critical that humanitarians minimise and mitigate the negative environmental impacts of their projects. Building back sustainably can **improve affected people's resilience to endure stresses and shocks** in the present, as well as reducing future risk. Such approaches link to **disaster risk reduction (DRR)**, which applies to the risks inherent in most crises. These risks may be the result of natural or manufactured hazards or those related to environmental, technological, and biological hazards. DRR makes a distinction between hazards and disasters. The Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction calls for integrated and inclusive measures, which prevent and reduce hazard exposure and vulnerability to crises, and strengthen resilience.

The Sphere standards are for use in humanitarian responses of **varying timelines**, when displacement or conflicts become protracted. The environment, climate change adaptation, and DRR become more relevant in protracted crises where increased pressure is put on natural resources. or where environmental conditions might cause prolonged crises, such as droughts.

5.   Complementary standards

The four life-saving technical sectors in the Handbook do not cover all aspects of humanitarian response. Partnership agreements solidify the complementary relationship between the Sphere standards and the following standards developed by different networks, which complement the Handbook:

● **Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS):** Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS) Project;

● **Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS):** Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action;

● **Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery:** Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE);

● **Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS):** Small Enterprise Education and Promotion (SEEP) Network; and

● **Minimum Standard on Market Analysis (MISMA):** Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP).

Like the Sphere standards, these standards are also rights-based and were developed through broad consultation processes. These partnerships further develop coherence and complementarity between the standards. Given the importance of these sectors in humanitarian response, use these complementary standards when carrying out programming in these sectors.

6.   History and philosophy of Sphere

The Sphere Project was initiated in 1997 by a group of humanitarian non-governmental organisations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to improve the quality of their humanitarian responses and to be held accountable for them. It was one of the first quality and accountability (Q&A) initiatives.

Sphere sees the rights and agency of affected people as being at the centre of humanitarian response. The inclusion of those affected by disaster and conflict is central to humanitarian response and to Sphere's philosophy.

The Humanitarian Charter and technical minimum standards were subsequently developed to help put these core beliefs into practice. Protection Principles and Core Standards (now the Core Humanitarian Standards) complement the Humanitarian Charter. Sphere is intended to be a voluntary code and a self-regulatory tool. Sphere does not operate any compliance mechanisms.

The Handbook was first published in 2000, with revised editions published in 2004 and 2011. Each revision process involves inclusive, sector-wide consultations involving a range of organisations, agencies, and individuals from non-governmental organisations, governments, and United Nations agencies.

7.   The revision process

The revision of this fourth Handbook has been done through an inclusive and collaborative approach. The process was designed by building on lessons from previous revisions. Teams of experts led the drafting of the technical chapters, with their time donated by their organisations. They were supported by groups of experts, representing a broad range of stakeholders, to develop the standards and incorporate comments from the broad public consultations. Thematic experts worked with the technical experts to ensure that different cross-cutting themes were incorporated in the chapters.

Authors have attempted, for the first time, to publicly document the evidence base behind the standards and to show how comments received have been addressed. The Handbook has been developed with inputs from over X,XXX people representing NGOs, UN agencies, governments, and individuals in over XXX countries over XX months.