



Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
"making humanitarian action accountable to beneficiaries"

Quality and Accountability Initiatives: Questions and Answers

Introduction

During the past decade the humanitarian community has initiated a number of inter-agency initiatives to improve accountability, quality and performance in humanitarian action. Four of the most widely known initiatives are the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), People In Aid and the Sphere Project. Representatives of these initiatives began meeting together on a regular basis in 2003 in order to share common issues and harmonise activities where possible; since 2006 these four have been joined by Coordination SUD (Solidarité, Urgence, Développement), Groupe URD (Urgence Réhabilitation Développement) and the Emergency Capacity Building Project (ECB). It is hoped that the group may continue to expand in the future: if you work for an initiative that you think may be compatible with the aims of this group, please contact one of the members.

- * *This short paper was originally written to provide a response to questions that are sometimes asked about the four Quality and Accountability Initiatives. At the end of it has been added in information also about the three other groups that now meet with the original four.*

Who are we and what do we do?

ALNAP: established in 1997, the *Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action* is an international, sector-wide membership forum which aims to promote a culture of learning across the humanitarian sector in order to improve performance. ALNAP is involved in a range of activities including the production of an annual *Review of Humanitarian Action* which monitors the performance of humanitarian action through a synthesis of evaluative reports provided by the Membership. It monitors the quality of the evaluations themselves using the *ALNAP quality pro-forma*, and works with agencies to improve their evaluation skills. The ALNAP Secretariat hosts a comprehensive evaluative reports database. ALNAP's Biannual Meetings provide the membership with extensive opportunities for networking and learning on a range of important issues. ALNAP also produces papers that draw together lessons learned for particular types of emergencies, and practical tools, such as guidance booklets and training modules, on subjects and themes prioritised by the Membership. The ALNAP Secretariat hosted the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition during 2005 and 2006 and is taking responsibility for its follow-up. At the time of writing, ALNAP has 57 Full Members and over 700 Observer

Members; its Secretariat is based at the Overseas Development Institute in London.
www.alnap.org

Humanitarian Accountability Partnership – International – HAP: was founded in 2003 by a group of humanitarian agencies committed to making their work more accountable to its intended beneficiaries, following on from several years of research and field trials conducted by HAP's antecedents, the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project (1999-2001) and the Humanitarian Accountability Project (2001-2003). HAP is now finalising a system of voluntary self-regulation and quality assurance to be based upon the HAP Accountability and Quality Management Standard due to be published in late 2006. Registered as a Swiss NGO, the HAP Secretariat is based in Geneva with 14 full members as of September 2006. New members are required to submit an Accountability Workplan mapping out how their organisation will seek to implement the HAP Accountability Principles. Eventually, through the accreditation of affiliated NGO networks and associations with the authority to certify their own members as being compliant with the HAP Standard, it is hoped that HAP's vision of an accountable international humanitarian system at large will eventually be realised.
www.hapinternational.org

People In Aid: formally established in 1995, People In Aid promotes good practice in the management and support of employees and volunteers working in relief and development. The People In Aid Code of Good Practice is a quality framework covering all aspects of human resources and people management. It comprises 7 principles, each with specific indicators. The Code supports continuous improvement of NGOs' HR practices, facilitates stakeholder engagement, and measures improvement. People In Aid's mandate as a central resource to the sector, supporting agencies in improving the quality of their human resources management, is further carried out through workshops, published guidelines, research and exchange of information between the 100+ members based in over 25 countries.

www.peopleinaid.org

www.managing.peopleinaid.org

www.epn.peopleinaid.org

The Sphere Project: launched in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, Sphere has developed a handbook of standards for 4 sectors (Water/Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion; Food Security; Nutrition and Food Aid; Settlement and non-Food Items and Health Services). The cornerstone of the book is the Humanitarian Charter, which describes the rights of people affected by disasters. The standards, each with key indicators and guidance notes (covering 'cross-cutting issues' such as people living with HIV/AIDS and gender), aim to articulate the implications of fulfilling these rights. An introductory chapter outlines standards which are common to all sectors, such as Participation, Initial Assessment and Evaluation. The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross/Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief is an annex in the Sphere handbook.

Sphere is not a membership organisation. The process of developing the handbook, and its revision for 2004, were based on extensive collaboration involving over 4,000 people from 400 organisations in 80 countries. Following consultations in 2004 with people and organisations that use Sphere, the Sphere Management Committee became

a Board. The small project office based in Geneva was restructured to allow greater emphasis on gathering and managing knowledge on Sphere, and better support those developing materials and training to facilitate its use. The interactive website and online database are a key tools in these tasks. 'Offline' activities include 'learning activities', which are being held around the world to allow people to reflect on and record their experiences of using Sphere (see also below *How do we know that we are making a difference?*).

The project operates in three languages: English, Spanish and French. Most project materials are available in all three languages, and the handbook has been translated into several more.

www.sphereproject.org

* *See the end of this paper for information also about Coordination SUD / Synergie Qualité, Quality Compass / Groupe URD and the Emergency Capacity Building Project.*

Why do we do what we do?

The original 4 initiative members of this group were formed for very compelling reasons, as explained in the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (1997) - a time of serious reflection that represented a sea-change in humanitarian strategy and practice. The processes that gave rise to each initiative have, for the most part, been extraordinarily collaborative, involving hundreds of agencies and many thousands of individuals across the humanitarian sector. Hundreds of agencies spanning bilateral and multilateral donors, the UN system, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, NGOs and inter-agency umbrella organisations have participated in, or are members of, one or more of the initiatives.

Although the debates about the appropriateness and value of these initiatives are ongoing, the need for learning, standards and codes of best practice is not in doubt. Indeed, the current experiences from all ALNAP Reviews of Humanitarian Action¹ suggest that poor human resource practices, a lack of lesson learning, weak accountability to intended beneficiaries and patchy application of technical standards are still all too common in humanitarian action.

What are the similarities between us?

All initiatives share a common *goal* which is to improve accountability, quality and performance in humanitarian action. There are many paths to achieving this goal and while each initiative takes a different route, they sometimes overlap and they have a shared destination. All the initiatives are governed, managed and supported by humanitarian agencies and individuals, and there is a commitment to work closely together towards greater harmonisation and impact.

What are the differences between us?

Although the initiatives share the same goal, there is also a necessary distinctiveness. Quality and accountability in the humanitarian sector are multi-faceted and each

¹ ALNAP has produced 6 Reviews of Humanitarian Action all of which can be found on www.alnap.org

initiative has chosen or been mandated by the sector through its membership to take a distinct entry point and methods for addressing specific component(s). In this way, each one requires a different combination of skills and competencies, and has developed its own unique way of addressing its specific objectives. This distinctiveness can be described under the following 3 headings –mandates, constituencies and structures.

a) distinct mandates

Each initiative aims to improve one or more component parts of humanitarian quality and accountability. ALNAP is concerned with promoting learning, especially through improved evaluation, whilst HAP aims to improve the quality and impact of humanitarian action through helping agencies to become more accountable to disaster survivors. People In Aid's remit is to help NGOs to improve their human resource practices through the use of the Code of Good Practice and other targeted services and outputs. Sphere has developed and supports the use of standards and a humanitarian charter in disaster response, in order to improve the quality and accountability of performance by humanitarian professionals.

b) distinct constituencies

Because each initiative has a distinct approach, each one has different core constituencies, although there is considerable overlap between them. For example, an important part of ALNAP's constituency is the evaluation community who are centrally involved in producing one of ALNAP's core products, the *Review of Humanitarian Action*.

HAP, on the other hand, was created to ensure that humanitarian action is accountable to its intended beneficiaries, and thus its efforts are largely directed to the development and application of instruments and incentives that promote that goal.

People In Aid's main constituencies are the human resource departments and the operational line managers among its Member agencies, and much of its work comes from and is directed at them.

Sphere's core constituents are humanitarian professionals managing and implementing work in the main technical sectors. Improved accountability to those affected by disasters is also explicitly part of Sphere's overall goal. Sphere users should as far as possible work with affected communities in designing the response, and monitoring agreed indicators of the Standards.

c) distinct structures

Given that each initiative has distinct aims, approaches and core constituencies, each needs different organisational structures and governance. Although there are literally hundreds of agencies involved in various ways, it is worth noting that only one humanitarian agency has a governance role on all four initiatives.

ALNAP's network structure helps promote a culture of learning throughout the humanitarian sector by creating safe places for discussion (biannual meetings), communities of practice, sector-wide initiatives and so on. The most effective way of achieving this is to put people in touch with each other through the multiple

connections that a well functioning network can provide. The ALNAP Secretariat's main function is to facilitate/operationalise the decisions made by the Membership.

HAP has been created to promote compliance with relevant standards through accreditation and certification, which is managed on a self-regulatory model. Thus, the HAP Secretariat requires a level of autonomy that is guaranteed by a formal constitution, which includes for example, rigorous criteria for the appointment of independent board members.

Like ALNAP, People In Aid responds to the priorities of its member agencies and increases the knowledge of its members by facilitating the exchange of information throughout the network. People In Aid is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. At least 10 members have nominated employees on People In Aid's Board, with up to 5 independents making up the full Board.

Sphere has some elements of a network structure. It is governed by a Board of NGO networks and families, but it does not have formal members and is effectively 'owned' by those who use it. This ownership is based on the informal acknowledgment of added value and therefore, unlike HAP and People In Aid, there is no formal compliance mechanism ensuring adherence to its standards. Thus, each initiative has developed a distinct organisational structure, governance and modus operandi. However, conscious of the considerable overlap amongst members, partners and stakeholders, the initiatives are aware of the need to ensure that their work is harmonised effectively (see *How is complementarity assured?* below).

How is complementarity assured?

Several mechanisms are in place to ensure that the work of each initiative is harmonised sensibly. For example, all the initiatives come together twice a year to review their respective workplans and to discuss overlaps and gaps. The minutes from these meetings are posted on each of the initiatives' websites. HAP, People In Aid, Groupe URD and Sphere are all Full Members of ALNAP and are in constant touch through circulars, e-mail and face to face meetings. The ALNAP Biannual Meetings provide a forum for regular updates and discussing work-plans. There is also crossover on various working groups – for example HAP was on the Working Group of the ALNAP Global Participation Study and is also a member of People In Aid. During 2006 Sphere participated in the Editorial Steering Committee for the development of HAP standards. HAP, Sphere and ALNAP are all in an advisory group to ECB. Increasingly, the initiatives are looking at ways of working together on certain projects and in certain countries.

How much do we cost?

The initiatives represent a significant element of the collective efforts of the sector to work together to improve accountability, quality and performance. Their total annual costs are around \$3 million in 2004. This represents a tiny percentage of global humanitarian spending which is about \$4 billion per annum. When compared to other service delivery sectors it could be argued that this proportion is much lower than it should be. However, it is also recognised that money spent on these initiatives is taken

out of the international humanitarian budget, the primary purpose of which must always be to provide direct assistance to the most vulnerable.

How do we know that we are making a difference?

Like many other humanitarian agencies we are collectively concerned with this question. Although the question has by no means been answered satisfactorily, each initiative has its own means of tracking its performance and impact. As mentioned above, ALNAP closely monitors the quality of evaluations through a *quality proforma* and also monitors usage of its materials through annual visits to member agencies. In 2004 it was evaluated by DfID, as was People in Aid in HAP runs a modest research programme designed to examine the costs and benefits associated with the practical application of accountability principles. People In Aid provides external verification of the social audit process for agencies working through the Code of Good Practice. An independent evaluation of Sphere was completed in 2003 by Columbia University, USA, in collaboration with Makerere University, Uganda. The focus is now on gathering and compiling evidence – through learning activities and other events - of how and where Sphere has made a difference: ‘Sphere stories’. This learning is shared on the website, and a compilation on CD will be produced during 2007.

Like most humanitarian agencies, each initiative recognises that there is still some way go to be able to give credible answers to what impact they have. Thus, each is involved in studies and debates on how to meet this challenge.

* *Additions to ‘Who are we and what do we do’.*

Coordination SUD - Synergie Qualité is the national coordination committee of French international solidarity NGOs. It produced the Synergie Qualité methodology in 2003. The conviction behind this approach is that the quality of international solidarity actions must be grasped in a multi-dimensional way. Quality includes ethical principles, organisational factors at NGO headquarters, technical know-how, and relationships between members of the NGO, and between these members and the local actors (beneficiary populations and southern partners). This conviction led to the formulation of a coherent set of principles and methods based on five themes:

- humanitarian ethics
- governance within the agency
- human resources management
- project cycle
- the role of the affected populations

The ambition of the Synergie Qualité approach is to help NGOs implement their own ‘quality approach’ by suggesting that they incorporate these five elements. Furthermore, Synergie Qualité asserts that quality criteria vary according to the contexts in which the actions occur. This is why this approach deals with the right questions to ask oneself rather than with responses to apply whatever the context. At the same time, this approach favours the risk-prevention way of thinking. It gives keys for identifying possible dysfunctions, in particular at each stage of the project cycle.

The guide is made up of five chapters that can be read independently from one another. Each chapter corresponds to a theme that NGOs must incorporate into the definition of their approach for improving the quality of their actions: humanitarian ethics, governance within the agency, human resources management, project cycle, role of the affected populations.

For each theme, the guide presents:

- major principles: The internal operations and the external relations of the NGO respect and promote its values.
- quality criteria: The project responds to a demonstrated need;
- examples of good practices: Setting up joint committees made up of trustees and employees with regards to the major events of the agency's life;
- key questions to ask oneself: What needs to happen within an agency - be it at the headquarters or in the field - to acquire operational knowledge of the legal frameworks in which it is working?

The guide is being translated into English and some of the chapters can be downloaded in English.
www.coordinationsud.org

Quality COMPAS has been produced by *Groupe URD*, which undertakes research, evaluation and training in humanitarian action.

It has its roots in operational research carried out from 1999 to 2004 in different contexts and different types of humanitarian projects, alongside operational aid workers.

It is the first method of Quality Assurance produced specifically for humanitarian projects, based on a series of questions and centred on affected populations. It enables steering and evaluation of projects with the aim of improving the quality of service provided to these populations.

Today, it is complemented by an information handling system (Dynamic COMPAS), which makes it possible to record key data about the project. Groupe URD is now supporting leading humanitarian organisations as they adopt this method and its tools.

a) distinct mandates

Quality COMPAS supports aid actors managing their programme quality on the field by offering a system of steering (based on key questions) and a system of evaluation. Steering of the project cycle and programme evaluation are the two complementary utilisations of this quality system which aims to continually improve the service provided to beneficiaries.

b) distinct constituencies

Quality COMPAS is aimed at humanitarian actors working on management of the project cycle (both field teams and other levels of the organisation). It offers its users a common system based on the individual's expertise and local knowledge.

The Emergency Capacity Building Project's Accountability and Impact Measurement Initiative. The Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) Project is a collaborative effort of the seven agencies of the Inter-agency Working Group on Emergency Capacity: CARE International, Catholic Relief Services, the International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps, Oxfam GB, Save the Children US, and World Vision International. Over a two-year period from March 2005, these agencies and their partners are jointly addressing issues of staff capacity, accountability and impact measurement, risk reduction and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in emergencies, with the objective of improving the speed, quality and effectiveness of emergency response.

The focus of ECB work on impact measurement and accountability; recognizing the important humanitarian standards developed by ALNAP, HAP-International and Sphere and working with them, the Project has focused its efforts on bringing together practices in the field that will improve accountability to people affected by disasters and impact measurement of work undertaken. The focus on practice is informed by a field reference group and inspired by the "good enough" approach. This stresses doing what is safe, essential, quick and simple in complex emergency situations, to ensure that even in these challenging contexts staff take some initial, practical steps towards accountability to disaster-affected people. These practices have been published in a brief Guide entitled 'Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies: The Good Enough Guide' in early 2007.

ECB has also formed and deployed a standing team to promote and strengthen good practice on accountability and impact measurement within the agencies, and supported joint evaluations of emergency responses by these agencies.

ECB's primary stakeholders are the staff of the seven IWG agencies, particularly staff in the field who are expected to be accountable to local people and to measure impact. The hope however is that this work will enable field staff from across the humanitarian sector to take action to increase their accountability in any emergency situation.

Those involved in the Project have agreed that our primary accountability is to people affected by disasters. For ECB, accountability means involving men, women, and children affected by an emergency in such a way that they can voice their opinions, influence project design, say what changes they want to see and judge results achieved. Practices that can help staff to achieve this are set out in the Good Enough Guide.

For further information or to give feedback on the above, please write to the initiative(s) concerned:

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