Critical analysis of the latest standard and certification initiatives in the humanitarian sector:

The Core Humanitarian Standard and the SCHR’s Revised Certification Model

Report from the workshop of 10 March 2014

List of participants:

Véronique de Geoffroy \textit{Groupe URD} \quad Annick Gouba Guibal \textit{Medair France}
Hugues Maury \textit{Groupe URD} \quad Yoann Maldonado \textit{Secours Catholique}
Héloïse Heyer \textit{Coordination SUD} \quad Roger Persichino \textit{PU-AMI}
Luciano Loiacono \textit{Handicap International} \quad Antoine Petibon \textit{Croix Rouge}
Anne Hery \textit{Handicap International} \quad Anne Bideau \textit{Croix Rouge}
Pauline Chetcuti \textit{ACF} \quad Benjamin Lacave \textit{ACTED}
Grégory Bulit \textit{Solidarités}

OVERVIEW

Following the Joint Standards Initiative (JSI), a first draft of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) has been disseminated throughout the international humanitarian community for consultation until 31 March 2014. As the Sphere project has withdrawn from the initiative, HAP and People in Aid are steering the development of the CHS with the objective that it will replace the 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management and People in Aid’s Code of Good Practice.

In addition, the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response’s certification project has also just published the revised version of its certification model for the humanitarian sector. In parallel, this model is also being tested in Ethiopia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Lebanon. As for the CHS, feedback on this revised model is being gathered until 31 March 2014.

Following the previous discussions of these initiatives in France, and in particular the workshop of 20 September 2013 in Paris, Groupe URD and Coordination Sud called a meeting of the organisations on 10 March 2014 to analyse these two new proposals in detail and produce a critical analysis and recommendations for HAP and People in Aid about the CHS and for the SCHR about the Certification Model.

This report formalises the main points made during the workshop and is addressed to the two initiatives – the Core Humanitarian Standard (HAP and People in Aid) and the SCHR’s Certification project – as part of an ongoing discussion about quality in aid.
I- MAIN OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE SCHR’S CERTIFICATION PROJECT

The participants observe that many of the comments made in September 2013 and addressed to the SCHR have been taken into account by those in charge of the project but that uncertainties, important shortcomings and major risks remain. These include:

The method

1) The aim of making certification the principle means by which quality will be improved is restated without sufficient grounds for such an assertion.

2) The concept of “quality” is still not clearly defined, which is a problem as certification either should certify that the capacity of an organisation meets quality criteria, or that a good or service provided by a humanitarian organisation has a certain level of quality.

3) Though the proposed model mentions numerous other models/tools and claims to be compatible with these, it does not use any of their concepts or methodology, and does not synthesise what exists apart from content by HAP and People in Aid and the humanitarian principles. Thus, this model contradicts what is stated in paragraph A3: “aligning and harmonising approaches at the national and international level (…) would be a benefit for the sector”.

4) We are concerned that this certification project does not include, or hardly includes, certain criteria which are universally recognized, such as effectiveness, positive impact, coordination between different actors, management capacity and flexibility. In addition, some of the indicators that are proposed are not measurable, such as those that are related to humanitarian principles.

5) The proposed vision in chapter B, which argues that certification will help communities to choose an aid actor is completely disconnected from reality. When there is competition between organizations in the field, it is seen as a problem which needs to be combated to ensure better coverage of needs and not as an option to be promoted to guarantee better quality of aid.

6) The SCHR certification project establishes an official link with the Core Humanitarian Standard regarding the evaluation and certification criteria. And the Core Humanitarian Standard project mentions that it could be used as the basis for voluntary certification of NGOs, amongst other things. If this is the case, why do the two projects not have the same criteria? What is more, after nearly two years of work, the official relationship between the two initiatives has still not been established. The parallel consultation processes are long and repetitive for contributors, and major uncertainty remains about the possible interaction and compatibility between the two mechanisms when they are eventually finalized.

Field of application

7) The field of application of the SCHR project is now known: certification will only concern NGOs. This clarification confirms that pressure will only be put on NGOs, whereas UN agencies, Red Cross/Red Crescent movement bodies and governmental agencies will be exempted. This creates a problem of coherence as the majority of aid goes through these exempted organizations and it is expected that all actors in a given context should coordinate. As a result, coordination would bring together both certified and uncertified actors who did not have the same objectives in terms of quality, nor the same level of demands.
8) As international, governmental and supra-governmental actors are exempted, the SCHR certification model appears to be another instrument to supervise and select NGOs.

**Governance**

9) Having presented a governance structure and plan in version 1 which posed significant problems in terms of the transparency, legitimacy, and economy of the system, version 2 does not address this issue at all, leaving it to a later stage. As governance and the legitimacy of the authorities are central questions in terms of whether the project is acceptable to actors or not, this uncertainty has only increased concern and doubts about the objectives of the approach. Who will have the central authority within the system? Who will its legitimacy come from? Who will certify NGOs and who will accredit the certifiers? It is not possible to continue working on the contents of the system without clarifying these fundamental points.

**Economy of the system**

10) The question of how the mechanism is funded has not yet been given a solid answer. The main humanitarian donors have not made a commitment to guarantee the financial viability of the system. And those who support the current study will not be able to cover the costs alone. The vast majority of donors currently have a wait-and-see policy, and contrary to what is sometimes said, are not particularly pushing for the implementation of a certification system which would replace their own controls and authorizations.

11) The certification project does not provide any solutions for the additional workload created by donor controls on administrative and financial aspects. If it is implemented, the certification project will place a further burden on NGOs, without removing any others.

**II- KEY OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE CORE HUMANITARIAN STANDARD PROJECT**

**Method**

12) Since Sphere has ended its participation in the project, it is no longer clear if the plan to integrate reference frameworks concerns only the members of HAP and People in Aid, or if the ambition remains to create something which is universally applicable.

13) If the latter is the case, the Core Humanitarian Standard appears to be a regression, from a qualitative point of view, compared to existing tools such as the Sphere Core Standards or the Red Cross’s Code of Conduct. Furthermore, the CHS does not stipulate what its relation will be with the existing reference frameworks that it will affect. To the extent that it will not be able to replace all the others, the status of the CHS needs to be clarified. The order of primacy between the different instruments should be indicated, and which reference frameworks may have to disappear.

14) The Core Standard project mentions that it could be used, amongst other things, as the basis for voluntary certification by NGOs. It is essential that the project’s interactions with the SCHR certification project should finally be clarified.
On the content and added value of the proposed standard

15) The participants were satisfied to note that the four fundamental humanitarian principles and the « do no harm » principle had been included and underline the importance of criteria which are often forgotten such as "Supporting and promoting local and national humanitarian leadership".

16) The participants are concerned that the Core Humanitarian Standard does not include fundamental criteria such as effectiveness, positive and negative impact and flexibility.

CONCLUSION:

With the consultation process for the SCHR certification project now drawing to a close, the general feeling amongst the participants is that the project in its current form would not help to significantly improve aid quality. At the same time, the project does contain some risks:

- Increased pressure on NGOs alone and increased competition between them;
- Resources redirected from monitoring and evaluation to procedures to comply with standards and certification.

The status of the new Core Humanitarian Standard which is being drawn up needs to be clarified in relation to existing tools. If it concerns only HAP and People in Aid, its consequences will be limited to their members. On the other hand, if the ambition for the project is much broader, it is essential to think about the consequences that the arrival of a new reference framework would have in relation to those that are already used by many organizations.

Independently of the SCHR and CHS projects, the participants restated their desire to continue working together to discuss and prioritise the needs of their organizations in relation to improving the quality of aid. With this aim in mind, they will study the possibility of implementing initiatives in 2014 which are open to other organizations and other categories of national and international actors, in order to move forward collectively in this direction.

1st April 2014