

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership

"making humanitarian action accountable to beneficiaries"

Accreditation: the HAP Way Forward

9 December 2004

Summary: At the December 2004 General Assembly and Board Meetings, HAP decided to explore the development of a decentralised accreditation system in collaboration with suitable NGO networks and associations. In due course it is envisaged that HAP will accredit such national, regional and International NGO networks with the competence and authority to certify their members or affiliates as being compliant with the HAP Accountability Principles. To achieve this outcome, it is necessary to (1) identify indicators and benchmarks of quality management in the application of the HAP Accountability Principles (2) adopt standards for the process of accreditation, and (3) grant "accredited status" to suitable NGO networks.

1) The Task

HAP's founding Statutes (Article 5 point 4) require the establishment of an accreditation system that enables interested humanitarian agencies to demonstrate their compliance with the HAP [Accountability Principles](#). The HAP Board meeting of 11 June 2004 requested that the Secretariat prepare a proposal for an accreditation system to be considered by the General Assembly and the Board in December 2004. This paper provides a map for guiding further exploration of the basic proposal rather than a definitive design for the establishment of a HAP Accreditation mechanism.

2) The Challenge

HAP's current constitution and relatively high membership fees, combined with the location and diminutive capacity of its Secretariat, creates unintended but strong incentives to build a partnership largely restricted to the familiar big Northern relief agencies that currently dominate the operations of the International humanitarian system. An accreditation system based upon a model where the Secretariat awards "accredited status" to its members would simply reinforce this oligopolistic tendency, which is already embedded in HAP's organisational design. However, it is the Secretariat's understanding that the General Assembly and the Board of HAP in fact want to develop an accreditation system that will discriminate only on the quality of an agency's actual performance in relation to agreed benchmarks of HAP's Accountability Principles. Thus, while the HAP accreditation system should promote synergy between "market forces" and the quality of humanitarian action, it most certainly should not do so solely for the benefit of a small club of large International NGOs. Apart from the inherent unfairness of a system that would restrict the benefits of HAP accredited status to the larger International NGOs, this would also be a certain method of discrediting the HAP Accountability Principles more generally. In turn, this would surely put back rather than advance HAP's strategic vision of an accountable International humanitarian system at large, and would, ironically, run counter to the interests of the intended beneficiaries of humanitarian action. In contrast, a HAP accreditation system must first serve the interests of the intended beneficiaries, and to meet this fundamental criterion, at a minimum it will have to be genuinely meritocratic and accessible to all qualifying organisations.

Thus it is necessary to develop an accreditation system to which access is not constrained by the current HAP membership system with its small but monolithic Geneva based, high-entry-cost, registration system. This combination of obstacles clearly discourages applications from smaller and more remote NGOs, just as the spectre of processing hundreds of membership applications from small Southern NGOs daunts the Secretariat. Given this existing flaw in HAP's organisational design, it is surely desirable that HAP creates a highly flexible and decentralised system of accreditation that is accessible and responsive to smaller and less capitalised humanitarian agencies, especially those in the South. As it is manifestly unrealistic for HAP to create its own accreditation capacity in each country where potential candidates exist, the only plausible means of providing this service is through collaboration with interested NGO networks and associations,

whether these be national, regional or International. This analysis of the organisational development task facing HAP in creating a suitable system of accreditation is absolutely central in shaping the Secretariat's recommendations for the best way to proceed.

3) Definitions: Accreditation, Registration & Certification.

To facilitate discussion about this proposal, it is necessary to provide definitions of key terms used. Our definitions are drawn from the International Standards Organisation (ISO), and are specifically related to the ISO 9000 series of "quality management" standards. As the ISO website explains, *'In the everyday context, like "beauty", everyone may have his or her idea of what "quality" is. But, in the ISO 9000 context, the standardized definition of quality refers to all those features of a product (or service) that are required by the customer. "Quality management" means what the organization does to ensure that its products or services satisfy the customer's quality requirements and comply with any regulations applicable to those products or services'*¹. While it may be argued that humanitarian action is not simply a "product" or "service", and that the intended beneficiaries are not just "customers", the core ISO objective of promoting quality management is exactly analogous with HAP's transformative agenda for the humanitarian system, and in this respect the ISO 9000 quality assurance process is of direct relevance and has much accumulated experience and wisdom to offer us.

Accreditation *'refers to the formal recognition by a specialized body - an accreditation body - that a certification body is competent to carry out... certification in specified business sectors. Accreditation is like certification of the certification body. An Accrediting Body, Agency, or Association is a non-governmental entity that sets standards for accreditation, administers the process of accreditation, and provides assistance, as it is able to institutions, programs, and the general public. Accreditation is a process by which an institution periodically evaluates its work and seeks an independent judgment by peers that it achieves substantially its own objectives and meets the established standards of the body from which it seeks accreditation.'*².

Certification *'refers to the issuing of written assurance (the certificate) by an independent, external body that has audited an organization's management system and verified that it conforms to the requirements specified in the standard. Certificates issued by accredited certification bodies - and known as "accredited certificates" - may be perceived on the market as having increased credibility.'*³

Registration *'means that the auditing body has recorded the certification in its client register'. The organization's management system has therefore been both certified and registered.'*⁴.

Typically, the accreditation and certification processes both include a self-evaluative description of the candidate institution, examining goals, activities, problems and achievements. The resulting report is the basis for an on-site review by a team of professional peers. Finally the accrediting or certification body reviews the self-study and the peer reports as the basis for decisions and follow-up action on granting accredited or certificated status.

4) Why accredit and certify?

Although HAP's Statutes place an obligation upon the Secretariat to develop a system of accreditation, it is worth reminding ourselves why this process is attractive, and why it has been given a central role in HAP's organisational design. A reliable, robust and accessible accreditation system will:

¹ http://www.iso.ch/iso/en/iso9000-14000/basics/general/basics_4.html

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

- Create incentives for improving the quality, effectiveness and accountability to beneficiaries of the humanitarian work of certified agencies
- Confirm that a reasonable level of compliance with the HAP Accountability Principles is being achieved by certified agencies
- Provide a framework for recognising and rewarding agency staff that implement the HAP Accountability Principles
- Ensure learning and continuous improvement within certified agencies
- Enhance the credibility of certified agencies
- Protect certified members against harmful internal and external pressures
- Enable donors to make more informed choices

If HAP is to become more than a small mutual admiration club, it must develop and promote incentives that encourage greater accountability to beneficiaries. An accessible and robust accreditation system is probably the most powerful tool that could be deployed for this purpose.

5) The HAP Accreditation Strategy

Given our particular need to build a decentralised and accreditation system with an “outsourced” certification function, the strategy for creating a HAP accreditation system will have to accomplish three crucial development tasks:

- a) Define indicators and benchmarks of “quality management” for the Accountability Principles
- b) Adopt standards for the process of accreditation
- c) Grant “accredited status” to suitable certification/registration bodies

Each of these stages in developing a system of accreditation will have important implications for HAP-I, specifically with regard to its constitution, its membership and the functions of the Secretariat.

- a) **Define indicators and benchmarks of “quality management”.** The 2003 General Assembly and Board meetings tasked the Secretariat to develop a process to identify appropriate indicators and benchmarks for the application of the HAP Accountability Principles. The Secretariat has integrated this and several other General Assembly and Board mandated activities into a process for the production of the HAP “Manual for Accountability to Humanitarian Beneficiaries” (see Appendix 1). The detailed planning of this project, approved in principle by the Board in June 2004, should have been completed by September 2004, but unfortunately the consultant was unable to complete the assignment⁵. However, initial feedback indicates widespread support within the HAP membership for the production of the Manual, as well as amongst potential new members. The Secretariat now intends to appoint a temporary member of staff to manage the project, with guidance provided by an Editorial Steering Committee, and in consultation with a wider reference group of humanitarian practitioners and accountability experts. Given the problems with this consultancy, it is now more realistic to anticipate that the first meeting of the Editorial Steering Committee will take place in March 2005. The Secretariat still expects to present a draft Manual, including indicators and benchmarks for the application of the HAP Accountability Principles, to the December 2005 General Assembly and Board meetings.
- b) **Adopt standards for the accreditation process.** In order to protect the “brand” integrity of a HAP system of accreditation and certification, it is necessary to adopt robust standards and benchmarks for the processes of accreditation and certification. A sound accreditation process usually involves a collegial exercise of self-review and peer review that provides a reliable guide to the quality and accountability of institutions and programs. As the exercise involved in developing accreditation and certification process standards and benchmarks needs to be closely linked to the process of seeking consensus on appropriate actionable

⁵ This being due to an extended period of compassionate leave, followed by an offer of a full-time post

and verifiable indicators for HAP's Accountability Principles, the Secretariat proposes to incorporate this task into the HAP accountability manual project. To foster closer collaboration with potential HAP certification bodies, it makes sense for HAP to invite such bodies to participate in the Editorial Steering Committee. The DEC, ACFID and InterAction have all expressed an interest in taking part in this project. The Secretariat now proposes to formally invite these associations and other suitable bodies to participate.

- c) **Grant “accredited status” to interested certification/registration bodies.** In line with the need to develop a decentralised system in collaboration with existing NGO networks and associations, the Secretariat now favours an ISO 9000 type model that would eventually establish the HAP Secretariat as the accreditation body for candidate national, regional or International NGO networks. Successful candidates would then enjoy the authority to "register and certify" their own members as being "HAP compliant", and to run their own "HAP approved" complaints handling mechanism. The idea of “franchising” or “outsourcing” HAP’s certification function would on the one hand enable smaller local organisations to seek certification from more accessible national NGO networks, while on the other it would obviate the need for an enormous Geneva based Secretariat that would be required were all applications for HAP certification to be funnelled through a single global registration entity. The Secretariat proposes that it should accredit suitable NGO networks as HAP certification and registration organs where these have demonstrated their willingness to comply with appropriate procedural standards for granting HAP certificates. Through developing the necessary competence for certification within existing NGO networks, the HAP accreditation system would avoid unnecessary institutional duplication and dysfunctional competition, as well as allowing for adaptations of the core HAP Accountability Principles to various legal, political, cultural, social and economic contexts. Not only does this make sense in terms of removing many of the institutional blockages that currently prevent HAP certification being made available to all those that might wish to qualify, the decentralised accreditation approach also has the merit of being consistent with the ISO definitions of accreditation and certification quoted above. This model could also be applied to the major International NGOs and their associations, such as CARE, Oxfam, World Vision, the IFRC, ICVA, VOICE and so on.

The only constitutional blockage to this approach is the current requirement that full members must undertake “operational relief and humanitarian assistance activities” as one of their core activities (Article 7a of HAP Statutes). This in effect blocks full membership to most if not all potential HAP certification bodies. While full membership might not be a necessary condition for accreditation as a HAP certification authority, this rule creates an unhelpful and entirely unnecessary constraint upon the development of closer collaboration with potential certification bodies⁶. In due course, it is desirable that a significant number of full-members of HAP-I, and thus members of the Board too, should be drawn from NGO networks that have been accredited as HAP certification bodies. The Secretariat believes that founding members of HAP should remain as full members, but over time the Board should more fully reflect a membership that would ideally include many NGO networks and associations. In this way, HAP could dramatically increase the reach of its accreditation and certification system, offering also a much more realistic prospect of achieving the sector wide impact that is described in the HAP vision statement.

However, to move in this direction, it is necessary to assess what level of demand there might be from potential HAP certification bodies. From preliminary and informal discussions with ACFID⁷ (the main Australian NGO network and an associate member of HAP-I), InterAction (the largest US NGO network) and the DEC⁸ (a coalition of the UK’s larger humanitarian NGOs), the HAP Secretariat now has the firm impression that it is worth entering formal consultations with these and other NGO networks with a view to building a

⁶ ACFID has pointed out that by being limited to Associate Membership due to its not operational character, ACFID is under no obligation to produce an Accountability Workplan or to report on progress achieved in implementing the Accountability Principles.

⁷ Australian Council for International Development

⁸ Disasters Emergency Committee

decentralised accreditation system. However, it is crucial at this stage to keep our thinking open and flexible, although the one thing that we must hold tightly to is the requirement that the HAP accreditation and certification procedures must be developed in a manner that always associates the HAP "brand" with quality, integrity, cost-effectiveness and, above all else, a consistent approach to making humanitarian action accountable to its intended beneficiaries. The initiative will fail, with grave consequences for humanitarian victims, if we ever allow the name of HAP to become associated with a process of ethical "window-dressing".

6) What next?

The HAP Secretariat Workplan for 2005-2006, authorised by the Board in June 2004, already includes budgeted activities for the development of an accreditation system and for the production of the Manual for Accountability to Humanitarian Beneficiaries. The December 2004 General Assembly approved the general principle of a decentralised accreditation system, and authorised the Secretariat to explore possible collaboration with suitable NGO networks, under the strategic guidance of the HAP Board. The General Assembly also approved a minor constitutional amendment to the HAP Statutes that now allows NGO networks and associations to apply for full membership of HAP-I. All the other membership eligibility criteria remain unaltered.

- a) The HAP Board approved a revised table of contents for the proposed Manual of Accountability to Humanitarian Beneficiaries as follows:

The HAP "Manual for Accountability to Humanitarian Beneficiaries" will serve as a single HAP "authorised" sourcebook and will contain (not necessarily in this order);

- 1) *The HAP Accountability Principles*
- 2) *A set of actionable and verifiable humanitarian accountability indicators to be used in HAP certification procedures*
- 3) *A set of agreed standards and procedures for accreditation as a HAP certification body.*
- 4) *Guidelines on developing Humanitarian Accountability Work Plans for HAP members.*
- 5) *Training of trainers source materials*
- 6) *An advisory section on good practices in humanitarian accountability*
- 7) *Standard forms or templates (e.g. for accreditation, certification, registering complaints, reporting etc)*

- b) The HAP Board also authorised the Secretariat to invite representatives of suitable NGO networks and associations to participate in the Editorial Steering Committee for the preparation of the HAP Manual for Humanitarian Accountability.

From November 2004, the Secretariat will prepare a monthly newsletter for members and associate members that will include a brief update on progress being achieved and challenges encountered in the development of the Manual and the proposed decentralised accreditation system.

At this stage it is not yet clear to the Secretariat whether HAP should seek ISO 9000 accreditation. Further research and analysis will be conducted on this matter, with a view to reporting back to the Board, and if appropriate to the General Assembly also, on the advantages, disadvantages, costs and wider implications of such a course of action.

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Geneva
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