
4. Benchmarks for the HAP Standard

An agency that wishes to comply with the HAP Standard must first fulfil the qualifying norms and then meet the Benchmarks and their related requirements. HAP Certification can be granted when an independent auditor confirms that an agency complies with the means of verification specified in the Standard. The HAP Standard has six benchmarks. These are reproduced in the exact words contained in the Standard in the box on the facing page.

In this section of the Guide, each Benchmark is examined in turn, using the following format:

1. What does the Benchmark mean?
2. Why it is important?
3. How will it be assessed?
4. Suggestions for good practice.
5. References to further tools and information.

HAP Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management Standard (2007)

The Six Benchmarks

1. The agency shall establish a humanitarian quality management system.
2. The agency shall make the following information publicly available to intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, agency staff, and other specified stakeholders: (a) organisational background; (b) humanitarian accountability framework; (c) humanitarian plan; (d) progress reports; and e) complaints-handling procedures.
3. The agency shall enable beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in programme decisions and seek their informed consent.
4. The agency shall determine the competencies, attitudes, and development needs of staff required to implement its humanitarian quality management system.
5. The agency shall establish and implement complaints-handling procedures that are effective, accessible, and safe for intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, agency staff, humanitarian partners, and other specified bodies.
6. The agency shall establish a process of continual improvement for its humanitarian accountability framework and humanitarian quality management system.

Links with the humanitarian accountability framework

Throughout this section, numerous references are made to the humanitarian accountability framework, which is described in Chapter 2: Qualifying norms for Certification. While drafting the Standard, there was much debate about whether the humanitarian accountability framework should be designated as a Benchmark or as a qualifying norm. However, this mattered primarily with regard to the logic and convenience of its placement in the text of the Standard, because in either case there was a general consensus that the Standard had to make the formulation of a humanitarian accountability framework compulsory. After much discussion, the humanitarian accountability framework was finally designated as a qualifying norm. Nevertheless, it is also explicitly referred to in:

- Benchmark 1 in relation to its implementation through a quality management system
- Benchmark 2 in relation to its public availability
- Benchmark 4 in relation to staff competencies
- Benchmark 5 in relation to complaints-handling
- Benchmark 6 in relation to continual improvement.

In this respect, the humanitarian accountability framework is a unifying tool that is an integral part of the Standard and an essential component of the Benchmarks.

Benchmark 1: Humanitarian quality management system

The agency shall establish a humanitarian quality management system.

- 1.1 The agency shall document its humanitarian accountability framework referring to all relevant internal and external accountability and quality standards, codes, guidelines, and principles committed to by the agency.
- 1.2 The agency shall demonstrate that its humanitarian quality management system enables implementation of its humanitarian accountability framework.

1. What is a ‘humanitarian quality management system’?

Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for. A product is not quality because it is hard to make and costs a lot of money, as manufacturers typically believe. This is incompetence. Customers pay only for what is of use to them and gives them value. Nothing else constitutes quality.

— Peter Drucker, management writer⁶

The HAP Standard takes it that a humanitarian agency’s principal ‘customers’ are disaster survivors, who are meant to benefit from the agency’s humanitarian programme. While those most adversely affected are not usually required to pay for the assistance that is offered, disaster survivors are always expected to devote time and due attention to the receipt, consumption, and utilisation of assistance. But because their continued existence itself is at stake, the participation of disaster survivors should never be taken for granted.

Although images of disaster ‘victims’ all too often show people apparently doing nothing but waiting for help to arrive, in reality survivors are almost always engaged in a desperate struggle to stay healthy and alive. For them, each moment counts in how it can be

used to improve the prospects for, and quality of, survival – for themselves and for their family, their neighbours, and their community. Therefore, when offering assistance, humanitarian agencies ought to have verified that their intended beneficiaries do value what is on offer, and that survivors are not wasting vital time and energy on what may be more ‘photo opportunity’ than rigorous assessment or distribution.

Thus, Peter Drucker’s formulation of what constitutes quality could be paraphrased for humanitarian agencies as follows: disaster survivors appreciate only what is of use to them and gives them value. Nothing else constitutes humanitarian quality.

The HAP Standard therefore defines a **humanitarian quality management system** as a ‘designated set of processes that enable continual improvement in an agency’s performance in meeting the essential needs and respecting the dignity of disaster survivors’. A humanitarian quality management system is, in essence, the means by which an agency’s humanitarian accountability framework is implemented, monitored, and improved over time.

The quality management system comprises the resources that the agency uses to meet its quality and accountability objectives, while the framework describes its essential quality and accountability objectives, stating who is responsible and where, when, and how each commitment will be met and progress measured.

In some agencies a humanitarian accountability framework will be part of a more comprehensive accountability framework that provides a publicly available statement about all of the agency’s key corporate or organisational commitments. Similarly, its humanitarian quality management system may be an element in its overall corporate or organisational quality management system.

Benchmark 1 requires that an agency prepares a humanitarian accountability framework (as explained in Chapter 2 under the qualifying norms) and puts this into practice through its quality management system. The implementation plan or strategy

included in the framework should cover every aspect of the ‘plan–do–check–act’ quality assurance cycle (see Annex 3, Tool 6: Plan–do–check–act). It should:

- identify stakeholders
- state their needs and expectations
- outline relevant ‘quality’ commitments
- contain SMART objectives and progress indicators
- designate management responsibilities
- designate human, financial, and logistical resources
- outline partnership strategies
- identify staff development plans
- specify a knowledge management strategy that includes monitoring, evaluation, learning, and improvement objectives.

2. Why is Benchmark 1 important?

The humanitarian sector has developed many standards and guidelines, but fewer means of verifying their implementation. Humanitarian standards often remain aspirational, due to weaknesses in quality management practices. A humanitarian quality management system can address these shortcomings through:

- empowering beneficiaries and other stakeholders
- fostering a culture of accountability and learning
- streamlining internal and external communications
- clarifying priorities and development needs for staff.

In turn, an effective humanitarian quality management system will:

- yield better humanitarian outcomes
- improve overall efficiency
- improve staff motivation and retention
- enhance consent and improve agency security
- strengthen the agency’s organisational profile and fundraising performance.

3. How will this benchmark be assessed?

The means of verification for this Benchmark are set out in the Standard itself as follows.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
<p>1.1 The agency shall document its humanitarian accountability framework referring to all relevant internal and external accountability and quality standards, codes, guidelines, and principles committed to by the agency.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Review copy of documented humanitarian accountability framework and cross-reference with all relevant agency commitments including the agency's non-disclosure policy.2 Verify that the document is made publicly accessible throughout the agency and to its humanitarian partners.3 Review agency's strategy to support humanitarian partners in developing their capacity to comply with the Principles of Accountability and Principles for Humanitarian Action.
<p>1.2 The agency shall demonstrate that its humanitarian quality management system enables implementation of its humanitarian accountability framework.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Confirm existence of and review implementation procedures for the humanitarian quality management system.2 Interview humanitarian partners to confirm awareness of agency's humanitarian accountability framework.

Working with partners

An agency working with humanitarian partners is required to:

- ensure that its partners are aware of, and understand, the agency's humanitarian accountability framework
- show that it has a strategy for supporting and strengthening the capacity of its partners to apply the HAP Principles of Accountability and Principles for Humanitarian Action (the guidance on good practices below gives further advice on what such a strategy should contain).

4. Suggestions for good practice

This section gives some suggestions about how to develop a humanitarian quality management system and a humanitarian accountability framework. Most organisations will already have systems and documentation policies in place, so this may be best treated as a checklist, although HAP does not claim that it is definitive or applicable to all organisations.

Step 1: Make quality an organisational goal

- Secure a definitive statement about quality and accountability by the highest authority in the agency. This can help to ensure that 'quality and accountability' are embedded in an agency's standard operating procedures. The process of doing this may also help to clarify an agency's priorities and what it can, and cannot, commit to.
- Ensure that the agency's board is committed and that its CEO has overall responsibility.

Step 2: Define stakeholders

- Define who the agency's stakeholders are.
- Clarify how their needs and expectations are defined in terms of quality and accountability.
- Clarify how the agency's stakeholders are consulted or represented. This may raise very important questions

concerning the agency's governance (see Annex 3, Tool 8: Community engagement tools: stakeholder analysis).

Step 3: Make a list of 'quality' commitments

An agency's commitments should be relevant to its own stakeholders and in particular to its primary 'customers', its programme beneficiaries.

- Review the agency's organisational mission and/or mandate and identify all relevant established 'corporate' quality and accountability commitments.
- Review and record all relevant commitments made at head office level.
- Review and record all relevant commitments made at field level.
- Agree indicators for all relevant commitments (the list of commitments should be documented in the agency's humanitarian accountability framework).

Step 4: Carry out a baseline analysis

- Evaluate where the agency currently stands in relation to the commitments made, using the indicators developed. Involving staff and stakeholders at different levels can enhance this process.
- Identify gaps in compliance, and set a timeline and an improvement plan for addressing these gaps (the baseline analysis should be documented in the agency's humanitarian accountability framework.)

Step 5: Improve the humanitarian quality management system

Identify the systems, mechanisms, processes, and resources that are currently being used, and what is now needed for implementation. Systems might include operations, logistics, financial, human resources, marketing/fundraising, policy, and learning. In each, clarify:

- **Management responsibilities**
 - Assign responsibility for implementation.
 - Create specialised posts to enable implementation if required.
 - Include reference to the HAP Standard in job descriptions, work plans, and targets.
 - Ensure that responsible staff can integrate the relevant elements of the quality and accountability commitments into their work.
 - Ensure that all staff who need to know about the HAP Standard do know through induction, refresher training, and information handouts, newsletters, etc.
 - Make knowledge and delivery of the HAP Standard part of the performance appraisal process.
- **Knowledge management procedures**
 - Include the HAP Standard in key organisational materials such as strategy papers, operations manuals, training materials, etc.
 - Include the HAP Standard at all stages of programme design, implementation, and evaluation.
 - Consider how the HAP Standard can apply to different programmes, projects, countries, and contexts.
 - Make the HAP Standard visible in the workplace.
- **Budget arrangements**
 - Ensure that implementation of the HAP Standard is budgeted for, whether under a single budget-holder or decentralised to all relevant budget-holders.
- **Monitoring and evaluation procedures**
 - Put in place processes to ensure that the implementation plan is functioning, and that it is monitored and continually improved.

- **Documentation**
 - Clarify what documentation is required for the quality management system, and establish who produces it, who revises it, who uses it, who retains it, and what restrictions apply to its distribution.

Step 6: Monitor and evaluate

Institute a monitoring process to check how accountability and quality assurance commitments are being met. This will require setting up systems and processes for monitoring, indicators for measuring progress, and procedures for capturing lessons learned and feeding them back into the system. Verification of implementation in the following dimensions should be covered:

- **Management responsibilities:** organisational structure; job descriptions; interviews with staff (varying levels, roles, locations, etc.).
- **Staff:** training manuals (induction and refresher); staff handouts; job descriptions, workplans, appraisal reports; visibility of Standard in workplace; interviews with staff.
- **Knowledge management:** key organisational documents for references; field visits; interviews with beneficiaries.
- **Budgets:** budget allocations.
- **Partners:** partner assessment and feedback.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** monitoring and evaluation reports. Monitoring needs to take place at two levels: (1) monitoring whether the quality management system is working; (2) monitoring whether the ‘quality and accountability’ commitments are being met. Commitments (e.g. gender policy) will require different indicators (e.g. targets for female staff, inclusion of female beneficiaries in community committees) from those used to measure the actual system.

Step 7: Continually improve

- Capture feedback and lessons learned for improving the process in line with HAP Benchmark 6.
- Ensure that new standards and good practices in the humanitarian sector are reviewed and incorporated as appropriate.

Step 8: Partnership arrangements

The strategy for working with humanitarian partners should include the following:

- **Partner selection:** Ensure that there is a sound and equitable selection process which provides equal opportunities for women's groups and other marginalised communities.
- **Contractual agreements:** Include commitments by the agency to the partner and vice versa. An undertaking to implement accountability principles can be included in the contract itself or made on a more informal basis.
- **Capacity building:** Assess the partners' strengths and weaknesses in relation to the HAP Principles of Accountability and Principles for Humanitarian Action and develop a plan for improvement and training. An improvement plan should include a baseline analysis (partners' current status, strengths, and weaknesses in relation to the different aspects of the Principles); identification of areas of potential improvement, listed in order of prioritisation; identification of resources, noting what it would take to support and improve the partner in each area identified; timeframe (planning deadlines and support in a realistic and affordable way); indicators (draft clear and attainable indicators for progress, including those relating to gender mainstreaming and child protection); and a joint agreement to be drawn up between the partner and the agency to work together on the implementation of this plan.
- **Information:** Keep partners informed about the accountability and quality commitments made by the agency.

- **Technical support:** Make arrangements to provide support as and when required.
- **Continual improvement:** Ensure that monitoring and evaluation are essential parts of programmes implemented by partners, to enable continual learning.
- **Complaints-handling:** Procedures for handling complaints should be set up. These include procedures implemented by the partner to enable beneficiaries to complain to the partner and to the agency directly, as well as procedures for the partner and the agency to complain or give feedback to one another (the implementation system should be documented in the agency's humanitarian accountability framework).

5. References to further tools and information

See the following Tools in Annex 3 for further assistance:

- Tool 6: Plan–do–check–act quality assurance cycle (PDCA).
- Tool 8: Community engagement tools: stakeholder analysis

For further guidance on quality standards and quality management systems, see the ISO 9000 Council website at:

www.iso9000council.org/index.htm

Benchmark 2: Information

The agency shall make the following information publicly available to intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, agency staff, and other specified stakeholders: (a) organisational background; (b) humanitarian accountability framework; (c) humanitarian plan; (d) progress reports; and (e) complaints-handling procedures.

A humanitarian plan includes overall goals and objectives (outputs/expected results), timeframe, and linked financial summary. Progress reports include progress as measured against the humanitarian plan and financial summary – reports to be made available at agreed intervals.

- 2.1 The agency shall ensure that information is presented in languages, formats, and media that are accessible and comprehensible for beneficiaries and specified stakeholders.
- 2.2 The agency shall inform disaster-affected communities about beneficiary selection criteria and deliverables as agreed with their representatives.
- 2.3 The agency shall include its name and contact details in all publicly available information.
- 2.4 The agency shall make available information about the relevant parts of its structure, including staff roles and responsibilities.

1. What is information?

By definition, information is of value to the receiver *because* it informs. If it does not inform, it is just raw data, noise, or propaganda. Communication takes place when information flows backwards and forwards between people, and through networks. This Benchmark seeks to improve communication between an agency and its stakeholders, while focusing on the particular requirements that an agency must fulfil as a provider of information.

Disaster survivors have told HAP that the following information was of critical importance to them:

- **Information about the agency:** What are its objectives? What is its capacity to respond effectively? Who in the agency is responsible for the emergency programme?

- **Information about humanitarian plans:** How, when, and where will disaster survivors be consulted? Who will provide assistance? What will be offered? Where will it be provided? When will it be available? In particular, who is providing food, water, and health care?

Accurate, timely, and accessible data about these matters would constitute valuable information in a humanitarian crisis.

2. Why is information important?

Sharing information and knowledge strengthens trust, increases understanding, deepens the level of participation, and improves the impact of an emergency response. It can also facilitate ongoing dialogue with a range of stakeholders, which in turn can lead to better co-ordination and effectiveness.

The provision of information by an agency to its stakeholders in an accurate and timely way is the key to meeting the principle of transparency. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on upwards accountability to donors, while information dissemination to other stakeholders, such as potential beneficiaries, has been weaker.

Some stakeholders, such as institutional donors, have the power to ensure that they receive information on a regular basis. Donors have tended to increase the level of planning detail that they require in funding applications, and funding contracts usually require their partners to submit plans and reports in accordance with an agreed schedule and format. Donors often know more about the relief programme than its intended beneficiaries do. Yet a failure to share information with beneficiaries in a timely manner can have very damaging consequences. It can contribute to:

- **Confusion and delays:** There may be chaos at distribution time, with no one knowing who is entitled to what.
- **Waste:** The agency may waste money on unsuitable and inappropriate items if it does not share information with beneficiaries in advance.

- **Increased insecurity and violence:** Distributions may inadvertently exacerbate inequity and escalate tensions if the process is not clear and transparent.
- **Sexual exploitation and abuse:** As cases of sexual exploitation in humanitarian operations in West Africa and elsewhere have shown, beneficiaries are vulnerable to manipulation and to the extortion of sex in exchange for aid. Knowledge of rights, including complaints and redress processes, can help to reduce opportunities for exploitation of this sort.

It is important to note that this Benchmark is about the flow of information to and from intended beneficiaries and other stakeholders in order to improve the quality of services they receive; it is not about public relations or promoting the organisation, although improved dissemination of information and the better programmes that result from improved communication can only be beneficial for an agency's image.

3. How will this Benchmark be assessed?

The means of verification for this Benchmark are set out in the Standard itself as follows.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
2.1 The agency shall ensure that information is presented in languages, formats, and media that are accessible and comprehensible for beneficiaries and specified stakeholders.	1 Review how the languages, formats, and media have been determined. 2 Review documentation provided on organisational background, humanitarian accountability framework, humanitarian plan and financial summary, progress reports, and complaints-handling procedures.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Review guidelines for information dissemination. 4 Review information availability and accessibility. 5 Compare languages used by intended beneficiaries, local staff, and specified stakeholders with that used in documents provided. 6 Interview beneficiaries to verify information availability.
<p>2.2 The agency shall inform disaster-affected communities about beneficiary selection criteria and deliverables as agreed with their representatives.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Demonstrate that intended beneficiaries have been informed about selection criteria and entitlements, whether through minutes of meetings, letters of agreement, information boards, or other verifiable means. 2 Interview beneficiary representatives, beneficiaries, and agency personnel.
<p>2.3 The agency shall include its name and contact details in all publicly available information.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Review contact details at appropriate and publicly accessible sites.
<p>2.4 The agency shall make available information about the relevant parts of its structure, including staff roles and responsibilities.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Review availability and accessibility of information provided.

Disaggregation of beneficiaries: As with Benchmarks 3 and 5, assessment will examine how the agency ensures that the diverse needs of different groups of disaster survivors are recognised, paying particular attention to gender, age, and disability, but also to ethnicity, sexuality, and other relevant factors where prejudice and discrimination may adversely affect humanitarian outcomes. The practice of disaggregation will be reviewed through documentation (e.g. needs assessments and project appraisals), through interviews with staff, partners, and beneficiaries, and through direct observation.

Working with partners

An agency working with humanitarian partners is required to:

- demonstrate that it meets the Benchmark itself
- show that its plan for supporting partners addresses this Benchmark.

As the agency may have little direct contact with beneficiaries, arrangements may need to be made to ensure that information about the agency is passed to beneficiaries via its partners.

4. Suggestions for good practice

Developing an information strategy/plan

It is important to prepare a communications strategy before a programme is launched, so that information about the agency can be disseminated from the outset. Agencies will need to review their information plans on an ongoing basis, as the programme develops and as their own knowledge increases. An information plan could consist of the following components:

- **Guiding principles that underpin the information strategy**
 - Define agency standards of transparency, reliability, timeliness, etc.
 - Clarify which information should be covered by a non-

disclosure and restricted circulation policy. Make this policy publicly available.

- Confirm the commitment of senior management to support the strategy.
- Ensure that information is an integral part of all the activities undertaken by the agency, e.g. if an operational objective is to supply water to a camp, it will be necessary to consider the ways in which information about this will be provided to disaster-affected communities and other stakeholders.
- **Analysis of what information to share**
 - Agency background, objectives, structure, and contact details
 - Humanitarian accountability framework
 - Humanitarian plans at each location
 - Progress reports against the humanitarian plans
 - Complaints-handling mechanism.
- **Analysis of who the information should be shared with (target audience)**
 - Stakeholders could include intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, host communities, agency staff, and other specified stakeholders.
 - Assess prevailing causes and practices of discrimination in access to information (e.g. differential access to television, radio, the Internet).
 - Assess the different needs of specific groups, such as women, children, elderly people, and people with disabilities or mobility restrictions.

It is essential that an agency overcomes obstacles that prevent information reaching marginalised groups within the beneficiary population. The obstacles can be structural, such as language barriers, or they may result from inequality, such as the exclusion of women and girls from decision-making fora. The agency should check whether critical information has

reached all groups within the disaster-affected population and that channels for feedback are open and functional.

The agency should assess the risks that receiving information may expose people to with regard to their gender, age, and other relevant factors such as disability, ethnicity, and sexuality.

- **Analysis of when to share this information**
 - At all stages of the operation, during the design phase, start-up, implementation, evaluation, and exit
 - At regular agreed reporting times throughout the life of the project
 - When there are any significant changes to the plans.
- **Analysis of how to share this information**
 - Consider the different types of information specified in the Benchmark (organisational background, humanitarian accountability framework, humanitarian plan, progress reports, complaints-handling procedures).
 - Decide on the best method for presenting each type of information to different stakeholders. Options could include annual reports, leaflets, booklets, posters, websites, organigrams, community notice boards, billboards, photographs, workshops, role plays, meetings, verbal feedback, images, etc.
 - Adapt information to make it available in different formats (print, audiovisual, etc.) so that it will be accessible to all recipients, taking into account diversity issues such as literacy levels, gender, age, ethnicity, race, and disability.
 - Ask beneficiaries what formats they would like to receive information in.
 - When working with partners, consider what information needs to be passed to beneficiaries via the partners.
- **Risk analysis**
 - Consider the potential impact of sharing information on the security of both deliverer and receiver.

- In particular, consider that the risks may be different for women or men, girls or boys.
- Assess the consequences of non-disclosure and restricted circulation policies.
- **Editorial guidelines for information materials**
 - Test information to ensure that it is accessible to, and understood by, the target audience.
 - Ensure that information is relevant, useful, and accurate.
 - Update information in a timely manner.
 - Check that information does not mislead or cause harm to the beneficiaries or to the agency, and that it respects the dignity of all.
 - Provide opportunities for feedback.
- **Clear and achievable (SMART) objectives and indicators**
 - Prepare a list of information materials to be produced. This might include a summary of commissioning authority, purpose, author, format, distribution method, cost, and feedback mechanism.
- **Budget**
 - Ensure that the costs of the information plan can be met.
- **Monitoring and evaluation process**
 - Review and refine the information strategy at regular intervals and whenever humanitarian plans change.

5. References to further tools and information

References and links

The points made in this section are similar to the principles embodied in Common Standard 1 on participation in the Sphere Handbook, which states: ‘The disaster-affected population should actively participate in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme’ (p.28). Key phrases from the indicators to this Standard refer specifically to

information (e.g. people ‘receive information ... and are given the opportunity to comment’). Guidance note 2 on communication and transparency states: ‘The sharing of information and knowledge among all those involved is fundamental to achieving a better understanding of the problem and to providing coordinated assistance. The results of assessments should be actively communicated to all concerned organisations and individuals. Mechanisms should be established to allow people to comment on the programme e.g. by means of public meetings or via community-based organisations. For individuals who are homebound or disabled, specific outreach programmes may be required’ (p.29).

The Sphere Project, *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*, (2004 edition), available at: www.sphereproject.org

IASC Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action: Women, Girls, Boys and Men – Different Needs, Equal Opportunities, available at: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/documents

IASC, *Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings*, available at: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/default.asp

Building Safer Organisations: Supporting the development of NGO capacity to respond to allegations of staff misconduct, in particular in relation to abuse and exploitation of persons of concern, available at: www.hapinternational.org

Benchmark 3: Beneficiary participation and informed consent

The agency shall enable beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in programme decisions and seek their informed consent.

- 3.1** The agency shall specify the processes it uses to identify intended beneficiaries and their representatives with specific reference to gender, age, disability, and other identifiable vulnerabilities.
- 3.2** The agency shall enable intended beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

1. What are participation and informed consent?

Disaster survivors are always the principal actors in a humanitarian crisis, and the involvement of aid agencies in the disaster response is a form of interference – welcome, it is hoped – in the lives of those affected. Aid agencies seek to participate in and contribute to the struggle of people affected by disaster to survive and, ideally, they should enjoy the informed consent of the people they are privileged to be in a position to help. Participation is the process through which disaster survivors can be empowered to actively exercise their right to informed consent.

The concepts of participation and empowerment are closely intertwined. Empowerment is sometimes described as the ability to make choices, but it must also include the ability to shape the choices on offer. Empowerment does not necessarily mean reversing existing realities (such as challenging power hierarchies or disempowering agencies); rather, it is about enabling people affected by disasters to make their own choices, to speak out on their own behalf, and to control their own lives. Participation and informed consent are key processes in achieving this.

The HAP Standard highlights two aspects of participation:

- **Participation in programme decisions:** Individual or community representatives actively engage in decision-making processes throughout the project cycle. However, because of the disaster context itself or due to pre-existing power differentials (e.g. based on gender, race, class, caste, etc.), participation may not occur spontaneously. Instead, it may need to be stimulated and facilitated, and aid agencies may have to foster a process of mutual learning and dialogue. Particular attention needs to be given to people traditionally excluded from power and decision-making processes, e.g. women, children, elderly people, people with disabilities, landless or homeless people, and ethnic, racial, and religious groups (not necessarily in a minority). Specific opportunities and facilitation may have to be provided to enable people accustomed to exclusion to participate in an active and meaningful manner.
- **Informed consent:** An individual or a community (through representation) gives its consent (expressed willingness, permission, or voluntary agreement) to programme activity based upon an appreciation and understanding of the facts and implications of an action.

2. Why are participation and informed consent important?

Participation entails mobilisation of the leadership and skills found within affected communities, so that disaster survivors are better able to define their priorities and determine their own fate. Participation also makes for more effective programming based on a sound understanding of the local context and culture. It increases trust and co-operation, and communities affected by disaster are seen to recover more quickly if they are active participants, and are able to regain some control over even small aspects of their lives. Effective participation at the design stage will mean more effective programmes, while participation during implementation will increase efficiency through reducing waste and losses.

Participation in monitoring and evaluation will streamline the learning cycle and encourage adaptive responses. Participation will also reduce complaints and the costs of providing compensation, because it will help to identify and thus avoid potential vulnerabilities to accidents and damage, as well as building support for the project from affected populations.

3. How will this Benchmark be assessed?

The means of verification for this Benchmark are set out in the Standard itself as follows.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
3.1 The agency shall specify the processes it uses to identify intended beneficiaries and their representatives with specific reference to gender, age, disability, and other identifiable vulnerabilities.	1 Review mechanism used to identify and disaggregate intended beneficiaries. 2 Review processes used to enable participation. 3 Interview staff about the processes for enabling participation.
3.2 The agency shall enable intended beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.	1 Demonstrate how its analysis of capacity has influenced implementation. 2 Review the appointment process of beneficiary representatives. 3 Review actual beneficiary input and impact on project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. 4 Review the process used for establishing beneficiary criteria. 5 Review records of meetings held with beneficiary representatives.

Working with partners

An agency working with humanitarian partners is required to:

- show that the agency itself ensures beneficiary participation and informed consent in its dealings with beneficiaries, however limited these may be, e.g. field visits, evaluations
- show that its strategy for supporting partners addresses this Benchmark.

4. Suggestions for good practice

Participation has come to mean many different things, ranging from a minimalist approach of simply informing beneficiaries what they are to be given (where participation is reduced to the act of consumption) through to cash distributions designed to transfer to survivors the right to choose for themselves how to use the assistance offered. As a rule of thumb, this latter approach is to be commended as it reflects two important propositions. First, that people are normally the best judges of their own welfare, and second, that autonomous decision-making is an inherent element of human dignity.

Participation and informed consent are important ideals but they are not always easy to achieve, and success depends upon two factors in particular:

- Agency-wide recognition and commitment to their importance
- Participation that offers genuine engagement rather than tokenistic involvement.

Consider the following when seeking informed consent:

- **Needs assessment interviews:** Interviews with disaster-affected people are about soliciting and providing information, in accordance with Benchmark 2. It is good practice to ask for feedback after sharing information, e.g. was the information understandable, timely, and safe? Exchanges and discussions can be minuted formally or documented informally, depending on the

situation. Confidentiality and safety must always be considered, and appropriate measures taken.

- **Beneficiary selection criteria:** The disaster-affected community and the agency need to work together to agree a set of criteria for beneficiary selection. Communication of these criteria is vital once they have been agreed. It is particularly important to include women in this process so that beneficiaries who might otherwise remain excluded are identified, e.g. single women, women-headed family groups/households, and child-headed households.
- **Participatory evaluation:** The project outcome should be evaluated jointly with disaster survivors in order to obtain an accurate picture and to learn lessons for the future.
- **Complaints-handling:** Inevitably, some disaster survivors will either not receive all the information necessary or will disagree with the decisions that are taken. An accessible and safe complaints-handling system will make it easier to deal with any complaints that arise (see Benchmark 5).
- **Verifying informed consent:** Verifying whether informed consent has been granted or whether levels of participation are adequate can be complex and difficult. People may express consent without fully understanding all the implications or without having a comprehensive grasp of the issues. A degree of consent and participation may have to be assumed, based on observation, knowledge, or legal or other documents (e.g. contractual agreements with the community).
- **Co-ordination:** As far as possible, the informed consent of intended beneficiaries should be sought in full knowledge of official policies and plans, as well as the plans and activities of other agencies. It is therefore desirable to identify all agencies operating or planning to operate in the area and to share this information with disaster survivors and officials. In general, the closer that co-ordination decisions are made to the disaster-affected population the better.

5. References to further tools and information

Tools

Annex 3 includes the following useful tools:

- Tool 1: How accountable are you? Checking public information
- Tool 2: How to decide whether to do a survey
- Tool 3: How to assess child protection needs
- Tool 4: How to start using indicators
- Tool 10: How to introduce your agency: a need-to-know checklist
- Tool 11: How to profile the affected community and assess initial needs
- Tool 12: How to conduct an individual interview
- Tool 14: How to involve people throughout the project
- Tool 15: How to conduct a focus group
- Tool 16: How to say goodbye
- Tool 17: Heart of community engagement
- Tool 18: Making a consultation meeting effective
- Tool 19: Participation strategy framework
- Tool 29: How to hold a lessons-learned meeting

References and links

This section draws on the following materials:

The Sphere Project (2004), *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*, available at:

www.sphereproject.org

Common Standard 1 on participation: ‘The disaster-affected population actively participates in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme’ (p.28).

Common Standard 2 on initial assessment: ‘Assessments provide an understanding of the disaster situation and a clear analysis of threats to life, dignity, health, and livelihoods to determine, in consultation with the relevant authorities, whether an external response is required and, if so, the nature of the response’ (p.29).

Common Standard 4 on targeting: ‘Humanitarian assistance or services are provided equitably and impartially, based on the vulnerability and needs of individuals or groups affected by disaster’ (p.35). Key phrases of relevance are also contained in the indicators, and further details are contained in the guidance notes on targeting mechanisms and targeting criteria (pp.36–7).

Common Standard 5 on monitoring: ‘The effectiveness of the programme in responding to problems is identified and changes in the broader context are continually monitored, with a view to improving the programme, or to phasing it out as required’ (p.37). A number of key phrases of relevance are also contained in the indicators (pp.37–8).

Common Standard 6 on evaluation: ‘There is a systematic and impartial examination of humanitarian action, intended to draw lessons to improve practice and policy and to enhance accountability’ (p.39). A number of key phrases of relevance are also contained in the indicators (pp.39–40).

ALNAP (2003) *Participation by Crisis Affected Populations: A Handbook for Practitioners*, Overseas Development Institute, London, available at:
www.alnap.org/publications/gs_handbook/gs_handbook.pdf
IASC Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action: Women, Girls, Boys and Men – Different Needs, Equal Opportunities, available at:
www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/documents

*IASC, Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings, available at:
www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/default.asp*

*Building Safer Organisations: Supporting the development of NGO capacity to respond to allegations of staff misconduct, in particular in relation to abuse and exploitation of persons of concern, available at:
www.hapinternational.org*

Benchmark 4: Competent staff

The agency shall determine the competencies, attitudes, and development needs of staff required to implement its humanitarian quality management system

- 4.1 The agency shall maintain a statement of the competencies (knowledge, skills, and behaviours) and attitudes required from its staff.
- 4.2 The agency shall ensure that staff are aware of the humanitarian accountability framework and humanitarian quality management system, their relevance and importance, and that they understand their responsibilities in their implementation.
- 4.3 The agency shall implement a system to review staff performance and competencies, including their knowledge, skills, behaviours, and attitudes.
- 4.4 The agency shall enable continual staff development for more effective implementation of the humanitarian quality management system.

1. What are competencies?

The term ‘competencies’ refers to all experience, skills, and behaviours that an individual may bring to their job, including – and in addition to – experience and technical skills. But it also defines how individuals are expected to fulfil their roles, and how they will be held accountable.

2. Why are staff competencies important?

No matter how good an agency’s management system is or how noble its intentions, the agency is only as good as its staff. An agency’s human resources are its most important asset, but also a source of potential risk. The competencies of staff will greatly affect the quality of services received by disaster-affected populations. Human resource management during humanitarian crises can be very difficult: standard recruitment procedures and checks may be relaxed because of the surge in demand and the lack of

availability of qualified personnel at short notice; moreover, staff may be expected to perform duties in dangerous and chaotic circumstances, with minimum supervision.

While compassion and a respect for beneficiaries are fundamental attributes in a humanitarian worker, these need to be matched with the knowledge and skills necessary to do the job effectively and efficiently. Adequate systems need to be in place for recruiting, training, supervising, and supporting staff. Sometimes it may be necessary to respond to a new emergency with a less than optimal cadre of staff, but adequate training and support need to follow quickly to bring staff up to the required level. Furthermore, as well as the agency's responsibilities to beneficiaries, it also has a duty of care towards the people it employs.

In summary, there are three major drivers of the Benchmark on competent staff:

- Providing optimal services for disaster-affected communities and ensuring that they are protected from further danger and exploitation, e.g. cases of sexual exploitation by aid workers.
- Protection of humanitarian staff themselves.
- Protection of the image and reputation of the agency.

Although this Benchmark focuses on staff competencies and the requirements and means of verification, it also looks at the practices the agency seeks to apply within its recruitment policy, in particular with regards to equal opportunities. This would include good practice in seeking to achieve gender balance in staff composition and leadership.

3. How will this Benchmark be assessed?

The means of verification for this Benchmark are set out in the Standard itself as follows.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
4.1 The agency shall maintain a statement of the competencies (knowledge, skills, and behaviours) and attitudes required from its staff.	1 Review job descriptions, recruitment files, and vacancy notices. 2 Interview agency staff responsible for recruitment, assignment, and training.
4.2 The agency shall ensure that staff are aware of the humanitarian accountability framework and the humanitarian quality management system, their relevance and importance, and that they understand their responsibilities in their implementation.	1 Review induction and briefing procedures. 2 Interview staff to check awareness.
4.3 The agency shall implement a system to review staff performance and competencies, including their knowledge, skills, behaviours, and attitudes.	1 Review the performance management system. 2 Review performance appraisal documents and other formal approaches. 3 Review follow-up activities. 4 Interview staff to check the impact of appraisal and performance management.
4.4 The agency shall enable continual staff development for more effective implementation of the humanitarian quality management system.	1 Review staff training records. 2 Review other staff development approaches. 3 Review agency support for the continual improvement of its humanitarian partners.

Working with partners

An agency working with humanitarian partners is required to:

- show that the agency is itself meeting this Benchmark;
- show that its plan for supporting partners addresses this Benchmark.

4. Suggestions for good practice

Competent staff are essential throughout an operation. All staff should have a current job description before they start work, and training should be provided on an ongoing basis to ensure that staff have the requisite skills and knowledge. Regular performance reviews are also important.

Basics

At a minimum, a quality management system that prioritises humanitarian accountability will need to:

- Keep job descriptions and staff competency statements up to date.
- Implement a performance management system (i.e. ongoing verification that staff are fulfilling their roles professionally, effectively, and efficiently) that takes into account the context of the emergency and the timeframe of the project. Appraisal schedules must be flexible enough to cover projects that last only a few months as well as those that last for years.
- Implement a training plan that covers key general topics, including the humanitarian accountability framework, as well as more job-specific identified training needs.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these procedures.

Recruitment policies should include equal opportunities, and non-discrimination guidance.

Staff competencies

There are a number of general roles commonly found within humanitarian agencies: project manager, administrator, finance officer, logistician, sectoral manager, sector specialist, and so on. There may be some variations in these roles depending on the nature and location of the emergency and the type of response being mounted, but nevertheless a common set of humanitarian competencies can be identified. Preparing a standardised set of competencies required for each role will facilitate the rapid creation of context-specific job descriptions. Stating the competencies necessary for any role will give a clear indication of the combination of skills and experience necessary. Competencies are often broken down into:

- required knowledge
- professional skills
- personal qualities.

Comparing applicants' CVs with the job description may reveal gaps that will need to be addressed through training, coaching, mentoring, or supervision.

Performance management and training

Effective performance management will help the agency to comply with Benchmark 4. Training can often be overshadowed by busy schedules, urgent deadlines, and a sense that other activities are more important for saving lives. Committing to and setting up a systematic approach to staff development and performance improvement may seem daunting, but many organisations already have excellent tools that may just need minor adjustments for use in emergency situations. The following suggestions may help in making appropriate adaptations to performance management systems:

- Use the job description set of competencies as a self-assessment checklist that staff members can complete themselves to ascertain

how confident they feel about their role and what training they require. The supervisor/line manager can then review this at the beginning of the recruitment process and plan any training needs identified.

- Training can take many forms, such as:
 - coaching and mentoring (one of the most effective methods)
 - internal training courses (a combination of classroom and practical learning)
 - external training courses
 - self-teaching, e.g. reading required material and familiarisation with guidelines and processes used by the agency.
- People's abilities can be verified by observing them, reviewing their work output, interviewing colleagues and beneficiaries, and through formal and informal appraisals.
- Findings can then be updated on the performance assessment list and any gaps dealt with before the next appraisal.
- It is the responsibility of the agency to monitor and evaluate whether these processes are occurring and to ensure that managers are trained to carry out appraisals and to manage performance.

Record-keeping

A minimum amount of recording-keeping is essential. This is not just to meet audit requirements, but also to protect beneficiaries, staff, and the agency. Record-keeping ensures continuity, improves communication, and facilitates good planning.

5. References to further tools and information

Tools

See the following Tool in Annex 3 for further assistance:

- Tool 20: Performance assessment checklists.

References and links

People in Aid, People in Aid Code of Practice, available at:
www.peopleinaid.org.uk/

HAP, *Humanitarian Accountability: Key Elements and Operational Framework*, available at:
www.HAPinternational.org/pdf_word/335-Final%20Operational%20framework.pdf

The Sphere Project (2004), *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards In Disaster Response* (2004 edition), available at:
www.sphereproject.org

One World Trust, *Global Accountability Project (GAP)*, available at:
www.oneworldtrust.org/?display=gapframework

Benchmark 5: Complaints-handling

The agency shall establish and implement complaints-handling procedures that are effective, accessible, and safe for intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, agency staff, humanitarian partners, and other specified bodies.

- 5.1 The agency shall ask intended beneficiaries and the host community about appropriate ways to handle complaints.
- 5.2 The agency shall establish and document complaints-handling procedures which clearly state:
 - the right of beneficiaries and other specified stakeholders to file a complaint
 - the purpose, parameters, and limitations of the procedure
 - the procedure for submitting complaints
 - the steps taken in processing complaints
 - confidentiality and non-retaliation policy for complainants
 - the process for safe referral of complaints that the agency is not equipped to handle
 - the right to receive a response.
- 5.3 The agency shall ensure that intended beneficiaries, affected communities, and its staff understand the complaints-handling procedures.
- 5.4 The agency shall verify that all complaints received are handled according to the stated procedures.
- 5.5 The agency shall establish and implement an effective and safe complaints-handling mechanism for its staff, consistent with the requirements set out in 5.2.

1. What is complaints-handling?

Accountability involves a two-way flow, a dialogue: it is about the right to have a say and the duty to respond. This means that stakeholders should have the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback on whatever is important to them, and that the agency should then respond to these concerns.

Being accountable to beneficiaries requires that humanitarian agencies take account of beneficiaries' opinions, concerns, suggestions, and

complaints. Most communication from disaster-affected people consists of advice and information, which agencies can adopt, challenge, or disregard as appropriate. A complaint, by contrast, contains the specific grievance of a stakeholder who believes that a humanitarian agency has failed to meet a stated commitment. This commitment can relate to a project plan, beneficiary criteria, an activity schedule, a standard of technical performance, an organisational value, a legal requirement, staff performance or behaviour, or any other point. While responding to feedback may be optional, a complaint requires an answer. It is the agency's responsibility to solicit both feedback and complaints, and to ensure that factors preventing disaster survivors from raising concerns are minimised and addressed.

An effective complaints-handling procedure will be accessible to, and safe for, all stakeholders. Agencies should bear in mind the vulnerability to manipulation, exploitation, and exclusion experienced by particular groups. Within any disaster-affected group, large or small, there will be power dynamics and political, social, and cultural norms that impact directly on peoples' opportunity to participate. At a minimum, agencies must seek to prevent social, political, ethnic, religious, disability, gender and age discrimination from adversely affecting the impartiality of their humanitarian work. Particular attention should always be paid to the specific needs of women and children, and to their voices in consultation processes. As effective complaints-handling is essential for improving the quality of humanitarian work, special measures to ensure that complaints procedures are accessible to the most vulnerable and socially excluded may be required. Methods for soliciting feedback and complaints should be culturally and socially appropriate (e.g. ensuring that female staff seek feedback from female beneficiaries in circumstances where it is culturally unacceptable for women to talk to an unrelated man), and that they provide a variety of means for giving feedback and submitting complaints for those who are unable to read or write or articulate their concerns for any other

reason (e.g. people with hearing or speech impediments, children, different language groups)

It should also be noted that this Benchmark requires a complaints procedure that is accessible to other stakeholders, most notably agency staff and humanitarian partners. A grievance procedure should be in place to deal with staff complaints, and a system for dealing with problems and concerns between the agency and its humanitarian partners should be instituted.

2. Why are complaints mechanisms important?

The reality of humanitarian situations means that sometimes beneficiaries may be unable to complain due to fear of retaliation (real or perceived), because of a lack of knowledge, opportunity, or trust, or because of a sense of hopelessness. An accountable agency should consider complaints-handling as a positive process that can:

- provide an early indicator that a process or plan is not working
- safely highlight a concern within a community
- provide a non-judicial, respectful means for addressing grievances
- increase transparency
- demonstrate an agency's humility and commitment to achieving its goals
- improve security
- provide valuable management information
- protect the dignity of users
- highlight cases of fraud, inefficiency, or abuse.

Evidence from both the profit and non-profit sectors strongly indicates that soliciting and handling complaints effectively leads to better relations between the client (in this case the disaster-affected person) and the service provider, and also leads to better-quality and more cost-effective service provision.

3. How will this Benchmark be assessed?

The means of verification for this Benchmark are set out in the Standard itself as follows.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
<p>5.1 The agency shall ask intended beneficiaries and the host community about appropriate ways to handle complaints.</p>	<p>1 Demonstrate that findings from consultations have been incorporated into complaints-handling procedures.</p>
<p>5.2 The agency shall establish and document complaints-handling procedures which clearly state:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the right of beneficiaries and other specified stakeholders to file a complaint• the purpose, parameters, and limitations of the procedure.• the procedure for submitting complaints• the steps taken in processing complaints• confidentiality and non-retaliation policy for complainants• the process for safe referral of complaints that the agency is not equipped to handle• the right to receive a response	<p>1 Review the documented procedures.</p> <p>2 Review samples of complaints to verify that complainants have been able to understand and use the procedure.</p> <p>3 Review budget, contracts, and support provided to humanitarian partners to implement this requirement.</p> <p>4 Interview field staff, affected community members, and/or intended beneficiaries about their perceptions and the adequacy of the procedures.</p>

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
<p>5.3 The agency shall ensure that intended beneficiaries, affected communities, and its staff understand the complaints-handling procedures.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="572 225 964 379">1 Review strategy and activities for raising awareness among these groups of their right to file a complaint and the procedures to use.<li data-bbox="572 384 964 507">2 Review documents about the complaints-handling procedures made available to intended beneficiaries.<li data-bbox="572 512 964 671">3 Interview staff, affected community members, and/or intended beneficiaries to verify awareness of and adequacy of the procedures and confidence in their integrity.
<p>5.4 The agency shall verify that all complaints received are handled according to the stated procedures.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="572 708 964 799">1 Review a sample of both pending and processed complaints, to check the integrity of the system.<li data-bbox="572 804 964 895">2 Review reports on the integrity of the complaints-handling process.
<p>5.5 The agency shall establish and implement an effective and safe complaints-handling mechanism for its staff, consistent with the requirements set out in 5.2.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="572 938 964 1002">1 Review the procedure and samples of complaints made.<li data-bbox="572 1007 964 1098">2 Interview staff to verify awareness of procedure and confidence in its integrity.

Working with partners

While the agency being audited can take the approach of *promoting* compliance by humanitarian partners with regards to most of the benchmarks contained in the HAP standard, there are stricter expectations as far as Benchmark 5 is concerned.

An agency working with humanitarian partners is required to:

- set up its own complaints-handling procedures which enable beneficiaries, partners, staff, and other stakeholders to lodge complaints;
- ensure that its humanitarian partners are implementing agreed complaints-handling procedures which enable beneficiaries to complain to the partner but also to the agency directly. The ‘good practice’ section below provides suggestions on how to establish complaints-handling procedures involving partners.

4. Suggestions for good practice

Establishing a complaints-handling mechanism

Ideally, a complaints procedure should be set up at the start of all programmes and should run throughout the project. Although many programmes will have been set up without such procedures, it is still better to set them up later than not at all.

One of the main fears of many practitioners when thinking about setting up a complaints mechanism is that they will be inundated with complaints that they are unable to address, because they concern issues outside the agency’s remit or responsibility. In practice, a more common problem is the under-utilisation of complaints-handling procedures.

Design of procedures

Complaints procedures can be simple, although they need to be carefully planned and need to follow certain key principles. A badly designed or managed complaints procedure can be harmful. Mechanisms to handle complaints should consider the following:

- Staff should understand, appreciate, and accept the agency's commitment to a complaints-handling policy.
- Prior to setting up a complaints-handling mechanism, a thorough analysis of the context should take place, incorporating the needs of the specific programme/sector. For example, a complaints-handling mechanism for a health programme will require a different emphasis to one for a non-food distribution programme.
- Beneficiaries should have the right to complain about anything linked to the agency's work and commitments, e.g. humanitarian accountability framework commitments, humanitarian plans, quality of delivery of the services/assistance, behaviour of staff. Where national or international law has been broken, a clear referral system should be in place.
- All allegations of staff misconduct received from beneficiaries or other staff must be investigated according to the official investigation procedures of the agency. Agencies should have formal investigation procedures that adhere to the principles of confidentiality, independence, and respect. Investigations must be conducted in a thorough, professional manner and must meet legal standards. The *Building Safer Organisations* guidelines on receiving and investigating allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation by humanitarian workers provide details of the investigation process (see references below).
- Although complaints may have common features, each one is unique and should be dealt with as such.
- Information systems and complaints mechanisms are linked; often complaints may arise because of a lack of information.
- Agencies should actively solicit complaints from beneficiaries. Soliciting complaints makes it clear that the agency is willing to provide redress, when it is justified.
- The procedures and parameters of the complaints system should be clearly understood by all potential users. Particular effort is needed to communicate these to marginalised groups.

- Beneficiaries should be told about the complaints-handling mechanism and should have the confidence to use it, knowing that their concerns will be answered. This will only be the case if there is mutual trust.
- No complaint should be ignored.

Working with humanitarian partners

Complaints-handling procedures for agencies working through humanitarian partners require special consideration. The procedure will need to allow beneficiaries to complain to the humanitarian partner and to the agency itself, and must also enable the humanitarian partner to complain to the agency about any concerns it has. The agency should develop a complaints-handling procedure to be adopted and used by humanitarian partners which:

- outlines the process by which the humanitarian partner can complain to the agency, and vice versa
- is based on consultation with partners, so that appropriate methods are used in handling complaints
- is documented, accessible, and understandable to partners, and includes:
 - the rights of beneficiaries to make a complaint
 - the purpose, parameters, and limitations of the procedure
 - details on how to submit a complaint
 - the steps to be followed once the complaint is submitted
 - assurances of confidentiality and non-retaliation (particularly for complaints relating to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse, given the social stigma associated with these and the very real danger that women/children reporting such abuse could face from perpetrators, or from their own families and communities)
 - a commitment to refer complaints that the humanitarian partner and agency are unable to handle

- a commitment by the humanitarian partner and agency to give a response
- the right of beneficiaries to complain directly to the agency instead of going through the humanitarian partner (contact details of the agency should be given on all information materials concerning the complaints-handling procedure).

5. References to further tools and information

Tools

See the following Tools in Annex 3 for further assistance:

- Tool 22: Complaints mechanisms: tips on file storage and data management
- Tool 23: Community feedback system: complaints cards
- Tool 24: How to set up a complaints and response mechanism
- Tool 25: Notes and guidelines about complaints-handling
- Tool 26: Points to remember when implementing a complaints-handling mechanism
- Tool 27: Step-by-step guide to setting up a complaints mechanism

References and links

Keeping Children Safe: www.keepingchildrensafe.org.uk

Childwise: www.childwisenet/choose-with-care.php

IASC Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action: Women, Girls, Boys and Men – Different Needs, Equal Opportunities, available at: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/documents

IASC, Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings, available at: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/default.asp

Building Safer Organisations: Supporting the development of NGO capacity to respond to allegations of staff misconduct, in particular in relation to abuse and exploitation of persons of concern, available at: www.hapinternational.org

Benchmark 6: Continual improvement

The agency shall establish a process of continual improvement for its humanitarian accountability framework and humanitarian quality management system.

- 6.1** The agency shall specify the processes used for continual improvement of:
 - the agency's humanitarian accountability framework
 - the agency's humanitarian quality management system, inclusive of all HAP Benchmarks.
- 6.2** The agency shall together with its humanitarian partners monitor and evaluate the agreed means to improve the quality of the partnership with respect to the Principles of Accountability and the Principles for Humanitarian Action.

1. What is continual improvement?

Learning from past successes and failures and applying these insights to modify and adapt future work is a cornerstone of accountability. A culture of learning and continual improvement should lie at the heart of a professional and committed agency. Continual improvement is achieved through an effective monitoring and evaluation system, which ensures regular reviews of the work of the agency, its impact, and effectiveness, and which identifies lessons for improving future operations.

2. Why is continual improvement important?

No product or service is ever perfect, either because it is produced less efficiently than it could be, or because it could be better adapted to meet the needs of the customer. This reality holds equally good for disaster survivors and humanitarian agencies. Therefore, the search for continual improvement must be an integral part of the humanitarian enterprise if it is to achieve optimum levels of service to disaster survivors. Its realisation will also benefit its staff members as donors will be assured that their funds are being used effectively, and the agency itself and the humanitarian sector as a whole will consequently

enjoy a strengthened reputation based on the confidence and trust of its stakeholders.

3. How will this Benchmark be assessed?

The Standard requires that the agency identifies its starting point and then shows how it plans to improve the quality of its humanitarian services. The Benchmarks are starting points only: agencies are expected to build and develop from them. The degree to which agencies have improved will be a particular focus in subsequent audits for surveillance or re-certification. The way in which this Benchmark is tied in with Benchmark 1 is explained in the section on Benchmark 1 above.

The means of verification for this Benchmark are set out in the Standard itself as follows.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
<p>6.1 The agency shall specify the processes used for continual improvement of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the agency's humanitarian accountability framework• the agency's humanitarian quality management system, inclusive of all HAP Benchmarks.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Review continual improvement process document/system.2 Note the dates when it was created and last updated.3 Dissemination: note if the latest version is accessible at all levels within the agency.4 Review meeting agendas and minutes to note discussions held and decisions taken to improve processes.5 Demonstrate how lessons learned impact current processes.6 Review feedback from governing bodies.7 Review internal and external audits and evaluations pertinent to the agency and how evaluation recommendations are acted upon and learning is incorporated.

Benchmark requirements	Means of verification
<p>6.2 The agency shall together with its humanitarian partners monitor and evaluate the agreed means to improve the quality of the partnership with respect to the Principles of Accountability and the Principles for Humanitarian Action.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Review improvement plans (agreed actions, strategies for learning) for partners, noting date of drafting.2 Review monitoring and evaluation reports and note impact on improvement plan.3 Review partner contracts and note inclusion of relevant contractual support and expectations of both parties.

Working with partners

An agency working with humanitarian partners is required to:

- demonstrate that it meets the requirements itself;
- show that its plan for supporting partners addresses this Benchmark;
- show how it monitors the progress of its partners.

4. Suggestions for good practice

Process design

Continual improvement is an essential part of quality assurance and should thus be a part of all activities, both strategic and in day-to-day management. Continual improvement should start at the very beginning of the project cycle, continue through implementation, and be a feature at its end.

- Continual improvement should be built into the design of the project. Project developers should take into account the organisation's humanitarian accountability framework when writing their proposals and should plan goals, objectives, and indicators accordingly.

- Regular internal and external monitoring and evaluation should take place during implementation to track lessons learned, correct mistakes, and address weaknesses.
- A final project evaluation should take place once the project is over. In addition, a review of the agency's humanitarian accountability framework and quality management system should occur, and any necessary revisions should be made.

Criteria for success

Ensuring continual improvement in the quality of humanitarian services requires that:

- Beneficiaries and other stakeholders are included in the monitoring and evaluation process.
- Senior management demonstrate a commitment to continual improvement in the agency's strategic objectives and in its allocation of resources.
- The improvement process is adapted to each level of management. For example, a large international NGO might apply the following approach:
 - Head office level: review strategy and quality management system (e.g. review cycle could be every three to five years, with annual monitoring)
 - Regional level: review strategy and quality management system (e.g. annually, with monitoring every three to four years)
 - Country level: review quarterly, with monthly monitoring
 - Project level: review monthly, with weekly monitoring
 - In emergencies, a shorter review cycle is applied (e.g. weekly with daily monitoring)
 - Internal and external monitoring and evaluation of specific programmes/projects should be supplementary to the review processes described above.

- Quality assurance of the system means that managers throughout the system are responsible for ensuring that each level is complying and reporting.
- Problems (current or potential) need to be captured, then discussed in designated management meetings at each level. Follow-up and follow-through actions should be agreed, implemented, monitored, and reviewed.
- Lessons learned should become part of the knowledge management system, and should be shared throughout the agency.
- Responsible innovation is encouraged throughout the humanitarian project cycle.

5. References to further tools and information

Tools

See the following Tools in Annex 3 for further assistance:

- Tool 4: How to start using indicators
- Tool 5: How to give a verbal report
- Tool 6: Plan–do–check–act quality assurance cycle (PDCA)
- Tool 7: SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats)
- Tool 10: How to introduce your agency: a need-to-know checklist
- Tool 13: How to observe
- Tool 15: How to conduct a focus group
- Tool 16: How to say goodbye
- Tool 24: How to set up a complaints and response mechanism
- Tool 28: Corrective and preventative action plan tracking guide
- Tool 29: How to hold a lessons learned meeting

References and links

This section draws on:

The Sphere Project (2004), *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*, Common Standard 6 on evaluation: ‘There is a systematic and impartial examination of humanitarian action, intended to draw lessons to improve practice and policy and to enhance accountability’ (p.39).

The Sphere Project (2004), *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards In Disaster Response* available at: www.sphereproject.org

One World Trust, Global Accountability Project (GAP), available at: www.oneworldtrust.org/?display=gapframework

Notes

- 1 J. Pictet (1979) ‘The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross – Commentary’, ICRC: Geneva.
- 2 SMART means specific, measurable, achievable, relevant/realistic, and time-bound.
- 3 The *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* (1994) was also an important source, especially with regard to Principle 7: ‘Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid’; Principle 9: ‘We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources’; and Principle 10: ‘In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects’. However, the full text of the Code of Conduct does not lend itself to use in a compliance verification audit, and as the Principles are not ranked in importance, the Code is of limited utility in exonerating non-compliance.
- 4 J. Pictet (1979) ‘The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross – Commentary’, ICRC: Geneva.
- 5 Further discussion on ‘The rationale for introducing a hierarchy of principles – particularly its operational impact’ is available on the HAP website: www.hapinternational.org.
- 6 P. F. Drucker (1986) *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and Principles*, New York: Harper Row.