



**Improving Accountability to Beneficiaries: What evidence is needed?
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The HAP Standard and certification scheme: some highlights

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The brief introduction will cover four main areas:

1. Overview of the HAP Standard
2. Highlights of the HAP certification scheme
3. Main learning from HAP's experience to date
4. Some reflections that have a bearing on potential research questions to be addressed

1. The HAP Standard

Action research undertaken in the field by HAP – the Project – demonstrated that in most humanitarian contexts self-regulation was the only realistic and affordable option for humanitarian quality assurance. Building on this, in 2003, the Partnership embarked upon a process of developing an accountability and quality management standard that could be used in assessing compliance with its accountability principles in a fair and consistent manner.

Facilitators of the Standard development process set off to answer three key questions:

1. What matters most in an agency's management system with regard to influencing humanitarian outcomes? In other words, which factors controlled by the agency have the greatest potential impact upon the well-being of disaster survivors?
2. Of the mission-critical practices, what is realistic and affordable in the great majority of circumstances?
3. And last but not least, of all this, what can also be measured either directly or through proxy indicators within reasonable parameters of complexity and cost?

Drawing upon the collective wisdom of aid workers, disaster survivors, academics and other stakeholders, the HAP 2007 Standard became the answer to these questions. While individuals contributing to the development process were not demographically or democratically representative of either humanitarian staff or aid beneficiaries as a whole, they were balanced with regard to gender and geographical representation. Contributing individuals also brought to the process authentic experiences from the perspective of both affected populations and front line humanitarian staff.

Without going into too much detail, the Standard consists of:

- a Covenant which, amongst others, recognises that in any humanitarian context, circumstances may prevail when difficult decisions need to be made. Thus agencies are offered a means for explaining those instances when the standard cannot be applied. A section on working with partners is also included here.
- And six benchmarks. In applying the benchmarks, agencies:
 - Employ a set of management practices that assures the implementation of quality and accountability commitments
 - Provide key information to beneficiaries and other stakeholders
 - Enable beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in programme decisions
 - Determine staff competencies and address their development needs
 - Manage a system to respond to complaints from beneficiaries and other stakeholders
 - Implement a process of continual improvement

2. The HAP Certification process

Using the HAP Standard, the Secretariat and member agencies developed a system of quality assurance through certification. Certification is one of the three options that member agencies have (alongside peer reviews and site-specific monitoring by the Secretariat) to demonstrate compliance with the Principles of Accountability and continuously improve their application. Non-member agencies too have access to the certification system.

A baseline analysis is a recommended step in the HAP certification process. While the basic structure of the process parallels that used by auditors during a certification audit, a HAP baseline analysis is an organisational development exercise. The baseline process engages a wide range of staff, raises awareness of the HAP Standard, explores links between accountability and quality management, involves agency managers to identify strategies for change, and assists staff to identify their own role in improving the accountability of the organisation.

The baseline helps the agency to affirm existing good practice, identify gaps and decide areas for improvement in relation to the HAP Standard. While it draws heavily on information provided by staff, beneficiaries and other stakeholders, a baseline analysis undertaken by an external facilitator provides objectivity and impartiality in the findings.

Each agency is different. In formulating the terms of reference for the baseline, HAP will discuss what is the optimal process given the size, complexity, geographic presence and activities of the agency. In some cases, HAP undertakes a more detailed scoping exercise to clarify what process fits best the agency.

The baseline analysis consists of two components:

- The head office analysis aims to gather information on the agency as a whole – its governance and management systems, agency-wide policies, systems, decision making processes and experience of practice in different programmes and countries. It provides an overview of the existing management practices, and the agency's intent and plans with respect to accountability.

- The programme site analysis aims to verify how the agency's policies, systems and procedures actually work on the ground: what is known and adhered to; how projects are managed and delivered and how the agency's work is experienced by people receiving humanitarian assistance, affected communities and other stakeholders. This involves on-site work in the country office and one or more project visits where the facilitator speaks with local partners, beneficiaries and other people of concern.

The certification audit mirrors the baseline analysis. During an audit, the organizational development advisor is replaced by an independent auditor. An audit at the Head Office of the agency is followed by an audit visit to one or two programme field sites selected randomly by the auditor.

During Head Office and programme site visits, the auditor interviews staff of the agency being audited, staff of its implementing partners and programme beneficiaries. The auditor analyses and reports on reviewed documentation, Head Office and field interviews, and their own observations in an audit report that is shared with the agency for comment or correction of factual errors. Following this, the audit report is forwarded to the HAP Certification and Accreditation Review Board for a decision as to whether the agency should be awarded certification.

If the audit successful, the agency will be awarded a Certificate in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management, valid for three years. A mandatory mid-term progress audit is required 18 months after the certification is awarded. In some cases, an agency may be awarded certification subject to corrective action requests (CAR). A CAR is noted by the auditor and indicates a weakness in how an agency is meeting their quality and accountability obligations.

A detailed audit report is then made available to the agency, which senior managers use to drive their agency's accountability and management improvement plan. A summary of the audit report is made available on the HAP website after its content is agreed with the agency. The summary report is intended to inform all relevant stakeholders that the agency is certified against the HAP Standard and that a specified improvement plan will be followed.

3. Main learning from HAP's experience to date

What do we begin to know in terms of the impact of the HAP Standard and the certification scheme?

In the past two years, the HAP Standard and certification scheme has been applied by multi-mandate agencies – those implementing relief, development and advocacy programmes, including by two agencies engaged in demining.

The Standard and certification scheme have also been applied by operational agencies as well as those working with partners in a variety of contexts; through either a certification audit or just a baseline analysis, the experience of OFADEC in Senegal, that of the COAST Trust in Bangladesh, Tearfund in the UK and that of UNHCR – to mention just a few – validate the applicability of the Standard to agencies of different sizes.

Feedback to date collected as part of the HAP Standard Review through consultation workshops and semi-structured surveys from over 420 individuals (beneficiaries or staff of over 100 agencies in 42 countries) indicates that, with adjustments to

language and minor modifications to content, the HAP Standard continues to represent what is mission-critical, affordable and measurable in humanitarian action.

Data collected for agencies that have been through a baseline analysis, followed by a certification audit and, in some cases, by a mid-term progress audit shows improvements in practice against the HAP Standard. Anecdotal evidence from agencies applying the Standard and those already certified highlights that HAP quality assurance:

- improves the cost effectiveness of humanitarian programmes
- improves staff security and risk management
- reduces losses through fraud and theft and helps curb other abuses of power
- strengthens the comparative advantage of certified agencies particularly in terms of access to funding sources

Certified agencies report that HAP certification acts as a catalyst for changes management; it helps them deliver better humanitarian outcomes as defined by aid beneficiaries and that it benefits all stakeholders (including staff, donors and partners).

Testimonies from beneficiaries of programmes delivered by agencies implementing the HAP Standard have welcomed this development; they feel listened to and reassured of the agency's commitment to respond to their needs, views and circumstances. They report increased trust and a sense that their rights and dignity are respected by these agencies: they also report more appropriate resource mobilisation and more effective use of local resources.

Some key learning points so far, many of which are interlinked:

- I. **Accountability is not a one-off exercise**, or “something that happens on the 31st of the month”. It is an ongoing process, which requires leadership and engagement of all staff. It is as much about systems (that ensure consistency of practice) as it is about values and attitudes.
- II. **Gaps still remain between policies and practice**; systematic good practice at field level cannot progress without institutional support and policies that guide it; on the other hand, policies are only as good as the practice that they lead to.
- III. **Linking commitments to management and practice**. Demonstrating how management approaches (and choices) enable implementation of commitments made to affected communities remains one of the main challenges in meeting the HAP Standard. Setting up effective complaint-handling systems is a second main challenge.
- IV. **“Hardware versus software”**; there seems to be a fascination amongst some aid workers with “hardware”, for example setting up complaints boxes or notice boards as opposed to identifying most context-appropriate means through which complaints can be raised and information shared.
- V. **Accountability is a two-way process**. In many cases, affected populations report that they are engaged in consultations, without any follow up or feedback from those who consult them, and limited clarity on the extent to which their contributions have informed action.
- VI. **Power dynamics need to be taken into account**; to ensure meaningful participation, a more clear understanding of power dynamics at community level is needed. During consultations with beneficiary communities it was suggested that the choice of “community

representatives” be more carefully analysed, and that information provided by this group be cross-referenced with data collected from other sources.

4. Some reflections that have a bearing on potential research questions to be addressed

First, while 2009 has seen increasing demand for HAP capacity building services and interest in the Standard/Certification scheme, and without diluting the importance of anecdotal evidence such as the one I’ve just mentioned, more systematic evidence of the impact (or lack of) of the Standard and Certification scheme needs to be collected.

- Does humanitarian quality assurance bring about real organisational change?
- Is there an optimum spend on humanitarian quality assurance?

Second, leadership and prioritising of accountability has been cited many times as a critical factor driving accountability. Many managers that HAP interacts with have expressed interest in better understanding the real forces of change, including incentives and disincentives, and enabling environments for improving accountability to beneficiaries.

Third, at a time when so much attention and resources are dedicated to humanitarian reform, there remains limited focus on programme performance and programme management. What role do funding sources play in selecting research themes?

Fourth, while HAP member agencies applying the Standard are no longer differentiating between "quality and accountability" on the one hand, and "performance" on the other, in most cases such agencies present an exception to most evaluation practice. The apparent disconnection between accountability assessments and programme evaluations at agency level mirrors the limited use of data on quality and accountability in joint evaluations and system-wide performance assessments.

The HAP standard is arguably a proxy for assessing performance, albeit defined for the agency rather than the system at large. The application of the Standard by agencies working with partners goes a long way in terms of scaling up this approach so that the whole system can be "quality assured". What are some of the potential metrics on quality and accountability? And how could these work alongside or indeed become part of metrics on performance?

Before I conclude, I would like to highlight that, at the Secretariat, we recognise that we are not and could not become a credible source of research findings by working alone on any of these topics; this is due to the very mandate of the Partnership. It is for this reason that we are hoping to engage others who have a shared interest in our research agenda, in particular research bodies and academic institutions, both in identifying relevant research questions and addressing them.