



Humanitarian Accountability Partnership - International
"making humanitarian action accountable to beneficiaries"

Quality and Accountability Initiatives: Questions and Answers

Introduction

During the past decade the humanitarian community has initiated a number of inter-agency initiatives to improve accountability, quality and performance in humanitarian action. Four of the most widely known initiatives are the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP-I), People In Aid and the Sphere Project. Representatives of these initiatives meet together on a regular basis in order to share common issues and harmonise activities where possible. It is hoped that the group may expand in the future: if you work for an initiative that you think may be compatible with the aims of this group, please contact one of the members.

This short paper provides a response to questions that are sometimes asked about the four initiatives.

Who are we and what do we do?

ALNAP: established in 1997, the **Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action** is an international, sector-wide network which aims to promote a culture of learning across the humanitarian sector in order to improve performance. ALNAP is involved in a range of activities including the production of an annual *Review of Humanitarian Action* which monitors the performance of humanitarian action through a synthesis of evaluative reports provided by the Membership. It also monitors the quality of the evaluations themselves using an *ALNAP quality pro-forma*, and works with agencies to improve their evaluation skills. The ALNAP Secretariat hosts a comprehensive evaluative reports database and ALNAP's Biannual Meetings provide the membership with extensive opportunities for networking and learning on a range of important issues. ALNAP also produces practical tools, such as guidance booklets and training modules, on subjects and themes prioritised by the Membership. ALNAP has over 50 Full Members and nearly 400 Observer Members, and has a Secretariat based at the Overseas Development Institute in London. www.alnap.org

Humanitarian Accountability Partnership – International – HAP-I: was founded in 2003 by a group of humanitarian agencies committed to making humanitarian work more accountable to its intended beneficiaries, following on from several years of research and field trials conducted by HAP-I's antecedents, the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project and the Humanitarian Accountability Project. HAP-I is now building a system of voluntary self-regulation, and is currently developing self-evaluation and peer review techniques for accreditation and certification of compliance with the HAP-I Accountability Principles. Registered as a Swiss NGO, the HAP-I Secretariat is based in Geneva with 9 full members as of October 2004. New members are required to submit an Accountability Workplan mapping out how their organisation will seek to implement the HAP-I Accountability Principles.

Eventually, through the accreditation of affiliated NGO networks and associations with the authority to certify their own members as being compliant with the HAP-I accountability principles, it is hoped that HAP-I's vision of an accountable international humanitarian system at large will be realised. www.hapinternational.org

People In Aid: formally established in 1995, People In Aid's first output was the People In Aid Code of Best Practice in the management and support of aid personnel. The Code, now revised as the Code of Good Practice, comprises 7 principles defined by indicators which are monitored and assessed by agencies, using the social audit process. People In Aid's mandate as a central resource to the sector, supporting agencies in improving the quality of their human resources management, is further carried out through workshops, published guidelines, research and exchange of information between the 70+ members around the world. www.peopleinaid.org

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

Sphere is not a membership organisation. The process of developing the handbook, and its revision for 2004, were based on extensive collaboration involving over 4,000 people from 400 organisations in 80 countries. The Sphere Project has developed a training pack consisting of four modules, which were published in 2003. The project runs 'Training of Trainers' courses to enable people to use the training materials effectively, and supports agencies implementing Sphere at country level. Following consultations with people and organisations that use Sphere, the Management Committee has decided that the Sphere Project will continue from 2005, with a slightly different focus and structure. While some existing activities, such as training, will continue, there will be a greater emphasis on facilitating the work of people already using and promoting Sphere at national and regional levels.

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

www.sphereproject.org

Why do we do what we do?

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

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

What are the similarities between us?

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

What are the differences between us?

Although the initiatives share the same goal, there is also a necessary distinctiveness. Quality and accountability in the humanitarian sector are multi-faceted and each initiative has chosen a distinct entry point and methods for addressing specific component(s). In this way, each one requires a different combination of skills and competencies, and has developed its own unique way of addressing its specific objectives. This distinctiveness can be described under the following 3 headings –mandates, constituencies and structures.

a) distinct mandates

Each initiative aims to improve one or more component parts of humanitarian quality and accountability. ALNAP is concerned with promoting learning, especially through improved evaluation, whilst HAP-I aims to make humanitarian action accountable to its intended beneficiaries through promoting compliance with the HAP-I accountability principles. People In Aid has created a code of good practice which assists its members to improve their human resource practices. Sphere has developed and supports the use of standards and a humanitarian charter in disaster response, in order to improve the quality and accountability of performance by humanitarian professionals.

b) distinct constituencies

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

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

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

¹ ALNAP has produced 4 Reviews of Humanitarian Action all of which can be found on www.alnap.org

Sphere's core constituents are humanitarian professionals managing and implementing work in the main technical sectors. Improved accountability to those affected by disasters is also explicitly part of Sphere's overall goal, so there are increasingly efforts to work with community members in establishing specific indicators that can be monitored for effectiveness.

c) distinct structures

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

ALNAP's network structure helps promote a culture of learning throughout the humanitarian sector by creating safe places for discussion (biannual meetings), communities of practice, sector-wide initiatives and so on. The most effective way of achieving this is to put people in touch with each other through the multiple connections that a well functioning network can provide. The ALNAP Secretariat's main function is to facilitate/operationalise the decisions made by the Membership.

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

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

Sphere has some elements of a network structure, but it does not have formal members and is effectively 'owned' by those who use it. This ownership is based on the informal acknowledgment of added value and therefore, unlike HAP-I and People In Aid, there is no formal compliance mechanism ensuring adherence to its standards.

Thus, each initiative has developed a distinct organisational structure, governance and modus operandi. However, conscious of the considerable overlap amongst members, partners and stakeholders, the four initiatives are aware of the need to ensure that their work is harmonised effectively (see *How is complementarity assured?* below).

How is complementarity assured?

Several mechanisms are in place to ensure that the work of each initiative is harmonised sensibly. For example, all the initiatives come together twice a year to review their respective workplans and to discuss overlaps and gaps. The minutes from these meetings are posted on each of the initiatives' websites. HAP-I, People In Aid and Sphere are all Full Members of ALNAP and are in constant touch through circulars, e-mail and face to face meetings. The ALNAP Biannual Meetings provide a forum for regular updates and discussing work-plans. There is also crossover on various working groups – for example HAP-I is on the Working Group of the ALNAP Global Participation Study and is also a member of People In Aid. Increasingly, the

initiatives are looking at ways of working together on certain initiatives and in certain countries.

How much do we cost?

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

How do we know that we are making a difference?

Like many other humanitarian agencies we are collectively concerned with this question. Although the question has by no means been answered satisfactorily, each initiative has its own means of tracking its performance and impact. As mentioned above, ALNAP closely monitors the quality of evaluations through a *quality proforma* and also monitors usage of its materials through annual visits to member agencies. It is also currently (autumn 2004) being evaluated by DfID. HAP-I will support a research programme, to be undertaken by independent and authoritative bodies, designed to examine the costs and benefits associated with the practical application of accountability principles. People In Aid provides external verification of the social audit process for agencies working through the Code of Good Practice and has also recently been evaluated by DfID. An independent evaluation of Sphere was completed in 2003 by Columbia University, USA, in collaboration with Makerere University, Uganda. An external consultation with over 400 Sphere users about the future of Sphere was held from February to May 2004. The outcome of the consultation process informed decisions of the Sphere Management Committee about how Sphere should evolve from 2005 onwards.

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

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

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