

Professionalising the Sector: A Proposed Certification Model for Humanitarian Organisations (Revised)

Draft for Discussion

Version 2.0

21/01/2014

Introduction

How can certification of humanitarian organisations contribute to greater effectiveness and accountability in humanitarian actions? The Certification Review Project, sponsored by the SCHR, has been researching what a successful, sustainable certification model might look like and how to achieve it. Some of the key questions the project is exploring include:

- Can certification contribute to improved quality, effectiveness and accountability? If so, how?
- What conditions are needed to make certification successful and achieve impact?
- How could certification fit with existing approaches to standards compliance and verification?
- Are there other alternatives to certification that could contribute to greater effectiveness and accountability?

In September 2013, the project team developed a proposed certification model based on research and feedback from stakeholders as a means to stimulate more focused debate on the main questions underlining the review project. Over 50 organisations submitted a written response to the first draft model, ranging from national NGOs, INGOs, networks, governments and UN agencies (a summary of feedback is available on request).

This paper outlines the main features of a revised draft certification model incorporating the feedback from stakeholders.

Main features of the revised model:

- Builds on and validates current approaches to standards, quality assurance and certification
- Reaffirms humanitarian principles, accountability to affected people and programme quality and effectiveness as the foundation for certification
- Clarifies the purpose of certification is to promote continuous learning and improvement
- Proposes core requirements and expectations for NGOs engaged in humanitarian actions
- Sets out a limited set of key indicators to demonstrate compliance with the proposed requirements
- Considers recognition and validation of internal quality assurance processes against the requirements
- Promotes compatibility, alignment and validation of existing national or regional certification mechanisms, including the potential of accreditation

Section A situates certification in the context of other possible outcomes for the sector. **Section B** sets out the vision and purpose of certification while **Section C** outlines the foundation and core assessment criteria for certification. **Section D** explains how core requirements would be measured. **Section E** outlines the proposed assessment process and revised certification levels. **Section F** shows how the model could work towards greater alignment and compatibility with existing processes. **Section G** provides an update on the project's efforts to compile and compare the costs of different certification models, while **Section H** provides information on some of the governance and management issues. **Section I** outlines the next steps for the project, including field research and pilot testing of the key assumptions and criteria behind this revised model.

Note: This is a work in progress, and will evolve as we collect more information and feedback, particularly through our field research and consultations. Your feedback is welcome! Please share your comments with the project team at any time: philip.tamminga@schr.info or bmo@schr.info or visit www.schr.info for more information.

A. Certification in context

From the outset, the aim of the project has not been to establish a new certification model or promote certification as the ultimate goal for an organisation. Instead, the project has been a means to explore the *potential* of certification as part of overall efforts to improve performance and accountability in humanitarian actions. The project has successfully stimulated more debate on the role of quality and accountability standards and the relationship to external verification and certification mechanisms. At this point in the project, three possible scenarios seem to be emerging, each with the potential of contributing to improving the sector as a whole:

1. Working towards a common standard

There have been on-going efforts over the past two years to work towards greater alignment and harmonisation of standards in the sector, such as the [Joint Standards Initiative](#), and more recently, the [Core Humanitarian Standard](#) process, which is currently seeking inputs from stakeholders on a draft standard. From the perspective of the project, based on our research and consultations so far, a widely agreed, harmonised set of common standards is one of the prerequisites for any successful monitoring, reporting, verification and/or certification model. Widespread agreement to adopt and integrate a common set of standards into NGOs' work, and the corresponding recognition, validation and use of those standards by other stakeholders like the UN and governments, would benefit for the sector.

The project will continue to consult with stakeholders on defining core requirements, indicators and assessment criteria to demonstrate that an organisation is principled, accountable and effective, and share the learning on how this might contribute to greater alignment and harmonisation of standards. We expect the field research and pilots will contribute to identifying the most relevant and appropriate indicators and methodologies to measure, verify and report on how standards can be applied more consistently by organisations.

2. A common framework for monitoring and reporting use of standards

Several initiatives to promote a more coherent approach to monitoring and reporting of aid efforts have emerged in the past few years. These include [INGO Accountability Charter](#) and the [Global Reporting Initiative's NGO Supplement](#) and the [International Aid Transparency Initiative \(IATI\)](#). The debate is not as well developed in the humanitarian sector, but from the project's perspective, a transparent, publicly accessible common reporting framework on how humanitarian organisations apply standards and their commitments could be a benefit. By agreeing to publicly report against a core set of standards and indicators, organisations could demonstrate how they contribute to principled, accountable and effective humanitarian action. A global reporting framework may also be a cost-effective way for the sector to collectively demonstrate to stakeholders its commitments to principled, accountable and effective humanitarian actions, and an intermediary step towards independent external verification or certification. The project team intends to analyse this option in greater detail.

3. A coherent approach to external verification and certification

The project continues to research the conditions for a successful, sustainable certification model. Part of the definition of success is reaching "critical mass" of voluntary participation by NGOs in an external verification / certification model to assure stakeholders that a humanitarian organisation meets core standards and can be considered professional, reliable and accountable. In addition to the more widely known certification models in the sector, such as HAP and People In Aid, there are numerous national-level NGO standards and certification bodies. Several network and membership-based organisations also have systems in place to "certify" member organisations against quality, management or other standards and criteria.

Experiences from outside the sector show the value of harmonisation and consolidation of standards, reporting mechanisms, and external verification and certification processes. From the project's perspective, aligning and harmonising approaches at the national and international level, and looking for synergies and compatibility between different models, would be a benefit for the sector. In particular, it could help ensure greater consistency in applying common, agreed standards, and offer a more cost-effective and sustainable way of promoting quality and accountability in the sector. The project will continue to research and consult on the relevance, utility and feasibility of these three related outcomes, and share the findings with the sector to determine the most appropriate way forward.

B. Vision and purpose for a certification model

Vision

Feedback from stakeholders has been consistently in favour of a certification model that empowers affected people to participate more actively in shaping the kind of assistance they receive and the relationship with aid providers. Accordingly, the project proposes a long-term **vision** for a successful certification model:

An accessible, affordable system that:

- *Gives affected people and other stakeholders accessible and relevant information that can help them choose the organisation they want to provide assistance and protection.*
- *Allows organisations to demonstrate to affected populations and other stakeholders that they are credible, reliable, principled, and accountable and effective at responding to needs in crisis situations.*

Purpose

In the first draft of the model, the purpose of certification was not clear to many organisations. Some expressed concern that certification could be used by donors for control and compliance purposes, or could be misused by states to limit access to populations in a crisis. These are concerns and risks that we have noted in previous discussion papers and in the first draft of the model, that will need to be mitigated as part of any successful certification model. Based on the feedback received, we believe that the most relevant and meaningful **purpose** for a certification model would be to:

- *Establish a clear set of expectations and requirements for organisations engaged in humanitarian actions,*
- *Promote continuous learning to improve the quality, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian actions.*

In any case, it is important to reiterate that certification is only a part of wider efforts that an organisation should take to improve its performance and accountability. By itself, certification can never provide any guarantee of an organisation's accountability or effectiveness, only an objective assurance that if it demonstrates it consistently meets core humanitarian criteria and requirements, then there is a reasonable likelihood that that organisation will perform well in all of its humanitarian programmes.

C. Foundation and core assessment criteria

Foundation

The first draft model proposed that the cornerstone for a certification model should be to respect and promote **humanitarian principles** and **accountability to affected people**. However, according to much of the feedback received, this was not explained clearly enough in the proposed model, particularly regarding support for humanitarian principles. At the same time, there was significant feedback supporting a model that includes assessing the **quality and effectiveness of humanitarian actions**, and to verifying that an organisation is committed to **continuous learning and improvement**.

The revised model reaffirms the responsibility of organisations to respect and promote application of **all four humanitarian principles** of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. The model also promotes more accountable organisations that engage with affected people, respecting and protecting their dignity and human rights, and supporting quality, effective responses to address their needs in a crisis. Finally, the model proposes that continuous improvement of programme quality and organisational effectiveness must be a core commitment for any organisation engaged in humanitarian actions.

Core requirements

Feedback from many organisations on the first draft model was that the proposed assessment criteria and process was too focused on organisational systems and processes rather than verifying actual practices in the

field. Several suggested that the process would be a costly duplication of efforts for them unless there it was flexible enough to recognize and validate internal efforts to improve their performance and accountability. At the same time, the message from many stakeholders was to ensure the model was as rigorous enough to set out a minimum set of requirements to distinguish professional, committed humanitarian organisation from others, but simple as possible to make it accessible to a wider number of organisations.

In response, the revised proposed assessment framework attempts to simplify the essential characteristics of a principled, accountable and effective organisation into three pillars and core requirements.

Proposed Assessment Framework	
Pillars	Core Requirements
1. Principled humanitarian action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitments to humanitarian principles are clearly defined in policies, communicated to stakeholders, demonstrated by staff and applied in programmes.
2. Accountability to affected people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affected people have opportunities to participate in all stages of programmes (design, implementation, management, and evaluation), and have access to safe, appropriate complaints, feedback and response mechanisms.
3. Quality, effectiveness and continuous learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programmes are designed to meet assessed needs of affected people, are relevant and appropriate to the crisis context, apply recognised quality and technical standards and good practices (including risk management) and the organisation works towards continuous learning and improvement.

The core requirements are grounded in existing commitments, standards and good practices adopted by the humanitarian community, which the model tries to synthesise and consolidate under a common framework.

The revised model works towards promoting more rigorous evidence of how these core requirements are being applied in human actions.

Indicators

The revised assessment framework sets out a **limited number of potential indicators** to assess how well an organisation meets the proposed **core requirements** (see Table 1 below). Much more work is required to refine and agree on these indicators, but the list gives an idea on how an organisation could be assessed. It is quite likely that many organisations already meet many of these indicators. Some may have even more extensive requirements as part of their own internal policy, programming and quality assurance frameworks, or as part of their partner and donor requirements. The proposed framework seeks to establish core set of requirements relevant and applicable for all NGOs, but would encourage organisations to go beyond these requirements as part of their commitment to continuous improvement. Specifically, organisations would be assessed to ensure that they apply any technical and programming standards and accepted good practices relevant to their main areas of work.

The revised assessment framework would allow organisations to determine how to best demonstrate how they respect and apply humanitarian principles and meet affected people's needs. This allows an organisation to use existing management and reporting processes to gather the evidence to show they are meeting the core requirements. This would also allow organisations to continue to build their own internal quality assurance processes adapted to their own needs, or participate in other certification models at the national or international level, without adding too many additional requirements or burdens on them.

Several of the indicators are based on evidence shown through organisational documentation, such as policies or management procedures. However, the proposed framework emphasises organisations demonstrating **how** humanitarian principles are applied in practice and **how** the organisation is accountable for meeting affected people's needs and priorities, based on information at the programme or project level. The expectation is that participating organisations are able to provide convincing evidence that they are systematically engaging with affected people to get their feedback and inputs, and integrating this information into their programming.

Table 1: Draft Core Requirements and Indicators

Draft Core Requirements and Indicators				
1. Principled humanitarian action				
Commitments to humanitarian principles are clearly defined in policies, communicated to stakeholders, demonstrated by staff and applied in programmes.				
Core Requirements	Key Indicators*	Points*	Compatibility*	
1.1 The organisation makes a public commitment to the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence and communicates this regularly to its stakeholders (including affected people and staff).	▪ Evidence that humanitarian principles are reflected in key organisational documents.	5	-	Code of Conduct
	▪ Evidence that staff are able to define humanitarian principles and give concrete examples of how they have been applied to their work.	5	-	Sphere Charter and Standards
	▪ Evidence that commitments to humanitarian principles are communicated to affected people, authorities and other stakeholders in a culturally appropriate and accessible manner.	5	-	People In Aid Code of Good Practices
1.2 Humanitarian assistance does not seek to further any particular political, religious or ideological standpoint, and does not seek to obtain commercial gain.	▪ Evidence that programmes are focused exclusively on humanitarian aims and independent from other objectives.	5	-	HAP Standard and Benchmarks
			-	IASC AAP Framework
			-	GHD Declaration
1.3 The principle of impartiality guides programming decisions: programmes are designed on the basis of and in proportion to needs and are provided without discrimination to affected people.	▪ Evidence that programmes are informed by a recognised needs and capacity assessment process which includes disaggregated data on affected populations	5	-	Draft CHS Commitment 1 & 8
			-	Code of Conduct
			-	Sphere Charter and Standards
1.4 The organisation takes measures to ensure that its activities, public image or funding do not adversely affect the independence and impartiality of its humanitarian programming.	▪ Evidence that programmes do not discriminate against any group(s) of the population	5	-	People In Aid Code of Good Practices
			-	HAP Standard and Benchmarks
			-	IASC AAP Framework
1.5 The organisation makes efforts to minimise the potential risks and adverse	▪ Evidence that country resource allocations are based on and in proportion to assessed needs and complementary to other response efforts.	5	-	GHD Declaration
			-	Draft CHS Commitments 1, 3 & 9
			-	Code of Conduct
1.6 The organisation ensures that its activities, public image or funding do not adversely affect the independence and impartiality of its humanitarian programming.	▪ Evidence that the organisation considers impartiality in its global resource allocation.	5	-	Sphere Charter and Standards
			-	People In Aid Code of Good Practices
			-	HAP Standard and Benchmarks
1.7 The organisation ensures that its activities, public image or funding do not adversely affect the independence and impartiality of its humanitarian programming.	▪ Evidence that the organisation regularly assesses how principles are reflected in practice and attempts to address situations where principled humanitarian action could be compromised.	5	-	IASC AAP Framework
			-	GHD Declaration
			-	Draft CHS Commitments 1 & 9
1.8 The organisation ensures that its activities, public image or funding do not adversely affect the independence and impartiality of its humanitarian programming.	▪ Evidence that the organisation has processes in place to assess, monitor and manage risks to safety and security of staff and of affected people.	5	-	Code of Conduct
			-	Sphere Charter and Standards
			-	People In Aid Code of Good Practices

impact of its programming interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People In Aid Code of Good Practices - HAP Standard and Benchmarks - IASC AAP Framework - GHD Declaration - Draft CHS Commitments 1 & 9
---	---

2. Accountability to affected people

Affected people have opportunities to participate in all stages of programmes (design, implementation, management, and evaluation), and have access to safe, appropriate complaints, feedback and response mechanisms.

Core Requirements	Key Indicators*	Points*	Compatibility*
2.1 Affected people and stakeholders have access to timely, accurate and relevant information on the organisation's aims and objectives and accountability commitments, and a means to express their opinions on issues that affect them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evidence that the organisation has processes in place for all segments of affected population to participate in and contribute to programming decisions. ▪ Evidence that affected people have access to project plans, budgets and objectives, indicators and expected results ▪ Affected people report they are satisfied with the information provided to them by the organisation and their opportunities to participate and influence programme decisions. 	5 5 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Code of Conduct - Sphere Charter and Standards - HAP Standard and Benchmarks - IASC AAP Framework - GHD Declaration - Draft CHS Commitments 2, 3 & 5
2.2 The organisation ensures it complies with its legal and ethical commitments to respond in a timely, fair and appropriate manner to complaints, allegations of misconduct or illegal or inappropriate behaviour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that procedures are in place to investigate and address complaints or allegations of misconduct or illegal and inappropriate behaviour. • Evidence that staff understand their responsibilities to prevent situations of misconduct and have safe and appropriate mechanisms to raise issues and concerns • Affected people report that culturally and context appropriate and complaints mechanisms are in place to safely raise issues and concerns and that the organisation makes reasonable attempts to address issues raised. 	5 5 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Code of Conduct - Sphere Charter and Standards - People In Aid Code of Good Practices - HAP Standard and Benchmarks - IASC AAP Framework - Draft CHS Commitments 5, 6

3. Quality, Effectiveness and Continuous Learning

Programmes are based on meeting the needs of affected people, are relevant and appropriate to the crisis context, and apply recognised quality and technical standards and good practices (including risk management), and the organisation works towards continuous learning and improvement.

Core Requirements	Key Indicators*	Points*	Compatibility*
3.1 The needs of affected people and the crisis context are regularly monitored to ensure programmes are relevant and appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evidence that programmes are reviewed and adapted following feedback from affected people and/or changes in the context. ▪ Affected people report that programmes are relevant to addressing their needs and priorities 	5 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Code of Conduct - Sphere Charter and Standards - HAP Standard and Benchmarks - IASC AAP Framework - Draft CHS Commitments 3, 6

3.2 The organisation consistently applies recognised good practices and/or quality and technical standards in its programmes.	▪ Evidence that the organisation has the technical capacity and competencies to deliver effective programmes in the crisis contexts it works in.	5	- Code of Conduct - Sphere Charter and Standards - People In Aid Code of Good Practices
	▪ Evidence that staff and volunteers working with affected people have the required technical competencies and cross-cultural skills, and management support to perform effectively	5	- HAP Standard and Benchmarks - IASC AAP Framework - Draft CHS Commitments 3, 7
	▪ Evidence that programmes apply relevant SPHERE or equivalent technical standards and recognised good practices	5	
3.3 The organisation applies good financial management practices in programmes and resources are used responsibly, efficiently and effectively to meet the needs affected people.	• Evidence that programmes have adequate financial management systems in place, including provisions to prevent corruption and misuse of resources	5	- Code of Conduct - GHD Declaration - OECD/DAC Evaluation criteria
	• Evidence that resource allocations represent the most relevant, appropriate and cost-effective approach possible for affected people and the crisis context.	5	- Draft CHS Commitments 7, 9
3.4 The organisation consistently monitors and evaluates its performance and promotes continuous learning to address weaknesses and improve its current and future performance.	▪ Evidence that the organisation applies recognised good practices in monitoring and evaluation, including mechanisms to transparently share findings with affected people and stakeholders.	5	- Code of Conduct - Sphere Charter and Standards - People In Aid Code of Good Practices
	▪ Evidence that the organisation integrates learning into current and future programming.	5	- HAP Standard and Benchmarks - IASC AAP Framework
	• Evaluation findings demonstrate programmes consistently meet quality and effectiveness criteria and are appropriate and relevant to assessed needs and the crisis context.	5	- GHD Declaration - OECD/DAC Evaluation criteria - Draft CHS Commitments 10
	• Evidence that the organisation actively assesses its own performance against these core requirements and actively works to address gaps and areas for improvement.	5	
NOTES: * These draft indicators will be refined as part of the consultation and field research process to ensure they are relevant, useful and SMART. * Detailed guidance notes would be developed on the assessment methodology and with clear expectations for organisations, once the requirements and indicators are agreed * The standards and codes referenced are for orientation purposes only; the project will continue to review other standards and verification processes to look for alignment and compatibility without endorsing any specific approach. * With regard to the CHS, both People in Aid and HAP have indicated their commitment to replace their existing standards (referenced above) with any standard the emerges from the CHS process.			

D. Measuring the core requirements

The revised model proposes a points-based system to benchmark organisations against the core requirements. Under this approach, each indicator is assigned a number of points: a higher number of points for organisations that consistently meet or exceed the criteria, lower points for those that only partially meet the criteria. An organisation would need to obtain a minimum number of points under each indicator in order to demonstrate that it meets the criteria. For organisations that choose to participate in an external validation or certification process, the points system would provide an objective, comparable means to show which organisations have met the core requirements (though the scores themselves would not necessarily be made public). Determining the values for indicators and establishing the “minimum” points required will require substantial consultation and agreement with stakeholders, so that there is a fair and objective manner to compare different organisations’ performance.

There are several advantages to this approach:

- Organisations can use the assessment framework and indicators as way to identify strengths and areas for improvement, and as a means to prioritise internal **capacity building** and track progress over time.
- Organisations can also integrate the indicators into their own internal monitoring and reporting, or participate in an **external reporting mechanism**, organised around the criteria and indicators.
- Organisations can also choose to voluntarily participate in an **independent, external verification** process that could lead to obtaining **certification** that they have satisfactorily met the core requirements (or can demonstrate that they are in the process of working towards this).

The role of any external verification process – if an organisation chooses to participate in one – would be to provide an independent, impartial and objective opinion on the validity of evidence submitted. However, the evidence provided would need to meet several assessment criteria in order to be recognised as valid:

- **Relevant** – is the evidence provided relevant? Does it address how the core requirements are being met?
- **Credible** – is the evidence provided accurate? Is the evidence backed up by reliable information sources?
- **Comprehensive** – is the evidence representative of the whole organisation? Is it complete?

E. Assessment process and certification levels

The first draft model incorporated the suggestion from many stakeholders that a model with different levels of certification for organisations was the most appropriate approach for the sector. The proposed levels in the first draft were intended as a way for organisations to assess where they were in terms of meeting the core criteria, and as an incentive to continuous improvement. However, while many liked the concept, the descriptions of levels in the first proposal were criticised by many as potentially acting as a barrier or creating unhealthy competition by “ranking” and comparing organisations’ performance.

In the revised draft model, we have retained the concept that certification should provide an external, independent, objective and publicly available assessment on whether or not an organisation has met the core requirements. However, we have simplified the levels and shifted the emphasis on demonstrating an organisation’s progress towards certification, rather than a comparative ranking of how well it meets the core criteria. In the new model, the proposed levels are:

- **In process** – to indicate the organisation has registered publicly its commitment to meet the core requirements, with, for example, leadership commitments and a time-bound plan of action to indicate how it will work towards the requirements.
- **Validated** – to indicate an organisation has submitted the required documentation on how it meets the core requirements; that the evidence has been independently validated as credible and reliable; and that this information is publicly available for review and comment (for example, through a common reporting framework)
- **Certified** – to indicate an organisation has additionally successfully undergone an external verification process including assessing how well the core requirements are applied in programmes and verified with stakeholders (including affected people).

Organisations that work through partners or a membership base, either by providing funding, resources or technical assistance (such as a secretariat for a network or alliance) could also participate in the model.

However, the assessment focus for these types of organisations would be on providing evidence on how they actively work with their partners to promote greater use and application of the core requirements and good practices in programming. The assessment framework could include a modified set of indicators to focus on how these organisations assist their partners to meet the core requirements and evidence from their partners and stakeholders on the added value of the relationship and the support provided to them. Box 1 below describes the steps in the proposed assessment process.

Box 1: Steps toward certification

Step One:	The organisation undertakes a self-assessment exercise to determine how well they meet the core requirements and indicators and identify any gaps.
Step Two:	The organisation compiles and submits documentation to a certification body with verifiable evidence of how they are applying (or not) the core requirements and indicators, and how they will address any gaps in order to meet the criteria, and registers its commitment to work toward fully meeting the requirements. At this stage they could request “ <i>In progress</i> ” status.
Step Three:	The certification body conducts an independent review to assess the quality of the evidence submitted and provides a report on the organisation strengths, and areas for improvement. The organisation would then submit this information and the external assessment of as part their commitment to transparent public reporting on how they are applying the core requirements. If the documentation meets the evidence requirement, the organisation can request “ <i>Validated</i> ” status from the certifying body. However, this would not imply that the organisation could make any claims that it consistently applies the requirements in its programmes or practices.
Step Four:	If the organisation opts for full certification, an independent external review team conducts a verification assessment, including field visits in a representative sample of projects to verify and confirm the core requirements are applied in programming. The review process would include staff and stakeholder consultations, including affected people, to confirm the extent to which requirements are reflected in practices.
Step Five:	The certification body then reviews the verification report. If the organisation meets the requirements and can demonstrate how it will work to improve its performance, it can request “ <i>Certified</i> ” status. Certification would be for a four-year period, with interim progress review every two years to assess progress against the learning and continuous improvement targets the organisation has committed to.

F. Alignment and Compatibility with other Systems

The project received consistent feedback that the model should look for compatibility and alignment with existing processes, such as HAP. Other stakeholders recommended that the model should include a process to assess and recognise the validity of efforts and investments made by many organisations to meet internal quality assurance and accountability commitments. This could include, for example, internal certification-like processes by Caritas Internationalis or the IFRC, or the quality assurance processes developed by organisations like World Vision International. Many organisations asked for clarification on the relationship with the Core Humanitarian Standard process.

To clarify, the proposed model is meant to complement existing processes, not replace them. As stated above, the framework is based on many of these existing commitments: the project does not endorse any particular approach or model, but attempts to synthesise the most relevant elements of existing approaches that could be integrated into a model for field testing and consultation purposes. Our research and consultations so far do indicate that the prerequisite for any successful certification model is a widely agreed set of standards or criteria to assess and organisation against. This is why the project will integrate any widely-agreed consensus on standards that may emerge into the certification model. The limited set of requirements and indicators proposed here is designed to field-test key project assumptions around the potential added value of external verification and certification. Our intention is to share the finding of our field research and consultations as part of the project’s contribution towards greater consolidation and harmonisation of approaches to standards, quality assurance and accountability in the sector.

In this regard, the revised model proposes to recognise and validate other approaches provided there is a rigorous review process to determine whether or not the criteria in other processes are equivalent to the core requirements and indicators of the proposed model. In the event that an organisation can demonstrate that it meets or exceeds the core requirements and indicators under another process, it would be assessed as meeting the requirements, subject to field-level verification. This would allow many organisations to participate in the model without having to invest significant new resources into the process.

Accreditation of other bodies

Similar arguments were made to validate external requirements established by national or international level NGO certification initiatives, such as InterAction's PVO standards or national level NGO certification processes in countries like Australia, Cambodia, Pakistan or the Philippines. Several stakeholders recommended that the project review the concept of accreditation – where some of the authority for assessing if an organisation meets the core requirements is delegated to another body.

Under this approach, existing national NGO certification bodies could be accredited to assess and verify that NGOs meet the core requirements and criteria established for certification. The core requirements could be integrated into existing NGO certification processes, or as a stand-alone set of criteria specifically focused on humanitarian actions. Similarly, membership-based organisations and networks could also integrate the core requirements into the membership requirements, or include them as part of their technical assistance and capacity-building activities for their members. They could also potentially be accredited to assess and verify that their members meet the core requirements, provided the process is independent, objective and transparent.

In both cases, a recognised international accreditation and certification body would need to establish criteria and indicators and provide overall guidance and oversight of certifying bodies. Any recommendations for awarding certification would need to be reviewed and validated to ensure the process is credible and objective.

The concept deserves further research and analysis, as accreditation may be an option to encourage, engage and align the increasing number of national and regional level NGO certification models towards a common set of core requirements specifically for humanitarian actions. This may also reduce the costs of centralising the assessment and verification process, as other agencies or bodies could take on some of these tasks as part of their own verification work. The project team will continue to explore this as an option.

G. Costing the model

As noted in the initial draft model, the expectation of all stakeholders is for a cost-effective, affordable and accessible model. Many stakeholders have indicated that achieving widespread participation in any model will depend on ensuring NGOs both large and small consider the benefits of certification as outweighing the costs.

In the revised proposed model, we have attempted to keep the costs of assessment, reporting and verification affordable, incorporating several suggestions from stakeholders, such as:

- Using an assessment process that builds on existing internal processes (like monitoring, evaluation and reporting) and documentation, potentially reducing the administrative costs for participation
- Focusing on assessing the validity and reliability of the evidence provided by organisations, instead of more cost and labour-intensive detailed investigation and compliance verification processes
- Assessing a limited set of critical key indicators rather than a comprehensive set that would assess all aspects of an organisation's capacity, performance and accountability
- Using a smaller sample size of an organisation's programming for field level verification to keep the process manageable yet rigorous
- Exploring the option of accrediting local independent auditors or other organisations to integrate the assessment and verification process into existing reporting, verification and certification processes

The project is, in collaboration with researchers, HAP and other organisations, compiling comparative financial data on the costs of different quality assurance, reporting, and verification and certification mechanisms. Field research and consultation will provide further data on the potential costs of implementing a certification

model, including direct costs for the assessment and certification process, as well as indirect costs, such as training, communications, governance, etc.

Once this data is available, it will help drive a more informed debate on the costs and benefits of certification. However, as indicated in the initial draft model, our sense is that it is necessary to shift perceptions amongst many stakeholders, including donors, towards the idea that quality assurance, verification and certification are not a cost-burden, but an investment in achieving greater quality, effectiveness and accountability in humanitarian actions.

H. Governance and Management

In the first draft model, we proposed a management and governance structure mainly to generate ideas on what the most appropriate and sustainable structure might look like. However, this inadvertently gave the impression to some that the project was advocating creating a new organisation or replacing current approaches. This was not our intention; it is now evident that a discussion on potential organisational structures is premature without first agreeing on the core standards and criteria for assessing an organisation, how this might fit with other processes, and the key roles and functions required for a successful, sustainable model.

Accordingly, the project team proposes to postpone any discussions on potential organisation models and governance structures until there is a clearer idea on what the most appropriate standards and assessment criteria are, and more analysis on other options such as a common reporting framework or accreditation of existing certification bodies, etc. We expect that the field research and pilots will provide more data and analysis on these issues, and look forward to sharing the findings with the sector as they come out.

I. Next steps

Field research and pilots will take place with four different organisations and in four different crisis contexts between February and May 2014. The field research will help us understand the practical implications of certification for organisations and generate more information on how certification can contribute (or not) to improving humanitarian action.

The pilots are not intended as a full-scale organisational assessment against certification criteria. Instead, the purpose is to test and validate key assumptions of the model in different crisis contexts and determine how the model could be improved. The field research is also an opportunity to assess the potential linkages and synergies with national-level NGO certification processes, and get specific feedback from NGOs and other stakeholders (including affected people) on the relevance and validity of certification and the proposed assessment criteria and indicators to assess an organisation. Through the field research, the review team will also assess the costs, benefits and implications (including negative ones) associated with the proposed model, as well as the feasibility of replicating the model on a wider scale in other crisis contexts.

Key research questions:

- Does certification contribute to learning and continuous improvement, and better quality, more effective and more accountable programmes? How?
- Would the proposed model add value to an organisation's work? How?
- What would be the costs of meeting the certification criteria? Would the costs outweigh the benefits?
- Are there other, more cost-effective alternatives to certification that would benefit your organisation?
- How easily could the draft Core Humanitarian Standard and assessment criteria be integrated into your organisation's existing working processes?
- How would your organisation document and provide evidence on how you apply the draft standard?
- Would your key stakeholders view certification as an added value, or could there be negative consequences to certification?
- How could the draft model be improved?

For more information:

Please contact the project team at any time with your questions, comments or suggestions: philip.tamminga@schr.info or bmo@schr.info or visit www.schr.info for more information.