Humanitarian certification discussion workshop report
Paris, 20 September 2013

Organised by: Groupe URD and Coordination SUD

Workshop facilitated by: Véronique de Geoffroy and Hugues Maury (Groupe URD)

Location: Headquarters of Médecins du Monde in Paris (France)

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Introduction:

The SCHR’s Certification Project is currently exploring the potential benefits and limits of a certification mechanism to improve the quality, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action. At the end of June 2013, during the Humanitarian Standards Forum in Geneva, an initial review was presented and discussed, before a first draft certification model was made public in early September 2013.

Groupe URD, Coordination SUD and certain NGOs like Handicap International have been following this process closely. In conferences, workshops and consultations, requests for clarification have been made, questions have been raised about the objectives and methods of the certification project and the possible risks for NGOs of such an initiative have been highlighted in the absence of a precise structure and reference framework.

Beyond these exchanges with the facilitators of the SCHR project, Coordination SUD and Groupe URD felt that it was necessary to discuss this issue in greater detail to establish the conditions under which a certification system would work and identify the impacts that such a mechanism could have.

Coordination SUD’s humanitarian commission and Groupe URD therefore organised a one-day French-language workshop on 20 September which brought together representatives from 10 humanitarian organisations. Though this initiative was independent of the SCHR project, the SCHR project facilitators were informed about it.

During the workshop, three questions were discussed:

- The relevance of certification: what would be the objective of a quality certification mechanism and what advantages would it bring for humanitarian actors in the North and South?

- What reference framework should this mechanism be based on? What criteria/norms would allow humanitarian organizations to be assessed fairly while respecting diversity? What would be the place of humanitarian principles, performance criteria, management issues, etc.?

- What certification mechanism would be legitimate and credible? What place would humanitarian organizations be given in this mechanism? How could the independence, and therefore the credibility of the system be guaranteed? Who would pay? These issues determine whether the approach as a whole will be useful and feasible.

As the SCHR’s draft model was made public a few days before the workshop was held, it seemed essential to take it into account and review it. Thus, participants worked on the French version of draft V.1.0 of 10/09/2013, produced by the SCHR.

This report presents the results of the collective discussions during the workshop. It is aimed at the participants and their collaborators, but also other actors from the humanitarian sector. It aims to contribute to the collective discussion which is needed about these issues. However, the content of the report only represents the ideas of individual participants and does not constitute the official position of the NGOs represented at the workshop. The organizations in question will specify their position on certification in general and the SCHR’s project in particular at a later date.
1- What are the expected benefits of a humanitarian certification system?

Before giving their opinion about the SCHR’s Certification Project, the participants brainstormed ideas about the advantages that a certification system could ideally bring if implemented under certain conditions.

The conclusion was that a certification system could help to promote Quality approaches within NGOs and encourage the sharing of good practices between NGOs:

- By creating and maintaining external pressure, certification would push NGOs to become more mobilised internally to show proof that they had implemented and maintained a Quality approach;
- By basing the assessment of organisations on programme quality and results, certification could help to redefine priorities away from the administrative and financial norms that different audits currently focus on;
- By making “listening” and the participation of beneficiaries priorities in relation to quality, certification could reinforce the central place of local people in humanitarian programmes;
- By harmonising a certain number of good practices, certification could encourage the sharing of internal processes and strategies among NGOs.

In the participants’ view, encouraging organisations to adopt a quality approach is the most useful objective of certification, as well as being the most realistic, the most promising in terms of advantages for communities and the least risky for organizations and the sector.

This point should be seen as the main objective of a certification system.
2- General remarks about the SCHR Certification Project and its objectives

- Objectives:

Thus far, it would seem that the SCHR’s Certification Project has several objectives which are not all related to quality (regulating the sector? supervising NGOs? regulating access to funding?). It is urgent to clarify what the main objective of certification would be so that the reference framework and the certification mechanism are coherent with this objective.

Indeed, in general, it seems that the proposed reference framework gives priority to technical conformity with the norms presented in the reference framework rather than the quality, relevance and coherence of the activities in the field. It seems essential, if the main objective of certification is to improve the quality of operations, that the model should reverse this postulate and give priority to the response to needs and adaptation to context.

- Area of application:

In its present form, the certification project is imprecise about the bodies that the certification system will concern. Though in places « non-profit » organisations are mentioned (which would include government bodies) elsewhere, it seems that certification is only to apply to NGOs (non-profit and non-governmental). This would amount to saying that United Nations agencies, Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement bodies and governmental and para-governmental bodies would be exonerated. Considering the structural role of UN agencies and Red Cross/Red Crescent bodies in humanitarian crises, it is difficult to envisage what the reach of the project will be. This reduction of the area of application of certification raises the question of its overall objective: rather than improving the quality of humanitarian action, certification of this kind would be a way of supervising NGOs.

- Checking the initial hypothesis:

The whole approach is based on the hypothesis that certification will produce benefits for the humanitarian sector and communities. In the current project, no mechanism is planned to check the validity of this assumption. If a form of certification is finally implemented, during the test phase this hypothesis should be checked and lessons drawn before extending the model further. These evaluation and learning features should be integrated into the process calendar.

- Relations with local authorities and access to local populations:

The hope is that if the certification system is recognized by governments, it will make entry procedures for a country or a territory lighter and thus make it easier for NGOs to gain access to communities. If governments select the NGOs who are able to have access on the basis of certification, the system would contribute to reducing the number of NGOs and unclutter humanitarian space in certain crisis contexts.

However:

- As certification would become a new demand on the part of authorities, very professional organisations who did not recognise the certification system might be penalised or held back;

- As it is the sovereign right of states to decide the criteria for giving NGOs access to communities, certification will not necessarily ensure access to the field. Governments may limit or even
prevent certified organizations from gaining access, or invite bodies which are not certified, including those that are not professional.

Without any guarantee of being able to avoid instrumentalisation of the certification system by certain states, the negative effects of certification could outweigh the benefits.

• Relations with donors:

If certification is to benefit NGOs, it should allow procedures and controls imposed by donors to be reduced and audits to be rationalised. This could be differentiated depending on the certifications already obtained (cf. ECHO’s CCP).

Certification could make it possible for donors to give certified organisations priority and easier access to their funds, while other organisations would still have to go through all the present procedures. This simplified, rapid and flexible access would benefit beneficiaries as operations would be put in place even more quickly.

However, certification would only contribute to reducing audits if the major donors (ECHO, USAID) recognised its validity, but so far this is not guaranteed. In these conditions, the demands of certification will only be added to existing demands, without reducing the content of controls, and the overall weight of controls on NGOs will be increased.

The resources invested in certification should not take away from those which are currently reserved for monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

Lastly, it is unlikely that a certification system will limit the current tendency of donors to give priority to large organisations in order to limit the cost of transactions.

• The image of professional humanitarian NGOs:

Certification should make it easier to distinguish between professional humanitarians, who operate on the basis of a certain number of principles, and “non-professional” humanitarians.

However, organisations who are not bound by these principles in their operations and who are privately funded (and therefore not dependent on donors) will not be affected by the certification system. Their programmes, some of which are questionable (proselytism, inappropriate or dangerous practices, etc.), will continue to tarnish the image of organisations who do defend these principles.

In addition, and in contrast, very professional organisations who do not seek certification will continue to promote their institutional image without using a label (external recognition linked to certification).

• The question of how a certification mechanism is funded

This central and fundamental point does not appear to have been given the attention that it deserves. Is it appropriate to have begun testing the system without having estimated the overall annual cost of the system and without prior commitment from donors?
3. What certification mechanism should be adopted?

Participants split into two groups, one to discuss the certification organisation and mechanism, and the other to discuss the reference framework and certification criteria.

The certification mechanism work group analysed the parts of the SCHR draft document concerning the mechanism, its organisation, its composition and its management. The following points emerged from this analysis:

General considerations:

- The participants felt that the document focused much more on the organisation of the mechanism than on the reference framework that would be used (in the annexes). They felt that the latter should be given a more central place.

- The general architecture (several authorities and committees, made up of representatives from different environments) appears complex considering that the main objective of certification has not yet been determined.

Questions raised about governance and the composition of governance bodies – MAJOR CONCERN ABOUT THIS POINT

This particularly important point is a source of major uncertainty and concern.

- The diagram shows:
  - A non-executive Advisory board,
  - 2 independent bodies: a Humanitarian Certification Body – in dialogue with an external body, the Humanitarian Standards Forum - and an Independant Certification Committee (are these bodies independent of the Governing Body? Of external bodies?);
  - And a Governing Body, about which we do not know where or who its legitimacy comes from, who appoints it or who it is accountable to.

- This major shortcoming raises other questions:
  - Who will preside over the instigation of the 2 ‘independent’ bodies?
  - What is the electoral base that will designate the members of the Governing Body?
  - These questions lead to the following question: Who establishes the system and who is it for? (see above, “Area of application” in the “General Remarks” section). The self-designation or cooption of members by bodies working on accountability or technical standards would be neither logical nor acceptable in terms of representation and independence. It is therefore essential to define what the electoral body would be, and thus who will elect the members of the central Governing Body. If we are to remain faithful to the principle that is repeated several times, “It is better for NGOs to organize a system rather than for other actors to impose a mechanism from the outside”, NGOs should make up the base that would nominate the executive. If the base is broader, a
solution could be, for example, that the organizations that have voluntarily adhered to the Code of Conduct (512 organisations) would be invited to vote. This would be in keeping with the idea of placing humanitarian principles at the centre of the system and at the same time would strengthen the dissemination and recognition of the Code of Conduct. The fact that the executive body is designated in this way will not prevent the indispensable independence of the authorities and people in charge of auditing.

- The workshop participants insisted that the Governing Body should be made up principally of representatives of humanitarian organisations as it is supposed to be certification for and by NGOs. “Qualified personalities”, chosen for their experience and their knowledge of the sector and no longer working for a humanitarian organisation, should not be in the majority.

- The place of recognised evaluators in the sector should be clarified to ensure that practices which have been accumulated over more than 15 years in evaluating quality in humanitarian programmes are integrated into the system and reflections about certification.

- Lastly, the place of funding agencies and donors also needs to be clarified to ensure that their views are taken into account, and particularly if the main objective of certification is to remove a certain number of constraints which comes from them.

**Questions about the certification process, the 4 levels of certification (0 to 3), and the role of evaluation and auditors**

- Evaluation is not mentioned in the certification process. Practices based on new technologies to collect feedback from beneficiaries (via internet, SMS, etc.) should not, and cannot replace genuine evaluation processes, including participatory methods to gather the points of view of beneficiaries in a much more in-depth way.

- The question of sampling for certification audits remains unanswered: what criteria will be used and how will the sample of programmes be constituted for the certification process?

- The idea of audits carried out by peers could be explored. Based on the example of hospital accreditation processes, the auditors would be people who worked for NGOs who would be given leave for a few weeks in the year to take part, with others, in a certification process for an NGO. This could reduce costs and could make experience sharing between NGOs easier, whether they are from the North or the South (which, in addition, is supposed to be one of the objectives of the system). Of course, this method of certification would have appropriate methodology and training.

- Though the different levels of certification from 0 to 3 is theoretically more inclusive, it could have unintended effects. Indeed, it could lead to an increase in competition between organizations and a form of grading/ranking by donors and the general public which would have negative effects (see proposal in the section, “What reference framework should be adopted?”).

- In Section B, Paragraph 3, “Recognition and validation by affected populations and host governments”, apart from the fact that affected people cannot be assimilated to their governments, particularly in crisis situations, this section only refers to the validation of the
certification system by government authorities. Depending on the situation, this could be either dangerous, unrealistic, or simply inappropriate.

- It is important to underline again the possible unintended consequences of this certification project: NGOs might be encouraged to give priority to the simplest operations in terms of access and logistics, to the detriment of more difficult and critical situations, in order to gain and keep their certificate and protect themselves from bad evaluations in terms of performance.

- This point shows that it is important to agree about what is meant by performance, and what indicators can be used to measure it. In addition, it should raise questions about the use of the term performance and should encourage actors to arrive at a shared definition of quality for programmes, based on a shared reference framework established by consensus.
4. What reference framework should be adopted?

The workgroup analysed in detail the reference framework included in Annex 1 of the draft document.

General remarks:

**Preamble about the process:**

- The nature of the reference framework which will be used for the certification project is fundamentally important. However, up till now, it had been very difficult for organizations following the SCHR project to discuss the reference framework as none had been presented. Today, a reference framework has been made public, but it is only included in an annex, whereas it should be a central feature of debates.

- It is difficult to identify what part the Joint Standards Initiative (JSI) played in drawing up this reference framework, knowing that the JSI was primarily a regulation exercise between Sphere, HAP and People in Aid, who are not operational NGOs and do not represent all evaluation and quality initiatives.

- It is planned in the project calendar to conduct a test before the end of 2013. This will not allow sufficient consultation about the reference framework which will form the basis of the certification system. In our opinion, it is necessary to revise the schedule to allow more discussion and concrete proposals to be made about the reference framework which will be used for the tests.

**The need for clear definitions and references:**

- The introduction lacks a definition of quality as applied to this reference framework, and more generally a glossary of the different terms used (technical norms, standards, minimal obligations, good practice, etc.).

- It is very difficult to evaluate the proposed reference framework without knowing which norms, practices, obligations, etc. the different indicators refer to. A suggestion is that an extra column could be included, on the right, mentioning the resources used as a reference for each criterion and indicator.

**Selection vs. learning – the key role of the grading system:**

- The four-level grading system which is presented could encourage learning, by allowing organizations to identify their strengths and their weaknesses and to work on the latter. It could also reinforce a system of competition and exclusion between NGOs, by establishing the classification of certified NGOs (3 stars vs. 1 star), which would considerably reduce the appeal of certification for NGOs who do not achieve the highest level.
• The following suggestion was made: the levels would be retained in the reference framework, with a detailed evaluation for each indicator – (e.g. A, B, C, etc.) – without establishing an overall score. A critical threshold would be established (with an average score system which would only be accessible to the evaluators), based on which an organisation would be awarded certification. The system would therefore only distinguish between certified and non-certified organisations (rather than 3-star, 2-star organisations, etc.). This would create only one label, without different levels, as exists, for example, for Fair Trade. The organisation’s results for each indicator would be recorded and would be available to the public, showing their strengths and weaknesses and allowing both certified and non-certified organisations to engage in efforts to improve.

• The way that the appraisal works will also need to be clarified: particularly, would the different criteria be weighted differently? It is important to give priority to certain aspects, such as relevance and responding to needs, compared to others such as organizational processes or respecting norms, for example.

Key concepts which are absent, or which are only hinted at:

• Throughout the document there is no reference to the notion of the relevance of a humanitarian project, even though, on page 15 there is reference to a recognised methodology for evaluating and monitoring needs to guarantee respect for the principle of impartiality. Evaluation criteria (notably the DAC-OECD criteria – relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and coherence) do not appear though they have obtained general consensus in the sector and are recognised by donors. Analysis of / adaptation to contexts is hardly mentioned, and mainly for level 3, whereas these should be demanded from the first level. These elements are extremely worrying in terms of the definition of quality used for the reference framework, and, more broadly, for the planned certification system (see the comment on the absence of definitions above). Are we simply talking about technical norms to achieve, or about quality in terms of relevance, impact and efficiency? The proposed reference framework struck us as being essentially based on a technocratic and instrumental approach, overlooking what should be at the centre of the mechanism, the quality of our programmes.

• The fact that analysis and knowledge of the context, responding to needs and communication with local people are mentioned so little, and mostly in level 3, strikes us as a real problem. What type of organisation will have an advantage in relation to the indicators of level 1 (mostly centred on respecting technical norms)? What consequences will this have in terms of the formatting of the quality of humanitarian action? Is there not a risk of increasing the imbalance which exists between national and local NGOs and international NGOs? We feel that it is important to place the elements mentioned above (contextual analysis, responding to needs, communicating with the population and applying humanitarian principles) in level 1 and to give them greater importance in the reference framework.

• The notions of learning and evaluation are sadly lacking, whereas they are fundamental for humanitarian NGOs to improve the quality of their actions. They can be found here and there
in the criteria, but these notions should be given a more central and explicit role in the reference framework.

- The ability to work in partnership with other organisations should also be considered a central concept of quality – and should not be limited to a specific certification level and not purely in terms of implementing partners, as is the case for the time being.

**Detailed remarks on criteria and indicators:**

**Criterion 1: Mission, Legal Foundation and Commitment to Humanitarian Principles - MAJOR CONCERN ABOUT THIS CRITERION**

- When ‘non-profit’ is used rather than ‘non-governmental’, are we only talking about NGOs or are we opening the door to other actors (e.g. civil protection...)? What about other humanitarian actors (UN, Red Cross, etc.)? (see § about the area of application mentioned above)

- The indicator which refers to a “legally constituted organisation” could pose a problem for national or local NGOs which operate in particularly difficult political contexts, notably with repressive governments. For NGOs from the North, however, this indicator seems too basic.

- The choice of only the principles of impartiality and humanity pose a genuine question and is not in keeping with numerous texts which are recognised in the sector (the Code of Conduct, the Humanitarian Consensus, the Humanitarian Charter, etc.). There is a risk that this selection will weaken the other principles (independence and neutrality) by introducing the idea that there is a hierarchy among humanitarian principles, or that there are different levels of priority. To remain inclusive, a system of duly justified exceptions could be established for certain organisations in certain circumstances.

- A reference to the organisation’s mandate is missing.

- How will the system work for NGOs with different mandates among which the certification would only apply to their humanitarian activities? How can such organisations communicate to local people, for example, that they are certified for certain activities and not for others? It can be very difficult in certain cases to clearly establish the limits between humanitarian and development action.
Criterion 2: Governance, management and personnel

- This criterion refers almost exclusively to human resources. Is this a bias related to the way the reference framework was developed? Issues of governance and organizational strategy are lacking and should be reinforced. As partnership is another key concept which is not very visible in the reference framework and which is fundamentally linked to questions of organizational strategy, it is suggested that an additional criterion could be created: “Strategy and partnerships” (as is the case in other reference frameworks like EFQM for example).

- The development of a human resource strategy is placed at level 0 while there is no mention of a general strategy for organisations. This highlights the general bias of this reference framework which gives priority to conformity to norms rather than to the quality, relevance and coherence of actions in the field.

Criterion 3: Technical Competency

- This criterion refers a great deal to technical competencies, minimum requirements and good practices: as mentioned in the general remarks, we need to know what we are talking about and what we are referring to (see suggestion about creating an additional column for “Resources/References”).

- There is a certain hierarchy in this criterion which should be reversed: the capacity to analyse a context and conduct relevant actions which are adapted to needs strikes us as being more important than conforming to technical norms. See previous comment.

- This criterion does not strike us as being relevant on its own. It could be “redistributed” to other criteria (“Governance, Management and Staff” and “Performance and Results”).

Criterion 4: Financial Management

- The meaning of “adequate” should be clarified in relation to objectives of transparency, etc.

- A reference to efficiency should be added.

- Level 3 (Role Model) strikes us as very basic, without any reference to internal anti-fraud or anti-corruption policies, for example (whereas these exist in many NGOs).

Criterion 5: Performance and Results - MAJOR CONCERN ABOUT THIS CRITERION

- We feel that it would be more appropriate for criterion 5 to be entitled “Results and Impacts”.

- Responding to needs is the basis of humanitarian action according to all the NGOs taking part in this workshop. It is therefore shocking that this criterion should be positioned on level 3 – once again, this reflects the inverted paradigm used in this model (conforming to norms rather than assisting communities) which we ask should be changed as a priority. Responding to needs should be included in one of the first levels, not in level 3 as it is currently!
• At the basic level, organisations are expected to “demonstrate that (they) work towards achieving the core certification criteria”. This circular and inversed logic, centred on criteria before mentioning response to needs, strikes us as dangerous. We feel that it is fundamental to explicitly mention “response to needs” at this level, rather than “response to certification criteria”. For the moment, the current logic appears to be more “do things right” rather than “do the right thing”. This raises the problem of the absence of a definition of quality in the introduction to the reference framework: is the priority being given to the relevance of actions or adherence to technical standards?

• Contextual analysis is sadly lacking in this criterion. The principle of “Do No Harm” should also be mentioned from level 0 in terms of a commitment to define mechanisms to monitor the impact of actions (including negative impacts).

• Needs analysis is only mentioned in one indicator and only “to guarantee impartiality”, whereas it is a fundamental element of the quality and impact of humanitarian action.

 Criterion 6: Responsibility towards affected populations and other actors

• Responsibility is a central principle which we feel is the basis of all efforts to improve the quality of humanitarian action and therefore all reference frameworks. We suggest that this criterion should be renamed, “Coordination/Involvement of Stakeholders” – with a central place given to the affected population.

• The objective of “Do No Harm” should be in level 0 and not in the advance level! In addition, the only mention of respecting local people’s dignity is here in level 2. It would be more logical to place these two fundamental principles (Do No Harm and respect for dignity) in level 1 (commitment) with humanitarian principles as they should be the foundation of everything humanitarian actors do.

• The last indicator includes several elements which we feel belong in different levels: some in levels 0 and 1 (communicating with populations), others in level 2 (complaints mechanisms) and others in level 3 (transparency of budgets). Security deserves to be indicated from level 1, not only in level 3.
Conclusion:

- This one-day workshop allowed important shortcomings to be identified, with regard to the implementation process, fundamental issues and the reference framework which will be the basis of certification.

- The SCHR project currently seems to be basing certification on the ability to conform to technical norms and standards. But for fifteen years now the profession has become aware of the limits of such an approach due to the diversity of contexts. As such, the proposed method neglects an important element: whether or not an organisation, large or small, local or international, is engaged in a process of continuous improvement.

- If the risks linked to the certification project itself are not managed properly, it could have major negative impacts on the sector and notably on the smaller organisations in the North and the South.

- The representatives of the NGOs present at this workshop feel that it is essential to slow down the process so that genuine consultation can take place, considering the importance of the expected results and the consequences for the humanitarian sector.

- Our continued involvement in the next stages of the project is conditional on calendar deadlines being put back by 5 or 6 months.

- Independently of SCHR process, the participants are prepared to continue the discussions that have begun today about issues of quality and accountability and call for greater dialogue within the humanitarian sector.