The “People First” label is an approach which is close to that of certification, but is markedly different in terms of objectives, methods and means, and is based on a labelling system.

**Certification** aims to establish whether an organisation, a product or a service meets standards in terms of operations, activities and results.

A **label** is a distinctive badge awarded by a professional organisation to identify and guarantee the level of quality of a product or service.

The label "People First", created by and for humanitarian NGOs, is also managed by them. Its main objective is to **encourage humanitarian organizations to continually improve** in a sustainable way over the years. The aim will be for organizations to **be able to prove that they are improving** in different important areas of activity, from one evaluation to the next. The labelling approach that is presented here has a **strong pedagogical aspect** rather than a desire to select the best organizations, and is based on **goodwill and encouragement to make progress**, rather than sanctions.

In concrete terms, the labelling system has two complementary objectives. It both evaluates whether the management of the organisation includes a policy of continually improving quality, and the level of quality achieved based on criteria which are considered to be essential for the beneficiaries of aid. Thus beneficiaries are at the heart of the labelling process.

### The principles of the “People First” label

1/ **The “People First” label is a collective approach by the sector which encourages dialogue, learning and the exchange of experiences.**

*The labelling process consists of an evaluation which is designed, steered and run by peers, that is to say, humanitarian professionals.*

These peers, or Visiting Peer Professionals (VPP), are experienced humanitarians who work in different NGOs and in diverse sectors (management, operations, logistics, etc.). They are responsible for ensuring that the whole process is carried out properly: an evaluation at the HQ level, the analysis of field evaluations carried out by other professional evaluators and the production of the labelling report which is sent to the Label Committee and the management of the NGO. A coordinator is nominated in each VPP team to organise the visit and the distribution of roles within the team.

**The labelling process encourages learning**

Learning takes place through the dialogue between peers after the visit to the HQ and the analysis of field evaluation reports. The peers also learn as they return to their NGOs with ideas of good practices. The length

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1 Provisional title
of the process – about six months for self-evaluation, then around twelve months for the external evaluation – makes it possible to make improvements during the process itself. The conclusions made by the jury of the Label Committee that awards the label provide concrete ideas for action and learning.

2/ The “People First” label aims for long-term progress based on the continual improvement of quality

Being awarded the label gives organisations an advantage in terms of internal management (internal communication, emulation, recognition and gratification of staff, encouragement and coherence between different departments, etc.), and in terms of their external image, being validated publicly with regard to the media, the general public and donors.

Once organisations have been awarded the label, they will not want to lose this distinctive sign of quality. They will have to engage in the Visit & Evaluation process at regular intervals in order to apply for the label to be renewed. The weaknesses and opportunities for improvement which were established in the preceding cycle need to have been taken into account, either fully or in part. At each new Visit & Evaluation, significant progress will need to have been made in relation to the preceding visit (the ratchet effect of the “Deming wheel”): this is the very principle of a quality approach based on continuous quality improvement, a quality management principle which is well known in the business world. If no progress is observed, of course the label is not awarded.

The main advantage of the “People First” labelling approach for organisations is that it brings continuous support and motivation: once they have become involved in this process, organisations are invited to conduct this external evaluation every 2 to 4 years. They are therefore regularly encouraged to make progress, no matter what the difficulties of the context.

The “People First” label does not make any distinction between organisations who have been awarded the label:

At the end of the labelling process, an organisation is either awarded, or not awarded, the label, with specific appraisals and recommendations made by a jury of the Label Committee. The only information published by the Label Committee concerns whether or not the label has been awarded. No other information (in terms of level, quality, duration, etc.) will be available externally, other than what the organisation itself wants to share. On the other hand, it is up to the organisation to make the best use of the jury’s conclusions internally.

This confidentiality policy means that we do not create pointless competition between organisations that have the label, and we do not introduce any potentially damaging differentiation vis-à-vis the general public and donors.

The philosophy of the “People First” label is to encourage all organisations to make progress, whether big or small, new or old, with a big or a small budget, well-known or little known, from the South or from the North. It is, therefore, in no way aimed at selecting and distinguishing the “happy few” biggest and best organizations.

3/ The “People First” label uses existing, recognised and harmonised methods

A robust and unified evaluation method

All the evaluations, both internal and external, are based on a single reference framework of criteria and indicators which covers the main activities, methods and results of an NGO, with a particular focus on the
participation of beneficiaries. This reference framework would be based on the Core Humanitarian Standard (provided the final version of the CHS is a satisfactory reference framework) and the Quality COMPAS². The process must make limited demands in terms of the time and resources that it requires. Otherwise, only very big organisations would be able to adopt the approach, and even they would eventually stop taking part.

The “People First” label is based on and makes use of more than 20 years of programme evaluation by including in the labelling process the field evaluations which are part of the normal running of an organisation.

4/ The “People First” label respects the basic principles of independence, impartiality, integrity and transparency

Validation measures are taken to avoid placing peers in a situation where there is a conflict of interests

Before being proposed for a visit to a given NGO, a check will be carried out to determine if there is any conflict of interest for the selected peers (any current or recent links with the NGO, for example). The proposed VPP team will be submitted to the NGO for their approval.

The “People First” label is awarded by a professional and independent jury of the Label Committee

The Label Committee is made up of about twenty members that include a balanced number of experienced and retired representatives of NGOs, teachers and researchers, professional evaluators, representatives of donors and foreign aid ministries, business leaders, and other qualified figures. Each jury of the committee will bring together five of the twenty members. The role of this jury of five people is to come to conclusions and make reasoned and objective recommendations about the label request dossiers submitted by the peers. The Label Committee is obviously totally independent of humanitarian sector organizations and institutions. Its constitution avoids conflicts of interest.

5/ The “People First” label is inexpensive and accessible to all NGOs who want to become involved in the process

The peers are professionals who are assigned this task by their employer NGO and paid by this NGO during the time spent on the visit. For the NGO applying for the label, there is no cost for the external human resources necessary for the evaluation.

Nor is there any expense envisaged for the field evaluations, as the labelling process will use the evaluations already planned as part of the normal functioning of the NGO, which will already have been funded (by the NGO itself or by a donor).

The NGO going through the labelling process will have to pay for two things, at a relatively low cost in comparison to the price of the consultants usually mobilised for certification: payment of the peers' logistical fees (transport, accommodation and meals and per diem, etc.), and a sliding-scale fee, calculated on the basis of the NGO's budget, which will go towards the running of the label structure.

The members of the Label Committee will provide their services on a voluntary basis, for a contract of a few years. The organisations that employ the Visiting Peer Professionals will benefit in terms of the feedback that they will bring to their home organisations.

² See appendix 1 for the 9 criteria inspired by CHS and Quality COMPAS
The “People First” label process

- **Self-evaluation**

NGOs who want to take part in the process, on a voluntary basis, first have to carry out a self-evaluation (internal evaluation) on the basis of the reference framework described in a self-evaluation handbook.

- **Peer visit**

The peer visit consists of an evaluation of all the main functions at the HQ level: management of human resources, financial management, administration, management of projects and programmes, management of evaluations and learning, logistics, communication and marketing, fund raising, functioning of the administrative board and the general assembly.... The evaluation will be based on the analysis of documents (such as audit reports and evaluations), observation and interviews. This evaluation of the HQ is conducted over a number of days, involving several visits, which can vary in number depending on the size of the NGO.

- **Field evaluations**

The process also includes the evaluation of different projects and programmes in the field carried out by the NGO. The peers analyse the evaluation documents written by evaluators recruited as part of the organisation’s usual procedures. Field evaluations that are part of the labelling process must use the “People First” label’s reference framework. The choice of field contexts for this evaluation should be representative of the NGO’s different activities and the different situations where it is present, including difficult operational contexts. The choice of field visits is discussed with the management of the NGO.

- **Final report**

The Visiting Peer Professionals write a final report including:

- The report of the evaluation carried out at the HQ, and the evaluations carried out in the different field contexts.

- The report describing how the whole process was carried out, and particularly any improvement that has been observed during the process.

The final report is submitted to a jury of the Label Committee for deliberation. The head of the NGO can make remarks to the jury of the Label Committee about the evaluation reports.

- **Deliberation**

The “People First” label is attributed by a professional and independent jury of the Label Committee. Its deliberations are based on:

- The final report.

- Any remarks about the evaluation reports sent by the head of the NGO.

- Possibly an interview with the Visiting Peer Professionals (or a representative), if there is a need for complementary information.

The conclusions of the jury include recommended activities to be implemented to resolve any weak points that have been identified.
Awarding of the label

The label is awarded for a variable length of time, depending on the conclusions of the jury:

- Extended period (3 or 4 years?) if the conclusions are very positive.
- A shorter period (1 or 2 years?) if the conclusions are positive but with important room for improvement.
- If serious problems are identified, these will need to be corrected very quickly before a new visit to be conducted shortly afterwards (six months later). This visit will judge whether changes have been made, and the jury of the Label Committee will decide whether or not to award the label.
- After the period decided by the Label Committee, NGOs who want to maintain their label will then enter a new labelling cycle.

A visit may be terminated if serious problems are identified during a visit (serious faults in terms of integrity, ethics, or professionalism, etc.) and following discussions with the NGO management. In this case, no label would be awarded, of course.

The mechanisms

What institution(s) could host and run the “People First” label?

It would be premature to describe these institutions with any precision. Particularly as several different levels are possible depending on how much demand there is for labelling and how far it spreads geographically: from a single national office, to regional offices and an international office.

However, it is still possible to describe some of the tasks which would be necessary for the proper functioning of a labelling system:

- Writing the handbooks for self-evaluation and external evaluation; monitoring the development of the labelling process, and helping it to evolve both in terms of content and form; evaluating the impact of labelling on NGOs, and particularly any positive and negative changes which can be observed in the functioning and results of NGOs, particularly in relation to the quality of services that they deliver. These three functions should be taken up by a "People First" Label Evaluation and Revision Commission made up of qualified and voluntary figures who meet once or twice a year.
- Recruiting and training (or providing training for) experienced NGO volunteers in the labelling system. The Visiting Peer Professionals should represent different sectors in the organisation, and should be keen to take part in external, “peer-review” Visit & Evaluation once or twice a year, (based on calls for tender), under a contract of a few years (three years).
- Providing NGOs who have made a request with a team of Visiting Peer Professionals that is the right size, has the appropriate expertise, and does not have any conflicts of interest.
- Recruiting and training the members of the Label Committee.
- Awarding the “People First” label via an ad hoc jury of the Label Committee.
- Making the awarding of the label public (internet site, media, communication with donors...).
- Communicating and informing NGOs and the public about the label.
- Informing and communicating with the NGOs involved in the labelling system, providing them with the self-evaluation handbook, providing them with an appropriate team of Visiting Peer Professionals, etc.
- Raising funds for the functioning of the Label Committee.

Target groups

For the **general public**, a quality label can be a distinctive badge which sets an NGO apart from other NGOs, providing an image of professionalism, and a guarantee that their donations will be used properly. However, the fact that donations by individuals to NGOs often have emotional rather than rational grounds means that a label will probably not be very important for those making donations.

For **businesses that donate**, a label can provide a guarantee of professionalism and confidence, which is crucial for donations, both in terms of internal and external communication.

For **the media**, the label is a sign of an organisation’s commitment to quality action, and they will probably play a role in encouraging and promoting this approach.

For **aid beneficiaries**, the meaning of a quality label will continue to be obscure, except perhaps for host nations. But the hope is that a labelling system will make an active contribution to increasing the quality of the services delivered.

For **national and international donors** – that already have their own framework and their own criteria for evaluating the capacity and professionalism of the NGOs they provide with funding – it is not very likely that a label that has been developed independently of them to evaluate their partners will suit them, and they will probably continue to carry out their own audits. However, it would be a good idea to present the label’s reference framework and the labelling process to a few donors before they are finalized, so that they can give their opinion and advice. It is to be hoped that, with time, as the label becomes more known and inspires confidence, donors would lighten their assessment procedures for NGOs with the label. It is also to be hoped that donors will take part in funding the labelling system.

Finally, for **NGOs**, that in recent years have been subjected to more and more demands, reports, audits, evidence to be provided and incentives to increase their quality, the labelling process might be just another administrative task, an extra protocol, or one more thing forcing them to spend more time behind their computers and in their offices rather than being present in the field. Broad communication and information will be needed to reach NGOs. This should underline the philosophy of the "People First" label, its advantages, and also its limits and constraints. Labelling which is voluntary combined with good communication about its methods and objectives, should encourage emulation amongst NGOs and a snowball effect which will help spread the approach.
Conclusion

The setting up of a labelling system at the national level, or on a bigger scale, will not correct all the aid system’s flaws and problems, and will not prevent the actions of non-professional organizations. Similarly, the certification of businesses has never prevented the production of mediocre goods and services, including amongst certified businesses.

History and experience show that in NGOs, as is the case in almost all businesses, evaluations, experience sharing and knowledge management are incapable, on their own, of ensuring that there is continuous progress in what they do. Contexts, the aid system and trends change and there is no permanent and sustainable incentive to constantly encourage organizations to achieve the objective of continual improvement of the service they provide to aid beneficiaries.

We feel that the “People First” label could contribute to:

- Achieving this objective;
- Motivating and supporting humanitarian organisations who want to increase the individual and collective meaning of their activities;
- Strengthening their capacity to be accountable:
  . Towards aid beneficiaries: delivering the necessary and expected service in response to needs, in a given context.
  . Towards private and public donors: proper use of money raised and showing that the confidence shown in them is justified.
  . Towards society: respect for ethical values.
- Calming or reducing the fears of all those who are concerned about the form and the effects of a traditional certification system;
- Eventually attracting development NGOs, with a reference framework adapted to their specific needs;
- Attracting all humanitarian organizations (International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, United Nations agencies, donors, etc.) to become involved in this quality approach. This is all the more desirable as coordination of all the organisations within a particular context is expected: this will be made easier and more effective as the different organisations will all share the same objectives in terms of quality, via a single quality reference framework, and a single labelling system.
Appendix: The nine criteria based on the CHS and the Quality COMPAS

Values and principles

People are at the heart of humanitarian action, which is guided by principles of humanity, impartiality and independence.

1. Provide appropriate humanitarian assistance
Communities and people affected by crisis have access to humanitarian assistance which is adapted to the context, their needs and their capacities.

2. Ensure aid effectiveness
Communities and people affected by crisis receive the planned assistance in a timely manner.

3. Help communities to recover
Communities and people affected by crisis are provided with support so that they become more resilient.

4. Avoid negative effects of assistance
Communities and people affected by crisis are protected from the risks related to the assistance programme...

5. Promote communication and participation
Communities and people affected by crisis are able to participate in all decisions that affect them. They have access to a safe, accessible and responsive complaints mechanism.

6. Ensure that assistance is coordinated and complementary
Communities and people affected by crisis receive coordinated, complementary assistance that meets their needs.

7. Encourage continuous improvement
The organisation will examine and adjust its programmes to improve outcomes for communities and people affected by crisis.

8. Support staff and reinforce their skills and competencies
Staff of organisations are treated in a fair, equitable and efficient manner and are provided with support in terms of professional development.

9. Manage resources responsibly
The organisation uses resources efficiently and effectively for their intended purpose.