Improving the Accessibility of CHS Verification Scheme for National Actors
CHS Alliance Management Response Plan to the Verification Review
May 2023

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) is a set of commitments organisations have made to people affected by crises. It is recognised by a wide variety of organisations – including national and international non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, governments and donors – and is seen as a central reference in global humanitarian policy and guidance documents.

To support organisations meet these commitments and put people's rights and dignity at the centre of their work, CHS Alliance manages the CHS Verification Scheme which currently offers three options: Self-Assessment, Independent Verification and Certification. To date, more than 200 organisations have engaged with the scheme to measure how they are meeting the Commitments. However, to achieve the improvements needed in the sector, this needs to be taken to scale, meaning a greater number and diversity of organisations verifying their efforts, especially those at the frontline of delivery. This requires ensuring the scheme is accessible to the many national and local organisations working in and for their communities.

To chart the way forward for this scale up, CHS Alliance commissioned an external review in 2022. The Terms of Reference (TOR) called for an analysis of what it will take for the CHS Verification Scheme to meet its ambition of *as many organisations as possible measuring how they are meeting the commitments to people in crisis and making the needed improvements.* It focused on what is required from the perspective of national actors, specifically to:

1. Capture the various perspectives of national actors regarding CHS verification;
2. Report on the changes that other actors need to create to enable greater take up of measuring and improving the ability to meet the commitments; and
3. Draw lessons from the current Verification Scheme which has been in use for six years.

The review's process and timeline:

CHS Alliance Board approve the TOR (Annex 1)	June 2022
TOR advertised	July 2022
Contracted three-person team – contracted through HERE Geneva	September 2022
Inception Report approved	September 2022
Discussion with consultants and the CHS Alliance General Assembly	September 2022
Draft Report shared with Secretariat plus chairs of VAP and Board and Board members on the VAP. Feedback provided.	Dec 2022 and Jan 2022
Final Report	March 2023
Report discussed with VAP, Board and HQAI to inform Management Response	March / April 2023
Shared Report with CHS Alliance members	May 2023

Feedback on the report is based on

1) *Feedback on the three areas of the report:*
   - *awareness and understanding of the CHS,*
   - *increasing the drive for verification,*
   - *developing and adapting the Scheme to go to scale.*
2) *Factual clarifications*
3) *Specific responses to the recommendations are provided in the section below.*

Overall, the report's recommendations align with CHS Alliance's strategic direction, reinforcing the ambition for greater awareness raising for the CHS and greater impact at the country level. These build on areas the Alliance is already undertaking to scale up. The report also outlines areas and recommendations where further discussion and research are needed regarding the future direction for CHS verification.

1) Response to the findings in the report

1.1 Awareness and understanding of the CHS

Increased outreach - CHS Alliance has been making concerted efforts to increase outreach to national NGOs over recent years with positive results in terms of a marked increase of national organisations joining the Alliance or embarking on self-assessment[1]. However, the report findings affirm that far more is needed to galvanise these efforts. In 2023, the Alliance is investing in stepping up these efforts by conducting more outreach at country and regional level through the CHS revision process, developing its membership offer to provide greater support to meet the CHS Commitments, as well as developing an important new process which would build on the expertise of the network and promote collective accountability – a Collective Peer Assessment.

Size of the CHS - The review highlights that the size of the CHS is a barrier for some organisations to embark on CHS verification. The CHS currently has 62 indicators which are used as the basis for all the verification options. These indicators capture what organisations need to do to be able to meet the Commitments. All verification processes consider all these indicators to maintain the same standardized approach of what is being assessed. The feedback that 62 indicators is seen as too many, is a critical consideration in the ongoing CHS Revision process. It is a difficult balance to reduce the number of indicators, whilst maintaining a core standard that is robust and comprehensive enough to improve quality and accountability for people in crisis.

1.2 **Increasing the drive for CHS verification**

Resources needed for verification –The review acknowledges concerns regarding the resources needed for an organisation to undertake a verification process, either time or cost or both. It acknowledges that there are differences depending on the type of verification, which corresponds to the different ways organisations choose to verify.

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[1] In 2022, 80% of new Alliance members were national NGOs and 50% of those organization's conducting Self-Assessment. Read more in the 2022 Annual Report https://express.adobe.com/page/q8dj9p5Pjqqjv/

Conscious of these concerns, CHS Alliance has been making efforts in recent years to provide more accessible self-assessment online tools. Since investing in this area, there has been notable take up of self-assessment and the Alliance will be promoting these tools more with a new online platform.

The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI) which conducts Independent Verification and Certification are also exploring ways to lower the costs and making audits more widely accessible, through, among others, adaptions to the audit process and methodologies and maintaining resources to cover audit costs through its facilitation fund, without losing the robustness of the process and the requirements of ISO accreditation.

CHS Alliance, supported by its Verification Advisory Panel, will continue to explore options for more independent options for verification, along with other options including the Collective Peer Assessment.

Benefits gained from verification - The review acknowledges the gains made for organisations in conducting a verification process. This resonates with the overarching reports from CHSA members that all three verification options have a positive impact on organisational learning and improvement, access to funding and improved external recognition. However, the report shows that more is needed to capture this impact. Alliance is conscious of finding the means to promote these positive stories and will give more consideration to promote this.

The review highlights the confusion over differences between Independent Verification and Certification. CHS Alliance will be following up on this issue with the Verification Advisory Panel and HQAI to articulate the differences and the value of the two approaches in a clear and consistent manner and consider how to manage the future options regarding these processes.

1.3 Developing/adapting the Scheme to take to scale

Donor recognition - the discussion around how donors recognise and promote CHS is important, acknowledging the power that donors have to push for change. There is also a strong awareness of the potential to align due diligence processes with the CHS to reduce duplication, hence reduce the bureaucracy around these heavy processes in line with the localisation agenda. Fundamentally though, as the report highlights, the drive to engage donors has to be in support of organisational improvement, learning and accountability and not to conflate the CHS with additional donor due diligence.

The Alliance will focus on scaling up support on organisational learning, while continuing to work with HQAI on the potential opportunity with donors to align with the CHS.

Exploring other forms of assessment – The Alliance welcomes the consideration of how to build on self-assessment and the need to explore modalities around this. Self-assessment has seen a rapid take up in recent years and with a new online "CHS Commitment Tracker" platform about to be launched, it is a good time to develop this work.

However, to further progress, a process of "Collective Peer Assessment" will be developed. This would focus on the country level and include peers from the Alliance network to provide an understanding and analysis of the contextual challenges and to support each other in considering how improvements can be made. This will be discussed with members in the coming months with a pilot in 2024.

2. Clarifications on the report

1. Para 6 - The numbers of organisations verifying is constantly increasing, so the numbers have increased since the report. The latest numbers can be found here. In May 2023 the number of organisations which have completed the process was 141.
2. Para 61 – the indicators in the CHS do not change to maintain the same reference point, the audit or assessment methodology might to adapt to context.
3. Para 71 – ECHO has not agreed on the creation of HQAI's proposed CHS+. It did accept an ECHO FPA ex ante report - submitted by HQAI - that was based on a CHS certification audit along with a bridging process to cover all ECHO FPA ex ante requirements. This idea of the CHS+ notion is still being considered by donors, and more work and discussion on the potential and messaging on this is needed with HQAI and CHS Alliance.
4. Para 71 - While FCDO has been a key advocate for the CHS, it does not yet expect their partners to either undertake Independent Verification or Certification but asks that proposals for funding need to be consistent with the CHS. For DANIDA it is a requirement for its partners working in fragile contexts to be either independently verified or certified against the CHS to access funding.
5. Para 73 – Benchmarking is an option outside of the Scheme where HQAI provides as a one-off external audit for organisations. It was not designed specifically for a large UN agency. The expectation is for UN agencies to also undertake CHS verification process.
6. Para 76 – should be ISO accreditation rather than certification.

3. Response to Specific Recommendations

The CHS Alliance welcomes the series of recommendations that can chart a course for the future and spark greater uptake of CHS verification, driven by an organisation's intrinsic desire to learn, improve and grow. Specific responses to each recommendation are provided, along with acknowledgements of what action the Alliance is taking or plans to take.

Awareness and understanding	
Recommendation 1: Carry out outreach and awareness-raising campaigns with country-level outreach, including making use of peer outreach, in-country networks and NGO coordination bodies,	**ACCEPTED -** Since 2021 there has been a concerted effort by the Alliance to connect closer with national actors. 16 national workshops have been held to date involving more than 800 people. Since this concerted outreach, we have seen an increase in organisations applying to Alliance membership with 50% of new members in 2022 being

OCHA, cluster lead agencies and the clusters. **Sub-recommendation 1.1** Reach out to international and national coordination mechanisms including localisation and AAP working groups to encourage membership and use of CHS measurement tools. **Sub-recommendation 1.2** Engage "country-level champions" among CHS Alliance members, charged with peer outreach and support at local and country levels. 1. **Sub-recommendation 1.3** Create or integrate information "hubs" at country level, providing "country-targeted" outreach materials and eventual rosters of peer organisations/mentors/consultants to support uptake.	national NGOs, and the numbers engaged in the CHS Self-Assessment process rapidly increasing. This gives a strong indication of interest resulting from dedicated outreach**.** However, for this to be scaled up, a step change is needed in outreach at national level. NEXT STEPS - Greater country and regional outreach is already underway or planned in 2023, including a number of important workshops around the CHS revision process. Recognising the recommendation to engage with the coordination efforts, the Alliance is scaling up its connection with the ICVA regional hubs and investing more with OCHA /HCT /IASC on country level AAP efforts. **However, for this to be sustained and supported,** CHS Alliance will explore with its members the development of regional support mechanisms, building on the recommendation of the need for CHS Alliance champions. This will also be further developed with the concept of Collective Peer Assessments (Annex 1 / link to paper)
Recommendation 2: In communication materials, emphasise the universal nature of the standards, the diversity of verification options, the importance of measurement as part of a learning journey, and the adaptability of the indicators and standards to different sizes and types of organisations.	PARTIALLY ACCEPTED **-** The Alliance is already aligning its efforts in this recommendation, sharing regular stories of how organisations have made improvements through articles, CHS Exchanges and the Humanitarian Accountability Reports. However, more efforts are needed to sharpen the messaging and ensure the message is heard by organisations, backed up by evidence such as the ongoing Impact Study in collaboration with HQAI. The reason why it is "partially accepted" is it is important to stress that the CHS itself with its indicators cannot be adapted, but the verification process takes into account and adapts to the organisations' contexts. Next Steps - With more information on the CHS Commitment Tracker, the new online platform due for launch in coming months, will give us more evidence from the organisations verifying to support the need to increase these communication efforts and targeted messaging.

Recommendation 3: Consider creating further communication materials (fact sheets, Q&A) on CHS Alliance membership, the forms of membership, the advantages. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that membership is not necessary to show engagement and commitment to the CHS nor a necessary pre-cursor to undertaking a Self-Assessment exercise. **Sub-Recommendation 3.1**: The criteria for membership and/or the support offered to non-members should be reviewed considering "scaling" and supporting engagement among local and national NGOs. Among the considerations to be reviewed is to extent to which criteria such as audited annual accounts or external complaints mechanisms should remain as pre-conditions for facilitated Self-Assessment support.	**ACCEPTED** – The current membership material is being redeveloped with the updated membership services approach of the Alliance to take into consideration these recommendations to show the value of membership, and recognising the many ways organisations can show their commitment to the CHS. The Alliance, with its Membership and Nominations Committee, pays close attention to its requirements for membership. For a network that is based on accountability, it is important that there is a certain level of diligence to ensure members are well aligned with the CHS when they join, yet recognising they will also go through a learning journey with the verification process which is an important aspect of the Alliance membership. **Next steps** • Communication material development is ongoing and new membership promotion being prepared in 2023. Funding will be sought to have these available in different languages. • The CHS Alliance's Membership and Nominations Committee will consider the recommendation around its membership requirements in 2023
Increasing the drive to verify and return on investment	
Recommendation 4: Scale the CHS Alliance's capacity-strengthening support offered to members and/or non-members. **Sub-recommendation 4.1** Consider the development of a standby capacity of CHS advisors (a 'CHS-CAP') to be deployed, especially within humanitarian coordination mechanisms and NGO coordination bodies/networks. **Sub-recommendation 4.2** Develop CHS engagement tool kits and ensure active outreach among capacity-strengthening providers, including	**ACCEPTED** – the Alliance is developing its current options to scale up support the members. A number of initiatives are already underway, such as CHS introductory workshops for members, development of key guidance material, and communities of practice. The engagement tool kit is a good suggestion and will be considered alongside the work of providing more assistance for organisations to be able to meet the CHS Commitments. **Next steps -** In 2023 we will discuss with the membership the plans to build greater membership support focussing on engagement with peers. A series of regional meetings will discuss proposed plans on regional support networks and collective peer assessments to address recommendations

within networks of NGOs (national or international), enabling these providers to both advocate for and support local and national NGOs in strengthening systems, policies, and practices as per CHS commitments, and successfully interpret the indicators for their realities. 2. **Sub-recommendation 4.3** Further develop peer learning, mentorship, and support systems among and between CHS Alliance Members.	4.1 and 4.3**.** Alongside this a new framework for capacity support is being developed.
Recommendation 5: The ongoing revision process should consider streamlining the indicators as used in the independent audit processes.	**ACCEPTED** The CHS revision is focussed on the standard and its corresponding indicators. The indicators are the basis for the current Verification Framework which provides the same framework for all the verification options. The Alliance will need to adapt the Verification Framework to the new standard, to allow for a seamless transition for the organisations in this process. **Next steps -** The revised CHS will be ready at the end of 2023 for roll out in 2024 and the updated Verification Framework updated, which will guide all the verification options.
Recommendation 6: Lowering the costs of both Independent Verification and Certification should remain a primary consideration.	**PARTIALLY ACCEPTED** **–** We will continue to consider this critical issue with HQAI, ensuring the discussion focusses on lowering costs as well as accessibility of the audits and the added value of the independent audit process. Discussions on lowering costs needs to be cognisant of the right level of rigour required of the audit process and the value that CHS verification brings for those individual organisations. Accessibility of audits to a wide range of organisations needs to remain the primary consideration. The recommendation is "partially accepted" as the cost structure is determined by HAI, who is the only service provider at this time. Next steps –

	• Meetings with HQAI and CHSA are planned to explore further what the two respective organisations can do to continue to lower costs.
	• CHS Alliance will continue to explore with the Verification Advisory Panel the options of opening independent verification and / or certification to more service providers.
Developing/adapting the Scheme to scale	
Recommendation 7: Review the Verification Scheme based on an articulated Theory of Change and develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to measure success, capture lessons learned, and take adaptive measures. **Sub-recommendation 7.1** Define the Theory of Change as per a clarified specific objective for scaled verification. For example, specify whether the objective is to increase the numbers and diversity of humanitarian actors verifying against the CHS in general, or target fewer institutions with larger reach, or engage smaller organisations who work more closely with fragile communities, such as community-based organisations. 3. **Sub-recommendation 7.2** Within the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, further specify and publicise indicators of success (for example: the number of organisations applying at least one of the verification options? The number of CHS Alliance Members? The number of organisations going for Independent Verification and/or Certification? Strengthened	**ACCEPTED –** the current CHS Alliance strategy has a strategic indicator - "CHS Verification data shows more organisations have made improvements against the CHS" – with accompanying indicators focussing on two target audiences. - more national NGOs verifying against the standard, and - increased engagement with the UN, RC Movement and governments and donors. Plans are developed around these and reported on. However, more clarity can be brought to the results with a clearer M&E framework and clearer communication on the results to show progress. Work is underway with HQAI on an impact study of the verification scheme which will be an important contribution to measuring success of the process. **Next Steps -** The plans for greater engagement with national NGOs will be further developed with scaled up outreach at country level, targeting an increase in both membership and organizations applying different verification models. Outreach will be scaled up through ongoing CHS revision events at regional and country level, to be complemented by target country contexts, such as those with IASC Scale Up and IASC AAP Results Tracker pilots, and ongoing regular outreach based on membership collaboration. At global and system levels, the engagement with the UN is being accelerated this year, specifically through the increased momentum on AAP with OCHA leadership and

accountability to affected people? Organisational change	with the positioning of the CHS Alliance as one of the IASC AAP Co Chairs. The engagement with the RC Movement and donors is also being increased during 2023 with discussions to connect more with the RC Movement.
Recommendation 8: The potential cost and resource implications of meeting scaled demand of Independent Verification or Certification based on donor recognition for local and national NGOs should be further assessed.	**ACCEPTED –** this is an important area that needs careful consideration, including the potential for donor recognition for Independent Verification and Certification to potentially ease the burden of multiple donor due diligence processes. Next Steps - The Alliance will continue to work with its members and HQAI on this area. Meetings with HQAI and CHSA will be planned for mid 2023 to explore what the two respective organisations contribution should be in this area.
Recommendation 9: In further iterations of the Verification Scheme consider whether both Independent Verification and Certification should be maintained.	**ACCEPTED** – This is accepted as it is an area that needs further consideration, (as opposed to what the result of that consideration should be). This will take careful consideration with the organisations who have undertaken these processes, HQAI, as well as donors who currently require these options. Next Steps - Meetings with HQAI and CHSA to be planned in mid 2023 to explore this further and identify the follow up process
Recommendation 10: Consider piloting verification of the CHS in UN or NGO-led pooled fund mechanisms through integration in these funds' due diligence criteria and procedures.	**PARTIALLY ACCEPTED -** this is a valid recommendation and further work will be needed. While this is a priority area, it has been "partially accepted" as a reflection of the restricted resources available to the CHS Alliance. Should resources be available, there will be consideration of initial focus on up to two funds, one of which UN-led and another non-UN led.
Recommendation 11: Consider advocating with bodies such as ALNAP and IASC Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Groups to ensure that the CHS commitments are systematically reviewed in humanitarian evaluations, especially of collective responses.	**ACCEPTED** – CHSA engages with the DEC evaluations which are framed on the CHS. It will build on this, in line with the recommendation, to see what more can be done.

| Recommendation 12: Work to broaden the perception of CHS verification beyond Independent Verification and Certification and launch an "engagement campaign" including the promotion of Self-Assessment

Sub-recommendation 11.1 Revise the Verification Scheme to emphasise the value of Self-Assessment, including it being a "sign of engagement".

Sub-recommendation 11.2 Create a communications campaign/membership drive to encourage engagement and adoption of the CHS.

Sub-recommendation 11.3 Showcase lessons learned and reported benefits from Self-Assessment exercises, including through sharing case studies and profiling members' experiences.

Sub-recommendation 11.4 Regularly publicise and highlight aggregated Self-Assessment data on the CHS Alliance website and in communication materials, highlighting engagement and encouraging further uptake. | **ACCEPTED** – The CHS Alliance Verification Scheme provides the options for organisations and CHS Alliance has always promote all options.

It also supports the self-assessment process and there has been significant take up of self-assessment in the last year as a result of outreach by the Alliance and by our members, and the development of new online tools developed. We hope to see further take up with the launch of the CHS Tracker Platform in mid 2023 and this will enable more promotion of the data and evidence from the various CHS verification exercises.

The revision process with its country case studies and regional workshops will also be an opportunity to promote wider adoption of the CHS.

And while lessons learned on self-assessment are shared, greater communication on the benefits of this can be improved. The Impact Study will be important in this regard.

Next steps – Launch of the CHS Tracker Platform in mid 2023 and Impact Study by end of year. |
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| **Recommendation 12**: Complementary to Self-Assessment, develop other forms of verification, including peer review, which accentuate peer-engagement and support, accentuate organisational learning and growth, and create a shared identity or "movement" of actors. | **ACCEPTED** – We will continue to promote and advocate for organisations to use the current verification options, based on the individual needs of the organisation as to which make the most sense.

With the need to scale up efforts to see the change needed in accountability practices, CHS Alliance has developed a proposal for Collective Peer Assessments which will address these considerations, has been developed by the Alliance. It will take the learning from the past experience of the Peer |

| | Review option understanding that this will require active engagement by the members, as well as dedicated facilitated support by the Alliance.

Next steps - This proposal will be discussed with members at a series of regional consultations, ready for piloting in 2024. |
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