

## KEY MESSAGES

OCTOBER 2022

# AUTUMN SCHOOL ON HUMANITARIAN AID (UAH)

2022

**BETWEEN STANDARDS AND CONSTRAINTS,  
HOW CAN WE GIVE BACK MEANING TO  
QUALITY?**

## CONTEXT

The key messages that are summarised in this document are based on the discussions that took place during the round tables and open forums during the **Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid** that took place on **21 and 23 September 2022** in Plaisians.

Groupe URD would like to thank all the participants at this event: Action contre la Faim, Aide Médicale Caritative France-Ukraine, Association de Jeunes Cameroun, CartONG, CHS Alliance, Coordination Sud, Croix-Rouge française, Fondation de France, Fondation Terre des hommes, Global Impact Consulting, Ground Truth Solutions, Humanité & Inclusion, Nutriset, Oxfam, Pi Ethics and Compliance, Première Urgence Internationale, Solidarités International, Sphere, and Strateis.

## INTRODUCTION

How far have aid organisations come in terms of quality and accountability since the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda in 1994, when the aid system began to reflect on the subject? Numerous initiatives emerged during the 1990s and 2000s to contribute to improving the quality of operations and increase accountability (e.g. ALNAP, HAP, the Sphere Standards, and the Quality COMPAS). Then in the 2010s, given the proliferation of international frameworks and standards, international actors felt the need to rationalise quality initiatives via the Joint Standard Initiative, which gave rise to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in 2014.

In parallel to this, donor demands increased in terms of accountability and quality, which pushed humanitarian actors to reinforce their internal mechanisms so that they respected increasingly restrictive and rigid frameworks. As a result, quality and accountability now tend to be seen as donor issues – more to do with compliance with rules and standards than measuring the impact and quality of operations for people and communities. In response to the growing importance given to transparency and compliance, actors have tended to establish increasingly complex and sophisticated procedures, and rigid and cumbersome internal frameworks to protect themselves from potential risks.

*“When we built standards, we thought they would increase our freedom, but in fact we built our own prison”, Karine Meaux, Fondation de France*

At the same time, the sector has evolved and expanded as crises have become more intense and complex: the number of people in need increases every year and reached the sad record of 274 million people in 2022.<sup>1</sup> The budgets allocated to international aid have never been as high as in 2022<sup>2</sup> and the number of organisations has increased by 10% in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> Given this context, the way that the international aid system currently functions seems to have reached certain limits and aid organisations have begun to question the standard-based framework which tends to distance operators from the ultimate purpose of their work.

*“I am tired of being participated”, a comment made by a person met in the field and reported by Charlotte Dufour, a member of Groupe URD’s Governing Board*

What is more, the emergence of new ways of thinking within the sector has also contributed to the questioning of restrictive procedures and standards. Debates about aid localisation, the role of local people and communities, the contribution of social anthropology, environmental footprints and climate change mean that we need to take a step back from our practices and question the current system and the changes that need to be made. These topics have revealed incoherences and contradictory demands, and thus the limits of standards and the ‘over-standardisation’ of the sector while raising questions about the very notion of ‘quality’. It is also worth pointing out that the commercial sector has adopted norms and standards in the same way, and that the actors involved are faced with similar problems and questions.

<sup>1</sup> Global Humanitarian Overview 2022, OCHA.

<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the international humanitarian aid budget was 31.3 billion dollars compared to 16.4 billion dollars in 2012, ALNAP (2022) The State of the Humanitarian System. ALNAP Study.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Given the context, how do we give back meaning to the notion of quality?*

Based on this reading of the current situation, the participants of the 2022 Autumn School tried to answer a number of related questions:

- *How can the notion of quality be (re)defined in relation to climate change and the risk that the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond to crises might be saturated?*
- *How can quality be adapted to give a central place to affected people and local actors?*
- *How can quality aid be guaranteed in increasingly complex and volatile contexts?*

This document presents the key messages from the round tables, forums and debates related to these questions during the 2022 edition of the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid.

## CROSS-CUTTING KEY MESSAGES

**Key message 1 – Projects need to include long-term considerations in order to improve the way environmental issues, accountability to affected people, and localisation are taken into account.**

### *Recommendations*

- In the long term, **accountability to affected people will be transferred to local actors**, who are the only ones who will stay in an operational area. As they may be held responsible, several years later, for operations carried out by international actors, they should be given a central role in projects.
- **Include environmental and climatic considerations in projects with a long-term vision** so that people and communities are more resilient to current and future climate change and environmental degradation, and also to ensure that the ‘do no harm’ principle is taken into account based on a long-term and systemic vision.

**Key message 2 – Actors from the Global North need to rethink their role and their position in the aid system, and question what their added value is.**

### *Recommendations*

- **Question the added value of international actors** in certain contexts where local actors are able to deliver quality assistance, and accept not to take action or to take action differently (by providing support to local actors rather than substituting them);
- **Give local and national actors more room and resources (particularly financial resources)**; this could lead to a **reduction in the size of international organisations and their area of activity**, and change the nature of their role to that of an intermediary. **The volume of funds transferred directly to local actors should be increased** in line with the commitments of the Grand Bargain (25% of aid to local actors);
- **Redefine the role of actors from the Global North to guarantee the quality of operations** because neither localisation, nor the intervention of international actors are necessarily synonymous with quality. International actors have an essential role to play in reinforcing the leadership of local actors. These efforts should be based on horizontal and complementary relations between actors.

*“As local as possible, as international as necessary”, Ban Ki-Moon, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, World Humanitarian Summit 2016*

### **Key message 3 – The complexity of contexts should be recognised and should lead to greater agility from all actors**

#### *Recommendations*

- Analyse the aid ecosystem, made up of actors of different kinds, with different ways of functioning, to allow relevant, high quality responses;
- Question aid practices, anticipate the need for flexibility and adopt agile management methods in order to adapt to unstable contexts and changing needs;
- Institutional donors should allow **greater agility in project design and funding** so that they can be adapted to changing operational contexts and so that affected people's feedback and needs are taken into account more throughout the implementation of the project.

## QUALITY & THE ENVIRONMENT

### **Key message 1 – International aid organisations need to rethink their practices in order to take the environmental impact of aid into account more.**

#### *Recommendations*

- Move towards **greater decentralisation of organisations' resources and activities** by reducing, for example, the size of their headquarters and transferring resources and responsibilities to regional and national offices;
- Revise **management tools** to improve the way limited resources, externalities, and longer timeframes are taken into account;
- Negotiate with donors for **the inclusion of carbon offsetting efforts as eligible costs** in budgets.

### **Key message 2 – The operational methods of international aid organisations need to evolve and be adapted to the current context of climate change and environmental degradation.**

#### *Recommendations*

- **Rethink the use of natural resources in field projects** – limit the consumption and anticipate the depletion of certain resources, and rather than competing over them, pool them between the actors present within an area;
- Take into account the risks of **inappropriate adaptation** (e.g. air conditioning) and the **rebound effects** that certain new practices could have;
- Adopt a **conflict-sensitive approach** to take into account the tensions and conflicts that are/will be generated by the consequences of climate change and environmental degradation on the people within operational areas;
- Aid actors **should not focus only on reducing the environmental footprint of aid, but should develop a more integrated approach** in the way activities are carried out so that populations and communities who receive aid are also more resilient;
- **Rethink humanitarian aid to include 'non-human' factors** – do not focus only on communities and individuals – take into account the ecosystem in which they live.

**Key message 3 – The environment is above all a societal issue – beyond organisations and projects, it is also necessary for attitudes to evolve.**

*Recommendations*

- Refer to **behavioural science** to improve understanding of the incentives and drivers that could help to change attitudes on environmental issues in the aid sector;
- **Improve understanding of social representations**, particularly related to modernity, in order to adapt messages and actions;
- **International aid organisations should be exemplary** in their approach and their practices in order to help attitudes evolve;
- **Analyse the environmental issues facing the aid sector from the perspective of the Commons** (Ostrom, 1990), to improve understanding of how they are linked with governance systems and the rights on which they are based.

**Key message 4 – Quality standards should no longer stand in the way of taking the environment into account in the aid sector but should help to make attitudes and practices evolve.**

*Recommendations*

- **Include environmental considerations more clearly and assertively** in the sector's quality standards – this could be done, for example, during the revision of certain standards, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard;
- **Take into account the challenges for aid actors to adapt** to climate change and environmental degradation in the sector's vision of quality – towards 'adapted' quality ?;
- **Find the right balance between technical standards and environmental considerations** so that arbitration between the two is not to the detriment of the latter – this could involve revising certain technical norms when they threaten to have a negative impact on the environment – 'perfect is the enemy of good'.

## QUALITY & ACCOUNTABILITY

**Key message 1 – International aid organisations need to change their vision of accountability to go beyond a paternalistic (or neo-colonial) approach.**

*Recommendations*

- **Take into account affected people's views (more) in defining aid quality and accountability**, without which aid can not genuinely be accountable;
- **Consider accountability as the joint responsibility of aid actors, national institutions, and affected people and communities**, where the responsibility for the development and implementation of projects is shared between the three types of stakeholder;
- **Approach accountability with the objective of joint construction of projects**, via the significant implication of the different stakeholders concerned;
- **Accountability should not only be focused on affected people and communities – adopt a 360° vision of accountability that takes all the different stakeholders into consideration.**

*"The idea of accountability does not apply to us. We are doing our duty. We are helping our families"; Nathalie Chrin, a member of the Ukrainian diaspora in France*

**Key message 2 – Aid actors should be vigilant in their attitude to affected people and communities.**

*Recommendations*

- Relations with affected people and communities **should be approached with humility** – this has an impact on the state of mind in which the project is carried out and the approach that is adopted;
- **Be conscious of the relationship of trust** that underlies accountability to affected people and communities and the timeframes (long) that this requires;
- **Refer to social sciences** to improve understanding of the mechanisms and functioning of populations and communities with whom aid actors interact and work.

**Key message 3 – The change of attitude and vision in relation to accountability should be reflected in aid actors’ practices.**

*Recommendations*

- **Question whether needs assessments** are used to adapt a project to the population’s needs, rather than adapting needs to the priorities of donors and organisations – it should be noted that the notion of ‘needs’ can be biased and there is no consensus about what a community’s needs are;
- **Develop the agile management of projects** that allows feedback from affected people and communities to be taken into account throughout the duration of the project – to allow this flexibility, timeframes, funding and donor demands need to be adapted;
- **Be vigilant** to avoid an approach to measuring accountability that is too quantitative and comparative; measuring accountability is complex and depends on the context.

## QUALITY & LOCALISATION

**Key message 1 – Aid actors need to urgently embrace the issue of localisation to counter the anger of local organisations, particularly due to the time it is taking to implement the commitments of the Grand Bargain.**

*Recommendations*

- **Local actors and populations should be at the centre of quality approaches**, a rapid change of approach is required, and we need to end the neo-colonial, top-down and technically-centred vision of quality;
- **Internal discussions should be held** within each organisation based on the latest thinking in the sector – not all international aid organisations will necessarily do localisation in the same way, but they can all implement measures to improve the way certain dimensions of localisation are taken into account (equitable partnerships, funding, the sharing of risk, etc.);
- **Develop pilot approaches and share good practices** that can be useful to the sector as a whole.

**Key message 2 – Localisation should not be ‘idealised’ and the risks that it can bring should be taken into account.**

*Recommendations*

- **Recognise that localisation requires the transferal of risk and the agility** of all the actors (local actors, international organisations, and institutional donors). This agility not only applies to funding and compliance issues, but also the analysis of needs, operational methods, governance systems, cooperation between actors, etc;
- **Take into account the risk of negative effects that can emerge when international actors set up parallel assistance systems** that can have a negative impact on the solidarity mechanisms that are already in place.

### **Key message 3 – International definitions and standards should be established with local actors.**

#### *Recommendations*

- **Redefine the concepts and terms used by actors from the Global North with local actors** in order to end the paternalistic and North-centred vision that exists. For example, no longer assuming that local actors' capacities need to be reinforced and focusing on their strengths, the compatibility between actors and increasing mutual learning;
- **Reinforce the role of local actors in defining quality standards adapted to different contexts and establish links with international standards** to ensure that actors have a common vision of quality and accountability issues (e.g. the current CHS revision process);
- **When appropriate, use certification as a means of rebalancing power relations between Northern and Southern actors**, by allowing local actors to reinforce their credibility in relation to international actors and improving access to funding (link between certification and donor due diligence).

### **Key message 4 – Local actors and know-how should play a central role in jointly defining and managing quality.**

#### *Recommendations*

- **Reinforce the way that the plurality of actors is analysed and taken into account and their role in delivering aid and managing quality.** International actors always take action within a network of actors, pre-existing relations and power games (the aid ecosystem) which needs to be analysed and taken into account in the initial assessment and the project design.  
The position and role of institutional actors (ministries, local authorities, municipal authorities, etc.) should be given special attention in the assessment to identify their activities and possible opportunities for collaboration. Their involvement in responses should include significant involvement in quality and accountability management;
- **Take local knowledge and know-how into account more:** the diversity of local actors and the abundance of existing knowledge should be more widely recognised and promoted so that humanitarian operations build on existing strengths. The analysis of these factors should include social sciences (sociological and anthropological approaches);
- **Aim for and maintain good quality relations with local actors to ensure that co-building processes are successful:** in co-building processes, the quality of the relationships is as important as the results of the collaboration, and efforts should be made in this respect to build relations of trust based on acceptance, complementary assets and mutual respect. It is important to promote informal relations which are the foundation of good relationships between actors;
- **Re-localise training centres and focus training efforts on actors from the Global South** to continuously improve the competencies of local actors and promote mutual learning. Learning activities should take place as close as possible to field operators who play a central role in analysing and establishing learning needs, and should also be able to benefit from this. By encouraging mutual learning between international organisations and local actors, learning and the continuous improvement of practices within the sector as a whole will be improved.
- **Promote '360° learning'** – based on the accountability model – to help reinforce learning between the HQ and the field, within and between NGOs, between the South and the North, and between different stakeholders, for better use of local knowledge and more agile responses.



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