Quality in Humanitarian Actions: Thinking Ahead

Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid
Key messages

15-17 September 2014

INTRODUCTION

On 15-17 September 2014, a number of Quality and Accountability experts, representatives of humanitarian organisations, evaluators, donors and academics were invited to come to Plaisians, in France, by Groupe URD, in partnership with ALNAP. With so much going on around the world, the 9th edition of the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid provided an opportunity to step back and reflect about the quality issues affecting the sector. It was also a chance to review current initiatives and discuss the hopes that they have raised and their limits.

The event began with a number of presentations: the intermediate findings with regard to the Core Humanitarian Standard were shared, the preliminary conclusions of the Certification Project led by the SCHR were discussed, and Groupe URD took advantage of this opportunity to present the "People First" label, an alternative to certification which aims to promote learning and continuous improvement based on a peer review system. ALNAP presented its findings on the issue of sector-wide change based on what has been learned from years of evaluations in the sector.

Following these presentations, open space discussions allowed the participants to take a step back from current developments in order to look at the problems that were actually trying to be solved. This document presents a summary of the latest developments from these initiatives as well as the key points from the debates. It provides an appraisal of the different facets of the problem of quality in the sector.

KEY MESSAGE N°1: There is no consensus about the existence or seriousness of problems of quality in humanitarian operations

It is important to underline that the Autumn School was unable to establish a consensus about the existence or seriousness of problems of quality in humanitarian operations. For certain organizations, the quality of aid is a critically important issue and a lot of progress still needs to be made. For others, aid organizations have made huge progress and even though there is significant room for improvement, the most important issues today are to be found elsewhere (access to communities, new forms of conflict, risk management, etc.).

KEY MESSAGE N°2: Each aid stakeholder has their own point of view concerning the quality of aid

Behind these disagreements about the reality of the problem is the difficulty about agreeing on a shared definition of the quality of a humanitarian operation. Each stakeholder in the aid system (the affected communities and people, local or national authorities, individual donors, operators, etc.) has their own perception of priorities.

Of course, it is a question of meeting people's basic needs, but each actor also has numerous other preoccupations. Donors, for example, need to meet the political demands of their governments and

(tax-paying) citizens' demands for effectiveness, they need to ensure that their implementing partners respect administrative and financial rules, and they need to check what they do in the field.

The Autumn School thus highlighted different perspectives and interpretations regarding quality issues which represent different motivations, and even misunderstandings, behind the development of the sector's quality and accountability mechanisms and tools.

KEY MESSAGE N°3: Defining the quality of aid is necessary due to the emergence of new actors

Where there does seem to be a consensus, on the other hand, is in the observation that there are more and more new aid organizations. For example, the number, capacity and visibility of non-traditional actors such as businesses, military forces and national bodies like National Disaster Management Agencies (NDMA) is increasing. This raises the question of the criteria and principles which define humanitarian action. This phenomenon is amplified by the emergence of non-professional organizations in crisis contexts which receive a lot of media attention (e.g. the Tsunami in 2004, Haiti in 2010).The activities of these organizations are reported by the media who are often on the lookout for scandal, and this has repercussions on the whole humanitarian community.

The setting up of the Core Humanitarian Standard is a significant step towards redefining humanitarian action and the quality of aid. Many questions nevertheless remain, and in particular, should the Core Humanitarian Standard allow these emerging actors to be integrated into the humanitarian system or should it, on the contrary, preserve "traditional" humanitarian space?

The nine commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standard
(Version 3[1])

1. Communities and people affected by crisis receive assistance appropriate and relevant to their needs.
➔ *Humanitarian assistance is appropriate and relevant.*
2. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to the humanitarian assistance they need at the right time.
➔ *Response is effective and timely.*
3. Communities and people affected by crisis are more prepared, resilient and less vulnerable as a result of humanitarian action.
➔ *Humanitarian action strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects.*
4. Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, and participate in decisions that affect them.
➔ *Humanitarian action is based on open feedback and inclusive participation.*
5. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to a safe and responsive complaints mechanism.
➔ *Complaints are welcomed and addressed.*
6. Communities and people affected by crisis receive coordinated, complementary assistance.
➔ *Humanitarian action is coordinated and complementary.*

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[1] http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/CHS V3 FINAL%281%29.pdf

7. The organisation learns from experience in order to improve outcomes for communities and people affected by crisis.
➔ *Humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve.*
8. Staff are treated fairly and equitably, and are supported to do their job effectively.
➔ *Humanitarian staff are managed and supported responsibly.*
9. Organisations use resources efficiently and effectively for their intended purpose.
➔ *Resources are used and managed responsibly.*

KEY MESSAGE N°4: The imbalance in the humanitarian aid system: administrative compliance versus the quality of results

The humanitarian aid system is currently imbalanced with an enormous amount of energy and resources spent on audits and reporting for donors. These significant demands, which concern legal and financial aspects, are a diversion from the real issues concerning the quality of the service provided to crisis-affected people. This tension is even present within organizations, with, broadly speaking, managers who are concerned about the survival of the organisation and satisfying and reassuring donors, and operational staff who work with the affected people who are more concerned about the quality and pertinence of operations in the field.

In the private sector (where the principles of quality management were developed), best practice places the satisfaction of the client at the centre of all of the organisation's efforts. In the humanitarian sector, there are two types of 'clients', with the donors, who 'pay', and the affected population, who have little control over the organizations who provide them with assistance. This imbalance does not allow the reality of problems of quality to be systematically taken into account from the point of view of affected people.

Concerted advocacy on the part of NGOs vis-à-vis donors to lighten the load of multiple reporting is necessary and would allow resources which are currently used for reporting and administrative and financial controls to be reallocated to monitoring the quality of programmes from the point of view of affected people. A single reporting system, based on the CHS, could be developed in collaboration with the main donors. This would be in keeping with the commitments made by donors as part of the GHD initiative[2].

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[2] Good Humanitarian Donorship : http://www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org

KEY MESSAGE N°5: The local population and local actors need to be at the centre of operations

In parallel to the previous point, the humanitarian system is currently structured on the basis of imperatives which are specific to the sector but which do not always correspond to the reality and the day-to-day lives of crisis-affected people. It is split into specialized operational sectors (WASH, Nutrition, Food Security, Shelter, etc.) or into population groups (IDPs, refugees, etc.) whereas people's needs are interconnected. It is therefore common for beneficiaries to find themselves confronted with numerous specialized organizations who each have their own approach and their own methods. Though the place of crisis-affected people in the humanitarian system is a recurring issue for the sector, the development of new communication technologies could finally have a major impact in this area in the coming years; particularly by encouraging direct circuit aid from citizen to citizen and rapid feedback systems (via social networks, SMS, email, etc.).

Local and national authorities, for their part, are keen to play a more important role in humanitarian operations, but their involvement remains marginal. Recent joint initiatives with national authorities ("joint assessments" and "joint evaluations") have shown that they have a positive impact and helped to increase confidence between humanitarian actors and national authorities, which is necessary to make access to operational areas and the implementation of programmes easier when there is a disaster.

These are encouraging prospects but a lot still needs to be done to involve local organisations and beneficiaries in global debates about the quality of aid and allow them to embrace this subject more fully.

KEY MESSAGE N°6: Regain the confidence of public opinion and the media

The humanitarian sector has been the object of criticism by the general public, the media and individual donors for a number of years. Though this crisis of confidence has been fed by scandals which have received a lot of media coverage (mainly linked to non-professional organizations), it is also due to the way organizations tend to communicate about their activities, without mentioning the real challenges and difficulties of operations in the field.

This type of over-simplified communication, which aims to encourage donations while reassuring the donor, can be counter-productive: by creating high expectations in the public, it adds to the criticism of the humanitarian sector in the media when the sector fails to meet these expectations. This phenomenon is heightened by the increasing competition between humanitarian organizations and the need for each one to maintain their donors by appearing in the best light in the media.

From this point of view, all efforts in terms of quality and accountability should include an information and education component (rather than "marketing") directed at the media and the public. This component would address the quality of programmes in the field, including the limits and difficulties encountered.

KEY MESSAGE N°7: Differences of opinion remain about the risks of certification

Though the Core Humanitarian Standard represents an important step towards a common definition of quality in the humanitarian sector, the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid underlined, once again, different points of view about the certification project.

Conclusions of the certification project supported by the SCHR[3]:

The certification project presented its findings during the Autumn School and the main characteristics of the proposed model, based on the Core Humanitarian Standard.

Key findings:
- There is a strong link between improved quality and accountability and external verification and certification mechanisms – but limited evidence that this can be directly attributed to certification;
- There is significant stakeholder interest in and support for certification;
- There are also continued concerns about the potential risks of certification;
- The proposed model is relevant and feasible for both larger and smaller NGOs;
- The model is compatible with government regulatory frameworks for NGOs and with donor and UN agencies' funding and partnership requirements;
- Verification and certification is not a replacement for regular monitoring and evaluation;
- Certification is not a solution for political and structural issues facing the humanitarian system.

Key components of the system:
A.   An agreed set of standards and indicators to define what good practice is in terms of principled, accountable and effective humanitarian action – based on the final version of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) process.
B.   A common monitoring, reporting and verification framework that sets out clear expectations on how organizations will demonstrate that they are applying the CHS standards.
C.   An independent, third-party verification and certification mechanism to verify and provide assurances that an organisation complies with the standards in its policy, procedures, and practices based on objective evidence.

There is much to be said in favour of the objectives of this certification project, refocused on learning and continuous improvement. But its potential use by certain donors and political entities could carry some risks. According to some, the initiative could be diverted from its objectives of learning and improvement to become a selection tool for certain funding agencies and States.

Indeed, though the main established donors like ECHO, USAID and DFID have developed their expertise and a strong field presence over the years, which has allowed them to maintain relations of confidence with their partners, not all donors in the humanitarian sector have this kind of capacity, such as smaller donors, emerging countries or private donors like foundations. For these donors, the question is how to guarantee the viability of their implementing partners and the quality of the operations carried out in their name in the field. The certification project could therefore become a tool for donors with more limited capacities who would thus delegate some responsibility to a third party to check that organizations meet standards. Certain organizations in the global South, particularly national NGOs, see the certification project as an opportunity to prove that they are professional and develop new partnerships.

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[3] http://schr.info/assets/uploads/docs/Summary_of_FINAL_Findings_and_Recommendations.pdf

KEY MESSAGE N°8: The "cultural revolution" of Quality has yet to take place in the sector

Beyond these different outlines of solutions and the evaluation culture which exists today in the sector, there is still a need for a cultural revolution in terms of Quality at the institutional level which will establish a process of continuous improvement.

Studies on quality in other sectors of activity systematically estimate that an organisation which does not implement a quality approach loses between 15 and 25% of its turnover. It is this calculation of the cost of non-Quality and of the return on investment which led to the Quality revolution. In humanitarian aid, these costs are currently carried by crisis-affected people, not in financial terms but in terms of increased suffering, time wasted, pointless frustration, etc.

Though debates about quality have evolved in recent years so that they now address the overall management of organisations (and not only humanitarian project management), there is still too little investment in this subject, which has struggled to generate interest and enthusiasm amongst humanitarian organizations.

KEY MESSAGE N°9: Supporting change and encouraging learning; carrot or stick?

What can be done to have a positive influence on the diverse and complex humanitarian system so that the right conditions are in place to allow organizational change? Experience in other sectors seems to show that external systems based on sanctions (such as a funding system linked to obligatory certification) struggle to stimulate these changes in the long term, though this point of view is not shared by all. One condition which is necessary to stimulate and support real change is that the organisation should fully embrace the approach and should be sincere about wanting to change its practices. This is why the "People First" label is based on a spirit of goodwill and voluntary engagement by organizations.

A quality label for humanitarian NGOs: "People First"

Key principles:

➜ A collective approach by the sector which encourages dialogue, learning and the sharing of experiences via a peer review system;
➜ Which aims for long-term progress based on continuous improvement of quality rather than verification of standards;
➜ Which uses existing, recognized and harmonized methods from the evaluation sector and based on the CHS;
➜ Which respects the basic principles of independence, impartiality, integrity and transparency through the careful selection of peers and members of the Label Committee;
➜ Which is accessible to all NGOs who want to become involved in the process as the label is based on peer review and uses evaluation resources as an integral part of the verification process.

The process of the "People First" label:

Self-evaluation by the organisation → Peer visit → Field evaluations → Final report by peers → Deliberation by the Label Committee → Awarding of the label

KEY MESSAGE N°10: There is no 'miracle solution' to solve problems of quality

Finally, the participants stated that it was unrealistic to hope that one or two initiatives would solve all the problems of quality in the sector. For example, a certification mechanism will not be able to resolve the problem of unprofessional organisations in crisis contexts which receive a lot of media coverage because these organisations are, by definition, outside the sector. Nor does it seem that certification will relieve organisations of different donor demands in the short term as donors themselves are held by their own accountability mechanisms.

As for the CHS, the challenge for the future is its concrete use by organisations, at the individual level, but particularly at the organisational level, in a spirit of learning and continuous improvement.

More than new tools, the sector needs a "cultural revolution" in relation to Quality, for the benefit of crisis affected people. It is this which needs to be stimulated and supported.

Lastly, it is of fundamental importance to keep in mind that the humanitarian system is chaotic, made up of a variety of bodies and based on a systemic logic. There is no lever to pull or miracle solution to solve all the problems of quality. In order to address each problem and achieve greater effectiveness at the local and global levels, it is necessary to find specific and complementary forms of action by different actors