

Executive summary

This report describes how a group of aid agencies piloted the new People In Aid Code of Best Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel from 1997 to 2000.

The Code was commissioned by an informal, inter-agency project group. It aimed to help improve field personnel management and programme effectiveness.

Twelve agencies began to test the People In Aid Code in a three-year trial that ended in 2000. There were other codes in the sector but a trial of this kind was quite new.

The group of “pilot agencies” agreed to have their work externally audited. Though largely untried in the sector, an external audit was thought essential to ensure the credibility of claims that agencies were following the Code, and the integrity of the Code itself.

The audit process was based on social accountability. It emphasised the need for a demonstrable process of continuous improvement by each agency, rather than a “pass or fail” approach.

Stakeholder participation was a key part of that process. Most pilot agencies involved their field staff through surveys and meetings. People In Aid hired consultants to visit Kenya and Rwanda and seek views on progress to date of field staff in four pilot agencies - British Red Cross, Concern Worldwide, Oxfam and Tearfund.

Seven pilot agencies submitted a report on progress to an external social auditor in 2000. The auditor’s role was different from that of an evaluator. He was asked to ensure that the agencies’ reports gave a true and fair account of their performance.

In the auditor’s opinion, the seven pilot agencies had submitted accurate reports of their work. Individual reports gave evidence of positive change, for example: steps to improve Health & Safety and security; better insurance cover; the spread of good employment practice; heightened awareness of diversity and equal opportunities; increased consultation; the use of performance benchmarks to measure performance.

However, the process had not always been easy. Pilot agencies also provided evidence of the challenges they had faced: in seeking to “embed” the Code in their organisation’s thinking and practice; to extend its use, particularly to host country staff; to use the Code effectively within agency “federations”; to make consistent use of Health & Safety records and other management information systems.

Collective experience showed that testing the new Code, and the audit process, had been a labour-intensive, sometimes difficult process. Some parts of the Code worked better than others. The accountability process was unfamiliar and often time-consuming. Yet, investment in the Code and the accountability process contributed positively to change and innovation and the pilot agencies remained committed to it.

People In Aid laid down a set of four conditions, based on reporting, audit and disclosure of their progress, which pilot agencies had to fulfill before stating that they followed the People In Aid Code. Seven of the original twelve pilot agencies were recognised as fulfilling the conditions:

British Red Cross	MAF Europe
Concern Worldwide	RedR
Health Unlimited	Tearfund
International Health Exchange	

Their commitment would be re-audited at three-yearly intervals. Other agencies that were adopting the Code would undergo a similar, audited process.

The work of People In Aid attracted attention from aid agencies all over the world. In 1999 the short-life, inter-agency project was established as an independent organisation and a registered charity, dedicated to helping aid agencies improve the quality of field programmes through better staff management and support.