Chapter 08: Bringing aid to account: the CHS and third-party verification

2015

ON THE ROAD TO ISTANBUL

How can the World Humanitarian Summit make humanitarian response more effective?

HUMANITARIAN ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT
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<th>Acronym</th>
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<tr>
<td>3MDG</td>
<td>Three Millennium Development Goal Fund</td>
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<td>AAP</td>
<td>Accountability to Affected Populations</td>
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<td>AEI/CS</td>
<td>Accountability, Equity and Inclusion / Conflict Sensitivity</td>
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<td>ALNAP</td>
<td>Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance</td>
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<td>BBB</td>
<td>Better Business Bureau</td>
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<td>CAAP</td>
<td>Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations</td>
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<td>CERF</td>
<td>Central Emergency Response Fund</td>
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<td>CHS</td>
<td>Core Humanitarian Standard</td>
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<td>CV</td>
<td>Constituent Voice methodology</td>
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<td>CWC</td>
<td>Communication with Communities</td>
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<td>DAC</td>
<td>Development Assistance Committee</td>
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<td>DFID</td>
<td>Department for International Development</td>
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<td>DOA</td>
<td>Description of Action</td>
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<td>DRR</td>
<td>Disaster Risk Reduction</td>
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<td>ECOSOC</td>
<td>Economic and Social Council</td>
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<td>Fragile States Principles</td>
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<td>GHD</td>
<td>Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative</td>
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<td>GIS</td>
<td>Geographic Information Systems</td>
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<td>HC</td>
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<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
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<td>IFRC</td>
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<td>Implementing Partner</td>
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<td>LMMS</td>
<td>Last Mile Mobile Solutions</td>
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<td>LRRD</td>
<td>Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development</td>
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<td>MENA</td>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
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<td>MIRA</td>
<td>Multi-sector Initial Rapid Assessment</td>
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<td>MSF</td>
<td>Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
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<td>OCHA</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>OPR</td>
<td>Operational Peer Review</td>
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<td>PMR</td>
<td>Periodic Monitoring Report</td>
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<td>PSEA</td>
<td>Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse</td>
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<td>The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement</td>
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<td>Syrian Arab Red Crescent</td>
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<td>Strategic Response Plan</td>
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<td>Transformative Agenda</td>
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Bringing aid to account: the CHS and third-party verification

The Core Humanitarian Standard and third-party verification are vital accountability tools to help us deliver the aid that communities affected by crises need and want, writes Philip Tamminga.

The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) is a unique opportunity for a global dialogue on improving humanitarian assistance. Despite considerable efforts over the past two decades, progress has been frustratingly slow: international funding falls miserably short of needs, and aid efforts are often too slow, uncoordinated, inappropriate and ineffective.1 Perhaps one of the biggest gaps of all is a consistent and collective lack of accountability when it comes to ensuring the needs and priorities of people vulnerable to and affected by crises are at the centre of the way assistance is provided. In order to have a long-term impact, the WHS must lead to actions. The CHS is a vital tool to move us on from debating how we deliver effective aid accountably to those we aim to assist, to taking practical steps to achieving it.

Philip Tamminga
Humanitarian and development sector consultant

Philip Tamminga has over 25 years of experience in the humanitarian and development sector working with the UN, IFRC, and DARA among others. He recently led a two-year research and multi-stakeholder consultation process, sponsored by the SCHR, to identify the most relevant and appropriate approach to standards, third-party verification and certification for the humanitarian sector. Since then he has collaborated with HAP and the CHS Alliance to develop tools and guidance to implement, assess and verify use of the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS).

The author wishes to thank Pierre Hauselmann and Christina Laybourn for providing invaluable comments on the draft versions of this chapter. The views and opinions expressed in this chapter are however solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the CHS Alliance, or those of the peer reviewers. Details of all reviewers can be found on the inside back cover of this report.

This chapter argues that the CHS, along with its accompanying third party verification mechanisms, can help us make measurable progress towards improving aid effectiveness and accountability, reducing vulnerability and increasing innovation. Widespread application and verification of the CHS provides the sector with a much-needed common approach to defining how quality and accountability is measured, verified and improved. Most importantly, verification of the CHS gives us the tools necessary to provide independent, objective assurances that aid organisations are living up to their commitments to put the needs of affected populations at the centre of response efforts. Before discussing the CHS and third party verification, it is useful to put the CHS in the wider global context and address some of the critics of third party verification.

How standards and third party verification work in other sectors

The idea behind most standards is that they offer a way to systematise approaches to doing things, and through this ensure higher levels of efficiency, consistency and quality in people, processes, products or services. Typically, standards emerge out of a necessity, perceived or real, to provide order in what would otherwise be a chaotic, fragmented operating environment for organisations.

While standards have been around for some time, it was only after the establishment in 1947 of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) that standards truly became global, offering a means of achieving rationalisation, interoperability and interconnectedness between different sectors and countries. Since then, ISO’s work has expanded exponentially, with standards organisations operating in almost every country in the world, and the application of over 20,000 registered standards covering virtually every aspect of social and economic activity.²

Obvious as it sounds, standards alone are meaningless unless they are actually being used. This is why most standards are accompanied by verification systems, ranging from self-assessment and reporting, to independent, third party verification and certification. Each of these approaches offer varying degrees of rigour in the way compliance with a standard is assessed and reported. However, third party verification is often considered the most reliable approach, as it provides an independent, objective and impartial assessment of compliance with the standard in question. To safeguard the objectivity and rigour of verification processes, most third party verification and certification schemes are accredited by a national accreditation body as meeting the standard established by the ISO for conformity audits. Globally, there are now thousands of accredited third party standards verification and certification systems.³

In recent years, new standards and verification systems attempting to link social and environmental goals have emerged, such as poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, industrial and commercial practices. Examples include the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Fairtrade and others. Like other sectors, values-based standards systems have gradually moved towards consolidating and harmonising standards, and developing a more coherent approach to certification and labelling. Increasingly, those responsible for these values-based systems have also sought to reinforce the credibility of their standards and certification labels, and demonstrate results and impact on their stated goals. For example, ISEAL, an umbrella organisation of many social and environmental standards and certification schemes, has developed rigorous codes of good practice around developing credible standards, evidence-based verification processes, and results and impact measurement.⁴

One of the shortcomings of many of the standards initiatives in the humanitarian sector has been the lack of robust monitoring, reporting and verification systems, and outcomes of humanitarian actions, while others were developed to respond to specific technical needs, such as setting out a common approach to livestock management in emergency situations, for example. Others, such as financial reporting and auditing requirements, are the result of donor-driven concepts of accountability.

For the most part, there has been little coherence or interoperability between these standards, making it difficult for aid workers and organisations to interpret and prioritise the multiple demands on them in a way that shows they are applying good

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² See the International Standards Organisation (ISO) (www.iso.org) for more information on international standards, including those offering guidance on how to develop and measure standards, as well as how to verify compliance with those standards.

³ See the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) (http://www.iaf.nu/) for more information on the thousands of internationally accredited third party verification and certification systems around the world today.

⁴ See for example ISEAL’s various Codes of Good Practice on standards development, assurance, and impacts measurement. (http://www.isealliance.org/our-work/defining-credibility/codes-of-good-practice)

⁵ See, for example, the mapping exercise conducted by the JSI and other reports. Available at http://pool.fruitycms.com/humanitarianstandards/QLA-Mapping-Exercise-Report-from-Liza-Cragg-website.pdf

⁶ An exception are Sphere’s technical standards and their related companion standards. For more information see: http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook/handbook-companions/
practices or meeting multiple externally driven requirements. This lack of coherence has also made it difficult to communicate clearly to crisis-affected communities and other stakeholders what they can expect from organisations providing assistance.

One of the shortcomings of many of the standards initiatives in the humanitarian sector has been the lack of robust monitoring, reporting and verification systems to help track and assess how standards are being used, and with what results. Assessing the use of standards is often not an explicit part of evaluation processes – which tend to focus on ex-post project and programme level outputs and outcomes – and experiences with third party verification are limited.

One concern is that third party verification of compliance with standards can perversely make organisations more risk-averse, bureaucratic and less agile in meeting urgent needs.

The result is the lack of a comprehensive analysis and evidence base to establish the role standards and third party verification play in aid effectiveness, and the added value they bring to it. There are exceptions of course, most notably, HAP and People in Aid’s respective standards and certification processes (now consolidated under the CHS Alliance), which have strong verification mechanisms and have evaluated their impact, but this aspect is rarely integrated directly or explicitly with the design of most standards initiatives.7

This explains some of the motivations behind the development of the CHS. In many ways, the CHS is the product of a natural process of evolution in the sector, with clear parallels to developments in other sectors. The CHS builds on much of the positive learning from HAP, People In Aid, the Sphere Project and other initiatives, and addresses many of the gaps which have hitherto limited the potential of these standards as a tool to improve quality, effectiveness and accountability. It provides a coherent, harmonised global framework that is compatible with existing standards and quality assurance processes used by organisations. The CHS was specifically designed to be measurable and verifiable, using a standardised, objective methodology and in line with OECD/DAC evaluation criteria. These features help address the issues of interoperability of different organisations working in different crisis contexts, as well as contributing to the building of an evidence base of comparable data about how it is being used (as will be discussed later in this chapter).

Critics argue that in many cases the standard and its accompanying verification process can be too rigorous, acting as an impediment preventing new actors from joining, and a barrier to innovation.

Nevertheless, there is the perception amongst a small number of stakeholders that third party verification (and by extension, certification) of standards is not the most appropriate approach to promoting aid effectiveness. Rather than embracing the CHS and third party verification as an opportunity to bring more coherence and consistency to humanitarian actions, some see it as a threat. One concern is that third party verification of compliance with standards can perversely make organisations more risk-averse, bureaucratic and less agile in meeting urgent needs in challenging crisis situations. The argument is that organisations will tend to focus more on meeting external audit requirements, rather than meeting their mission and objectives. Others argue that standards and third party verification can work at crossed purposes with organisational learning, and that the sector needs to be more flexible, adaptable and innovative, in order to respond effectively to specific crisis contexts. Third party verification and certification, according to these critics, is not the best tool to support this goal in part because it reinforces a more rigorous system that prioritises compliance over learning.8

As an example, an ALNAP study on innovation suggests that the current humanitarian system tends to emphasise conformity and compliance, whether imposed by donors, internal organisational culture or the crisis context, at the expense of risk-taking and innovation. It says learning is “inhibited by a growing culture of compliance and the rigid contractual nature of aid relationships, both of which push agencies to deliver according to pre-defined goals, methods and targets.”9

Similar arguments have been made about other NGO standards and verification systems. Some critics suggest that a rigid set of compliance requirements is often simply a regulatory system in disguise, where certification becomes either a legal operational requirement, or is part of de facto sector-wide self-regulation to ensure quality, and limit access and participation to only those who meet the requirements.10 Critics argue that in many cases the standard and its accompanying verification process can be too rigorous, acting as an impediment preventing new actors from joining, and a barrier to innovation. There is particular concern that standards approaches can, perversely, be used to limit the work of non-profit and civil society organisations.11

On the other hand, others suggest that some standards are too vague and limited in scope, and the assessment process too subjective to offer a good analysis of whether or not an organisation merits the confidence of its stakeholders. An example is the Better Business Bureau’s Wise Giving Alliance charity-rating system, which has been criticised as overly simplistic and inherently biased by creating conflicts of interest between the assessing body (BBB) and its clients.12 Other examples include

7/ The SCHR Certification Review project assessed in detail several different standards, verification and certification systems, and found that HAP’s and People in Aid’s approaches were amongst the most rigorous. See www.schr.info/certification for more information and reports.
8/ Stakeholders consulted as part of the SCHR Certification Review project raised many of these concerns, which were carefully considered in the project’s final findings and recommendations. See www.schr.info/certification for additional information and background documents on the stakeholder consultations.
9/ Ramalingam, B., Scriven, K., & Foley, C. (2009). Innovations in international humanitarian action. p.11. That said, the study acknowledges, “…Tools to improve learning and accountability have been among the most strongly supported process innovations. These include standards such as People in Aid (Human Resource processes), Sphere (minimum standards for delivery in five key sectors) and HAP-International (beneficiary accountability)” (p 33).
10/ Similar arguments have been made about other NGO standards and verification systems. Some critics suggest that a rigid set of compliance requirements is often simply a regulatory system in disguise, where certification becomes either a legal operational requirement, or is part of de facto sector-wide self-regulation to ensure quality, and limit access and participation to only those who meet the requirements. Critics argue that in many cases the standard and its accompanying verification process can be too rigorous, acting as an impediment preventing new actors from joining, and a barrier to innovation. There is particular concern that standards approaches can, perversely, be used to limit the work of non-profit and civil society organisations.
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some environmental certification schemes – labelled ‘green washing’ by activist groups – that simply allow corporations to perpetuate business practices deemed unethical or unsustainable. Some commentators worry that a proliferation of certification labels reduces the overall impact and credibility of all schemes.

Addressing the sceptics

The problem with many of these critiques is that they fail to acknowledge the reality that organisations face increasing pressure to demonstrate accountability and performance. Verification- and certification-like processes already exist for many humanitarian and development NGOs in many countries, such as Australia, Cambodia, Pakistan, the Philippines and the United States, to name a few. The regulatory requirements for charities and NGOs, along with donor funding requirements, mean that external scrutiny and verification in one form or another is (forgive the pun) “standard operating procedure” for the vast majority of organisations carrying out humanitarian or development programmes.

The inexorable trend towards more rigorous, evidence-based reporting of performance and accountability, particularly among non-profits and NGOs, is in part due to the collective failures of the sector to show it can self-regulate, learn from its mistakes, and continuously improve quality, accountability and effectiveness. As an example of these increasing demands, the US Congress recently passed legislation that any organisation receiving USAID funding must report on its results, including the degree of satisfaction among the beneficiaries of its programming. Similarly, the NGO ratings organisation Charity Navigator has followed suit and now requires organisations to systematically report on their results, accountability and transparency as part of their external review process. Another example is the increasing requirement of many funding and partnership agreements to demonstrate that gender, age and ability are considered in programme design, which has led to greater awareness of the importance of these issues – although wide-scale and consistent application of gender analysis in programmes is still lacking in the sector.

The evidence

The other major flaw in arguments against external verification of standards is that they are simply not supported by the available evidence. Suggestions that external verification impedes learning and continuous improvement, or could draw resources away from improving quality or effectiveness, are simplistic. Indeed, ALNAP’s study on utilisation of evaluation...
There is no credible data to show that external verification of the use of standards has a net negative effect on any sector.

Of the dozens of studies reviewed for this chapter, the majority conclude that organisations working towards meeting a standard overwhelmingly report benefits from participating in an external verification process. Experiences with verification and certification across several sectors, including the humanitarian sector, support the thesis that a carefully designed external verification system is an important tool to promote greater, more consistent approaches to quality assurance, accountability and effectiveness. In fact, there is no credible data to show that external verification of the use of standards has a net negative effect on any sector. While many researchers question some aspects of a standards and verification process, the criticisms are, more often than not, around poor design and application of the standards and verification system, and not necessarily the value of external verification per se. That said, it is also clear that there is a need for much more research around the long-term impact of standards and verification systems, making it difficult at this time to definitively state that verification of compliance with standards has a directly attributable positive or negative impact on issues like quality and effectiveness.

Nevertheless, three recent major studies offer some convincing evidence that third party verification and certification can have positive impacts, including contributions to organisational learning, improved quality assurance processes, and internal business practices. The first two studies focused on the added value for businesses that are certified as complying with ISO 9001 standard, one of the world’s best-known quality assurance standards. A United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) study of 600 businesses in over a dozen Asian countries found that there are “clear empirical economic benefits to the effective implementation and accredited certification of quality management systems” for certified organisations. Indeed, 98% of the businesses surveyed reported that certification represented a good return on investment, and a clear majority claimed that “surveillance audits support continuous improvement.” These findings are consistent with a 2012 report from the International Accreditation Forum (IAF), which surveyed over 4000 respondents from businesses in 41 countries – the majority representing small to medium-sized business with fewer than 250 employees (a similar size to many NGOs) – on their experiences with certification processes. Four out of five reported that certification processes added value to their business, with nearly half reporting improved business practices as the main outcomes of external verification. Compliance with regulatory requirements was only a motivating factor for 13% of the businesses undertaking certification, although almost 80% reported that the process itself helped them meet external requirements.

The third study, more in line with the dynamics of the humanitarian sector, took a critical look at the impact of values-based social

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20/ A full bibliography of all the articles reviewed would be impractical, but are available on request from the author.
22/ Op cit. p.43.
24/ International Accreditation Forum (2013).
Four out of five reported that certification processes added value to their business.

Lessons from the humanitarian sector

However, rather than looking outside the sector for evidence of the added value of third party verification, a more compelling case can be made from the outcomes of research and extensive consultations with multiple stakeholders on their needs and expectations regarding standards and verification.29 Of particular interest are the views of organisations that have actually undertaken a third party verification and/or certification process. The results of this research strongly supports the claim that external verification against a common standard has a positive effect on participating organisations, and indirectly influences behaviour more widely in the sector.30

Reviews of People In Aid and HAP’s respective verification and certification processes clearly show that each has made a contribution to improved quality, organisational effectiveness and accountability. For example, several independent evaluations of People In Aid’s certification against its people management standards have shown that the process helps participating organisations to “implement a continuous cycle of improvement” by identifying gaps and taking steps to improve their systems.31 Other studies have found a “consistent conviction that ... engagement with the Code [Code of Good Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel] has resulted in corresponding improvements in organisational effectiveness.”32 It further noted that “the evidence base for the improvement in people management was clear... in terms of policy, procedure, management practice,” though variable when looking for “plausible links to improved programming”. Similar results were found in a 2011 impact assessment. Member organisations “reported without exception that [People In Aid] have had a beneficial impact on the organisation.”33

Reviews of HAP’s experience with accountability standards and certification reveal very similar findings. A 2013 review exercise with HAP-certified organisations concluded that: “Agencies saw HAP certification as a useful tool and a structured approach to identify progress in embedding accountability within organisational culture, systems and processes, in staff competences and practice improvements...taking the decision to go for certification and moving through the process did positively impact on the pace and reach of organizational change, including stronger management buy-in.”34

Another study analysed the progress of certified organisations in addressing issues identified through the accountability audit.35

The trend showed that the number of non-compliance issues identified decreased over time, at least in the case of those criteria under the organisation’s control, suggesting that learning and change process had taken place.36 The study acknowledged certification “was not the only driver of change in terms of improvements in program quality and impact, but that the process did have a positive impact on the organisational priority and pace to make these improvements.”37

Other examples can be drawn from NGO certification-type processes at the national level. For example, hundreds of US-based NGOs participate in InterAction’s member self-assessment and certification process.38 While not directly comparable to an external certification scheme, the process provides a structured, comprehensive framework to assess organisations against InterAction’s Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) standard. Interestingly, InterAction piloted a third party verification certification system for members involved in child sponsorship programmes. An internal review noted that the learning element from the verification and audit process “trumped any benefit that may result from public knowledge of their third party certification.”39 It also noted that accountability for compliance with a standard “cannot and must not be the end in itself. Rather, having standards and subscribing to a more rigorous compliance system must be part of a systemic commitment to transparency and to an on-going, regular institutional process.”40

The CHS also provides a much needed bridge linking issues of accountability to performance, and making sure the results of actions are relevant and appropriate for the people they are intended to assist.

26/ Op cit. p.101
27/ Ibid
28/ Op cit. p.84
29/ Together, the JSI and CHS processes and the SCHR Certification Review project interviewed more than 3000 stakeholders in the sector around the use, benefits and limitations of standards and third party verification, providing an excellent basis to determine the most appropriate standards and verification model for the sector.
30/ See, for example, the various reports produced as part of the SCHR Certification Review project, available at: www.schr.info/certification.
37/ Op cit. p.49.
39/ Unpublished internal review (dated October 2008) shared by InterAction with the SCHR Certification Review project. p.8
Too many commitments made in the aid sector are empty promises, with no real incentives.

More flexible criteria for verifying how the CHS Commitments are applied, rather than fixed notions of compliance or non-compliance, are themselves recognition that in different situations, contexts and organisations, many different approaches can be used to achieve the same result. Verification can therefore help promote adaptability and innovation. This makes it particularly suited to the humanitarian and development sector, where ways of working with communities affected by crises are just as important as the products or outputs of interventions.

The CHS is built around the idea of continuous improvement, recognising that humanitarian action is a complex undertaking.

Third party verification of the CHS and the link to aid quality, effectiveness and accountability

Based on the available evidence, there is no reason why external verification of compliance with the CHS will a priori act as an impediment to the kind of organisational learning and improvements needed to increase effectiveness and accountability in humanitarian actions. In fact, the opposite is more likely: a strong verification system increases the likelihood that organisations will develop and sustain a more systematic approach to quality assurance, learning and performance issues, with corresponding positive effects on aid effectiveness.

A unique and exciting feature of the CHS is that it provides a more comprehensive and holistic way to view accountability, one that has been hitherto lacking in the sector. Accountability to affected people, as promoted by HAP over the past decade, remains the centrepiece of the CHS, and rightly so. But the CHS also provides a much needed bridge linking issues of accountability to performance, and making sure the results of actions are relevant and appropriate for the people they are intended to assist. It also helps redefine donor-driven definitions of accountability around how and where money and resources are spent and, more importantly, whether or not aid efforts represent value for money in the eyes of affected communities. This logic underpins each of the Nine Commitments of the CHS, and as such, represents a step-change in how the sector thinks about the design, implementation, management and evaluation of aid programmes. 42

The following list outlines four key reasons how third party verification of the CHS can contribute to improved aid effectiveness and accountability by:

1. Providing a comprehensive framework to assess and verify performance and accountability

Too many commitments made in the aid sector are empty promises, with no real incentives, or mechanisms by which to demonstrate that those promises are being kept. The CHS provides a means of verifying whether or not organisations are serious about putting people at the centre of their humanitarian responses. Every CHS Commitment, with its quality criterion, accompanying key actions and organisational responsibilities, is designed in a way that promotes people-centred responses and practical actions to support them. The CHS asks organisations to demonstrate that they have made every reasonable effort to apply its criteria, justify when this has not been possible, and take actions to address any shortcomings in the future. 43

Third party verification is an ideal way to facilitate this. The CHS Verification Framework developed to accompany the

In different situations, contexts and organisations, many different approaches can be used to achieve the same result.

CHS is a systematic way to assess and verify that organisations are implementing it. This includes verification protocols with consistent methodology to assess organisations against the CHS, identifying and responding to weaknesses, and incorporating learning into its current and future practices. Part of the assessment methodology includes ensuring the views of affected people about the quality of aid and the relationship with aid providers are considered whenever possible, since they are key to reinforcing the central themes of aid quality, effectiveness and accountability. 44

While the protocols themselves are a rigorous, systematic approach to assessing an organisation, the process itself is sufficiently flexible to adapt to different contexts, organisational capacities and working methods. The emphasis is on whether the concepts behind the CHS Commitments and quality criteria are adhered to and whether the organisation fulfils its commitment to good practices and continuous improvement.

The learning element from the verification and audit process “trumped any benefit that may result from public knowledge of their third party certification.”

The CHS Certification Review project findings at: www.schr.info/certification.

40/ Op cit. p.15
41/ See the SCHR Certification Review project findings at: www.schr.info/certification.
42/ For more information on the development and content of the standard see: www.corehumanitarianstandard.org
43/ See the introductory sections of the standard itself, and accompanying Guidance Notes and Indicators for more background on how the standard should be interpreted and applied. Both documents available at: www.corehumanitarianstandard.org
44/ The CHS Verification Framework, Verification Scheme and other accompanying tools have been developed by the CHS Alliance. See http://chsalliance.org/what-we-do/ verification for more information.
These verification protocols have already been tested in several contexts with different types of organisations, with excellent results. The experience so far reinforces the conclusion that external verification is accessible, affordable, and adds value to the organisation in terms of understanding where its strengths are and where it needs to improve its effectiveness and accountability. It also shows that it is possible to assess large and small, national and international NGOs against the same requirements. In effect, this helps level the playing field in a system inherently biased against local and national actors by applying the same standard to all.

2. Building a stronger foundation for continuous learning and improvement, and benchmarking good practice

The CHS is built around the idea of continuous improvement, recognising that humanitarian action is a complex undertaking, and many situations make it difficult to consistently or perfectly meet any standard or good practice. Nevertheless, working in challenging contexts should not exempt any organisation, no matter what role it plays (funder, implementer, coordinating body, partner, etc.), from demonstrating with evidence that it is committed to improving the way it works. One advantage of third party verification is that it is a powerful tool for benchmarking good practices and promoting continuous learning and improvement. Most evaluation processes are one-off exercises with a limited focus on project or programme outputs and outcomes, providing only a partial picture of an organisation’s capacity, accountability and performance. In contrast, third party verification implies a regular, ongoing and independent assessment of the organisation’s capacities and performance over time. Assessing and verifying an organisation against a comprehensive standard like the CHS allows for a more holistic overview of an organisation’s systems, processes and practices. It provides an organisation with a clear, objective diagnostic of where improvements are needed, and an action plan to address, track and benchmark progress against them over time. It also helps organisations see how improving (or failing to improve) in certain areas affects performance in others, and apply these insights to encourage wider organisational learning and improvement. The process validates internal efforts to improve and provides external assurances that there has been measureable progress in applying the CHS. This becomes an incentive to make positive, sustained changes to an organisation’s ways of working.

It provides an organisation with a clear, objective diagnostic of where improvements are needed, and an action plan to address, track and benchmark progress against them over time.

Figure 8.2: ALNAP Global Forum recommendations covered by the CHS (for each Briefing Paper):

1. Good humanitarian action reaches everyone in need
2. Good humanitarian action meets the priorities and respects the dignity of crisis-affected people
3. Good humanitarian action is consistent with longer term political, economic and social processes
4. Good humanitarian action is led by the state and builds on local response capacities wherever possible
5. Good humanitarian action is apolitical and adheres to international law and the humanitarian principles
6. Good humanitarian action makes the best possible use of resources
7. Good humanitarian action uses the best knowledge, skills and tools to achieve an effective and timely response

The Core Humanitarian Standard addresses a large share of the 267 recommendations included in the 7 ALNAP Global Forum briefing papers, especially those related to “meeting the priorities and respecting the dignity of crisis-affected people”, and those related to “ensuring that humanitarian action is consistent with longer term political, economic and social processes”. Source: CHS Alliance analysis. Details available at http://goo.gl/yik4NL

45/ See http://chsalliance.org/what-we-do/verification for more information on how the Verification Framework was developed and field tested.
46/ Despite the widespread use of OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, the objectives, design and methodology of many evaluations are often quite variable, and dependent on the commissioning agency, the competencies of the evaluators, and the evaluation approach selected. As such, the evaluations are often very limited in scope, and the results not easily comparable across organisations, crisis contexts or programming areas. In contrast, the CHS integrates the OECD/DAC criteria, but offers a greater level of precision on how criteria such as “effectiveness” can be assessed.
The end result is that in many mature sectors, robust quality assurance processes are the norm, not the exception.

Beyond the immediate advantages to individual organisations, third party verification over time provides a useful database of comparable information on how each of the CHS Commitments, quality criteria, key actions and organisational responsibilities are understood and applied by different organisations. While each organisation’s data remains confidential (unless it wishes to share the information for the purposes of transparency), the overall trends and patterns of CHS implementation can be consolidated and shared widely, to help organisations benchmark themselves against others, and to track overall progress in the sector. It will undoubtedly help the sector as a whole in building a convincing evidence base on how well we are doing at putting people at the centre of our actions. An additional benefit is that this information will be extremely useful when revising and improving the standard over time.

3. Strengthening quality assurance and risk management processes in the sector

If the experience in other industries is anything to go by, third party verification of the CHS should help strengthen quality assurance and risk management mechanisms throughout the sector. Organisations undergoing third party verification tend to invest resources in their internal quality assurance processes to ensure more consistency in quality and performance, but also as a risk management tool to reduce the possibilities of major failures. The end result is that in many mature sectors, robust quality assurance processes are the norm, not the exception.

The humanitarian sector is no different. As noted above, the verification system for the CHS is designed to be flexible. The process does not simply look for evidence of compliance, but also considers whether an organisation’s processes are in the spirit of the CHS, and aligned with its goal of delivering better quality and more effective and accountable responses.

The focus is on assessing the strength of internal quality-control mechanisms and assessing potential areas where there is a risk that the CHS Commitments may not be met. Verification allows organisations to pinpoint areas where more work may be required to ensure more consistent application of the CHS.

The experience in other sectors suggests that this can lead to organisations operating more effectively and efficiently, not just in terms of internal processes, but also in their relationships with key stakeholders and the outcomes of their work. As more and more organisations undergo external verification, the cumulative effect is likely to be better quality assurance processes for the sector in general. Since the CHS is designed to improve performance and accountability to deliver timely, appropriate and relevant interventions, widespread adoption and implementation of the standard should inevitably drive improvements in aid effectiveness throughout the sector itself.

4. Rebuilding trust and confidence in organisations

Another important benefit of third party verification is that it can help restore trust and confidence in organisations engaged in humanitarian actions. Organisations that have undergone third party verification or gained certification often report that staff feel a great sense of accomplishment and pride that comes with meeting a benchmark and having their efforts externally recognised and validated. Just as financial or management audits provide a degree of assurance that good management practices are met, verification of the CHS provides external stakeholders with objective assurances that the organisation is professional and committed to the principles and values behind the CHS. Communicating this externally to supporters and other stakeholders is a means of building trust and confidence in the organisation.

More importantly, over time, as affected communities and local authorities become more aware of the CHS, they will have a clearer idea what they can expect from aid organisations. Third party verification could in future help people determine which organisations are more likely to provide relevant, appropriate and effective responses in an ethical, respectful manner. As more organisations engage in third party verification, this will become an incentive to others to demonstrate that they too are credible, professional and working towards full and consistent application of the CHS.

This is consistent with some of the points made in the Listening Project’s Time to Listen report.47 The report argues that ‘proceduralisation’ makes the current system biased toward bureaucratic systems and processes, rather than genuine people-centred approaches: “People in recipient societies also want the predictability and consistency that procedures can provide. What they want does not differ from what most donors and operational agencies also want — namely, standardized processes for ensuring that outsiders and insiders, in each context, can effectively engage together to promote peace and development.”48

Conclusions and recommendations

The fundamental contribution of the CHS is that it redresses the accountability deficit in the sector, by making sure applying and measuring the standard is explicitly linked to the quality of outcomes for communities affected by crises. However, unless this is accompanied by strong verification mechanisms, there is a risk that the CHS will become yet another empty declaration of good intentions. The WHS faces the same risks: the Summit outcomes will be largely hollow promises if they are not accompanied by a comprehensive framework to measure, verify and report on how we are individually and collectively improving the quality, effectiveness and accountability of aid efforts.

As this chapter has argued, the CHS and its accompanying verification mechanisms are precisely the kind of framework needed to translate the aims of the WHS into practical action on effectiveness and accountability. Third party verification is not an impediment to the continuous learning and improvement advocated by the CHS, but instead a powerful tool to ensure that it can help organisations better equip themselves to understand where improvements are needed, and work more consistently towards meeting the
quality and accountability commitments contained in the CHS. By demonstrating that organisations are competent, professional and working towards an agreed standard and good practices, it can help rebuild the trust and confidence of all stakeholders – and refocus attention on fulfilling our collective commitment and responsibility to provide more effective and accountable responses for people affected by crises. A number of stakeholders have directly or indirectly referenced the CHS in their recommendations to WHS, making it a useful framework for translating the key aims of the Summit into practical actions.49

Here are three concrete recommendations to the WHS on how the CHS can be used to move the aid effectiveness and accountability agenda forward:

1. Use the CHS as a framework to guide capacity-strengthening strategies.

Significant resources have been invested in strengthening the capacity of humanitarian actors over the past few decades. However, the lack of a common and coherent approach to designing and measuring these actions means that it is hard to show the results of those efforts. Through its Nine Commitments and Quality Criteria, the CHS describes the key characteristics of a principled, accountable and effective organisation. This makes it a useful framework to ensure that capacity-strengthening activities are orientated around ensuring organisations have the capacities to meet these aims. The WHS outcomes could support this by specifically recommending all actors use the CHS to support a more coherent and common approach to capacity-strengthening strategies.

2. Use the CHS as a common reporting framework for humanitarian aid effectiveness.

A key challenge identified in the WHS consultations is the inadequate evidence available to indicate the progress we are making towards greater aid effectiveness and accountability. The diversity of approaches by individual organisations, institutional donors and others to monitor and evaluate results makes it a challenge to demonstrate our collective impact. The CHS offers an excellent foundation to track our collective progress towards meeting the WHS goals. Its design is purposely aligned to meet OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, but goes a step further by offering more tangible, concrete examples of what relevant, appropriate, connected and effective assistance means and how it can be demonstrated. Developing a common reporting framework around the CHS, and encouraging all stakeholders (including governments, donors, UN agencies, NGOs, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and others) to report on their contribution to the CHS would allow us to track our collective progress against the aims of improving aid effectiveness and accountability. The WHS outcomes could support this by calling on all actors to align their reporting with the CHS as a means of showing collective impact.

3. Promote widespread third party verification of the CHS by all actors.

There is significant interest and commitment from NGOs to use third party verification against the CHS to assess their capacity, performance and accountability. But not enough actors submit to a similar degree of external scrutiny to demonstrate how they contribute to aid effectiveness. This is particularly the case of institutional and government donors and UN agencies. The CHS can be used to correct this imbalance. Encouraging all actors to support and engage with third party verification would provide evidence on how they contribute to putting communities affected by crises at the heart of their humanitarian actions. Third party verification would reinforce greater transparency, mutual accountability and more equitable relations amongst stakeholders. This in turn would contribute to restoring trust and confidence amongst all stakeholders in the sector, and in due course give affected communities a means by which to hold all organisations to account. The WHS outcomes can support this by calling on all actors to use third party verification against the CHS as a means of showing that their commitments to aid effectiveness and accountability are reflected in their practices.

Acting on these three recommendations would show we are serious about demonstrating our capacity, accountability and performance, with robust evidence that shows people affected by crises are always at the centre of our actions.

49/ See for example the briefing papers synthesising the recommendations from regional and global consultations for the WHS prepared by ALNAP for a global consultation. Available at: http://www.alnap.org/what-we-do/effectiveness/global-forum
Sebastian Cedillos, agricultural technician at FUNDES, a partner of ACT member LWR, inspects a farmer's corn field during a time of drought in El Salvador. © ACT Alliance/Sean Hawkey
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“It is the people, not our mandate, that must provide the rationale for what we do and how we do it. If we are going to achieve results for the people, we must begin with leadership from the countries, the communities and the people we serve. This means our agenda […] is fully informed by the concerns of the people we serve and with whom we partner. This has rightly taken centre stage during the [World Humanitarian] Summit because being people-centred ultimately means recognising the primary role of local communities in preparedness and response.”

Ertharin Cousin
Executive Director of the World Food Programme
Closing remarks at the World Humanitarian Summit Pacific Regional Consultation in Auckland, New Zealand

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