

Launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard and Outcome of the SCHR Certification Review

This report summarises discussions and key outcomes from the launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) and the outcome of the SCHR certification review project which took place on 12 December in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Welcome and keynote

Mr. Morten Jespersen, Under-Secretary for Global Development and Cooperation, Danida gave the welcome speech; **Ms. Gwi-Yeop Son**, Director of the Division for Corporate Programmes, OCHA gave the keynote speech.

Mr. Morten Jespersen celebrated the launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard, saying, “The CHS is the result of a long and very democratic and inclusive process. The result is the broad ownership of the CHS, with hundreds of humanitarian actors now backing it including NGOs, donors, and other international agencies.” He also praised SCHR for, “succeeding in coming up with a suggestion for a sustainable mechanism for external verification and certification that will be available for those who want to walk the extra mile.” He concluded by saying: “The timing for both initiatives is particularly relevant. The challenges in the humanitarian sector have never been more serious and there is an urgent need for improving the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.” Read the full [speech](#).

Ms. Gwi-Yeop Son applauded the efforts of all those involved in the creation of the Core Humanitarian Standard, recognising that it derived from the need for more accountability and greater effectiveness in humanitarian response. However, she cautioned that there were two schools of thought on standards: one that “says we must have standards for accountability, to manage performance and to develop a common understanding”; the other which “says common standards come with trade-offs”. She stated, “by their very nature, standards are exclusive,” and urged participants to, “ensure that our efforts to do the right thing do not come at the cost of excluding others”. Ms. Gwi-Yeop Son concluded by reiterating: “The emphasis placed on accountability to affected people in the Core Humanitarian Standard is the right way forward and is a reminder that we can have a greater and more sustainable impact when we engage more closely with the communities we serve”. Read the full [speech](#).

Launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard

“The German Federal Foreign Office highly welcomes the Core Humanitarian Standard as an essential tool that has been developed at the right time: The massive

increase of humanitarian crisis worldwide makes professionalism imperative in humanitarian assistance and emphasizes the urgent need for a sound and solid humanitarian system that is capable of dealing adequately with the growing challenges.” **The German Federal Foreign Office**

“As a global alliance we seek to strengthen quality and accountability and to maximize the impact of all work undertaken by ACT Alliance members, individually and collectively. That is why we will take action to roll out the Core Humanitarian Standard within ACT Alliance. The Core Humanitarian Standard, rooted in the needs and rights of the communities and people affected by crisis and founded in humanitarian principles, will inspire energy and action for improved quality and accountability within the ACT Alliance and beyond” **Pauliina Parhiala, Director, ACT Alliance**

More statements of support for the core Humanitarian Standard can be found on the [CHS website](#).

Why a Core Humanitarian Standard?

HAP, People In Aid and the Sphere Project came together in 2011 under the Joint Standards Initiative (JSI) with the common goal of bringing about greater coherence between their respective standards, thus strengthening aid workers' ability to put these standards into practice. The overall ambition of the initiative was to ultimately improve humanitarian action in favour of communities and people affected by crisis.

The JSI process [originally identified](#) the following issues: proliferation of standards, lack of awareness about them, and lack of consistent application of the standards. A sector-wide consultation of more than 2,000 humanitarian workers was carried out which did not find evidence, however, to fully support the assumption that proliferation was a major part of the problem. It found that 99.8% of survey respondents saw value in standards and many found the array of different technical standards useful for specific sectors.

The core problems noted were:

“The humanitarian landscape has been transformed and continues to evolve [...] the growing role of the new/non-traditional actors, the multiplication of NGOs, the increased voice of affected populations, the weakening of “principled” humanitarian action and the rapid uptake of information and communication technology in crises.”

In the consultation, the following areas needing to be addressed were:

- the harmonisation of the various standards, with communities and people affected by crisis at the centre and humanitarian principles as the foundation;
- increased action on raising awareness and application of standards; and

The result of the JSI process was a [joint agreement](#) by HAP, People In Aid and the

Sphere Project in May 2013 to develop a common humanitarian standard, map out how support on standards was to be provided at field level, and jointly develop a coherent framework (or 'architecture' as it was called) for the many humanitarian standards. The first priority, decided at the Humanitarian Standards Conference in Geneva in June 2013, was to develop a single standard – now known as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS). In 2014, Groupe URD committed to integrate the CHS criteria within the Quality COMPAS.

The consultation on the Core Humanitarian Standard

The consultation on the Core Humanitarian Standard was launched on 9 December 2013, and concluded after three rounds of consultation, each involving a new draft of the CHS, on 28 October 2014. The [summary consultation report](#) can be read in full.

The consultation on the Core Humanitarian Standard:

- Garnered **close to 1,000 contributions** from individuals, organisations, alliances and networks over the three phases of consultation.
- **Saw three draft versions developed** before arriving at the final version of the Core Humanitarian Standard launched 12 December 2014.
- Was led by the **Technical Advisory Group (TAG)** of 64 members from across the sector who invested 5 days in April and October workshops to orient, draft and, in October, to approve the final version.
- Involved the **Writers Group** representing the sector who brought together the feedback and results from the testing to develop the next version of Core Humanitarian Standard at each stage.
- Was tested by **60 organisations** which invested hundreds of hours **testing the CHS at the headquarters, programme and project level in the field in 20 countries.**

The future of the CHS

The Core Humanitarian Standard is owned by the sector, and institutional arrangements to support the standard on behalf of its users have been agreed by HAP International, People In Aid and the Sphere Project. In addition, in the first quarter of 2015, a set of indicators for the CHS and the completed guidance notes will be available for dissemination. Other tools and guidance will be developed as needed in 2015. The organisation formed by the [merger of HAP International and People In Aid](#) will put the CHS at the centre of its work. Future revisions of the CHS will be overseen by a Steering Committee. A video was shown of an interview of Jasmine Whitbread, CEO of Save the Children International, endorsing the Core Humanitarian Standard. Watch the [video](#).

Points made, issues raised from the panel

*The panel comprised: **Ms. Jane Cocking**, Humanitarian Director, Oxfam GB; **Ambassador Raul Heredia**, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of*

Mexico to the UN in Geneva; Ms. Loretta Hieber-Girardet, Chief, Inter-Cluster Coordination Section, OCHA; Mr. Vikrant Mahajan, Chief Executive Officer, Sphere India; Mr. Arno Wicki, Head, Multilateral Affairs Division Humanitarian Aid Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation.

Coherence was seen as one of the key benefits of those using the Core Humanitarian Standard, with Jane Cocking remarking that the CHS “brings coherence in accountability both within organisations and across the sector.” Loretta Hieber-Girardet also noted that, “Everything in the CHS is what the IASC Transformative Agenda is trying to achieve,” directly addressing concerns that the CHS was not responding to UN accountability initiatives.

The question of how the **Guidance Notes and indicators** will be developed, and who will take ownership of them was raised on several occasions. Loretta Hieber-Girardet urged that the Guidance notes and indicators be developed so that they that “don’t become burdens, but demonstrate how value is added is crucial.” She also posed the question: “How can you develop a mechanism that is not too heavy, requires too many resources, and that you can develop indicators that are measurable?”

Ambassador Raul Heredia and Vikrant Mahajan both noted: “There needs to be a substantial investment in **awareness raising and capacity building**,” for the CHS to thrive. Arno Wicki cautioned complacency, saying, “It is worth pointing out that while there are many governments in the room and that have endorsed this, there are dozens of governments who have never heard of the CHS.” It was agreed that both awareness raising and capacity building would be a priority for the new organisation formed by the merger of HAP and People In Aid.

Although HAP, People In Aid and the Sphere Project were applauded for their coordination in the consultation and production of the Core Humanitarian Standard, the importance of **sector-wide and ground-roots ownership** was reiterated. Vikrant Mahajan requested: “any revisions to the CHS be driven by local actors, and not from the top.” It was widely agreed that the strength of the CHS consultation was its global representation, and that this representation needed to have a clear voice in any future revision of the standard.

Points made, issues raised from the plenary

Representatives from three of the many organisations that tested the CHS during the consultation spoke of their experience, with Reza Chowdhury, Executive Director, COAST Trust summing up the experience by stating: “We believe, through our testing, that the **application of the CHS will give communities and affected populations a voice** in the organisational decision-making. This will also assist in disaster risk reduction. We consider the CHS a step towards the political empowerment of disaster-affected people.” Nic Seris from Transperency International and Chair of the Inter-Agency Accountability Working Group in Nairobi and Zeynep M. Turkmen Sanduvac from Turkey’s Mavi Kalem Social Assistance & Charity Association also commented on their experience in testing the CHS.

The issue of **verification and certification** against the Core Humanitarian Standard was raised, and the importance of national and international organisations having equal access to the verification/certification scheme was reiterated. It was also suggested that a body of evidence demonstrating the impact of certification was needed in order to assess the value of certification. There was a call for the verification/certification scheme to be designed so that it was both rigorous and light, so organisations' administrative capacity was not overburdened.

The **contextualization** of the CHS Commitments and the indicators was a concern for some implementing organisations, and it was noted that there was a need to ensure the indicators were applicable across all regions.

In light of the commitment to providing **complaints mechanisms** for affected populations, one participant noted that there also needed to be a provision in the sector for a mechanism to deal with complaints made by NGOs – against governments, organisations and other humanitarian and development actors.

Outcome of the SCHR Certification Review Project

*“On the SCHR Certification Review Project, as an SCHR member, we believe that third-party verification and certification of organisations will lead to more consistent action and better accountability to populations affected by crises” **ICRC position on the occasion of the presentation of the outcome of the SCHR Certification Review Project and the launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard in Copenhagen on 12 December 2014***

*“WVI is fully supportive of the external verification of use of the standard and is committing to participation in the certification model and approach proposed through the Certification Review project” **World Vision International***

SCHR Certification Review Project problem statement

The project was designed as an exploration of the potential of verification and certification mechanisms to contribute to improved quality, accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian actions. As a working hypothesis, the following problem statements guided the project research and consultations:

- People affected by crises do not consistently receive relevant and effective support from organisations claiming to assist them; nor do organisations consistently hold themselves accountable to them.
- NGOs are under increasing pressure to identify means by which they can distinguish themselves from other actors by objectively demonstrating their transparency, accountability and effectiveness in meeting the needs of affected people.
- The lack of a common understanding of what constitutes principled, effective

- humanitarian action impedes more consistent actions by all actors.
- Current approaches to quality and accountability are not rigorous or systematic enough and do not have a sufficient level of participation to drive sustained application of good practices and standards in the sector.

The findings: Certification will lead to better, more consistent humanitarian actions

Over two years, the SCHR Certification Review Project conducted a multi-stakeholder consultation on the role of verification mechanisms and certification in improving aid accountability and effectiveness, and researched various options and approaches from the humanitarian and other sectors. The main findings were:

1. Certification can lead to better results
2. Can also reinforce trust and credibility
3. Proposed model is feasible
4. Complementary to existing approaches
5. Enough interest to move forward
6. Support and participation critical

There were, however, a few caveats:

Certification is not:

- Relevant for every NGO
- A solution to political or structural issues
- A solution to funding issues
- A replacement for other processes

The system must be:

- Voluntary
- Open and accessible and affordable
- Flexible and adaptable
- Sustainable
- Demonstrate benefits and results

The [Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations](#) can be read in full.

The future of certification

The SCHR certification review project recommended the founding of an independent certification body. Certification would be undertaken against the Core Humanitarian Standard, with certification defined as: “A declaration by a credible, independent, third party that an organisation meets an agreed set of standards.”

The SCHR certification review project recommended:

- An independent CHS certification body
- Scale-up and achieve critical mass
- Mobilise resources to support smaller NGOs
- Fast-track process for mutual recognition

- Build political support and commitment
- Collect rigorous evidence on results
- Market and brand for wider public support

The project outlined the following differences in the model from those which already exist:

- Verifies continuous improvement against the CHS
- Scope not limited to accountability
- Affected people part of verification process
- Recognises and validates existing assurance processes
- Complements donor, government & UN processes

The proposed time frame was as follows:

Start date – 26 November 2014

End date – World Humanitarian Summit, May 2016

An informal Steering Group comprised of interested stakeholders were charged with overseeing the implementation of the certification body road map. Currently these include DANIDA, HAP and People In Aid, SCHR NGOs, and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC). It was requested that additional stakeholders come on board, following the Copenhagen Conference and as the implementation of the road map progresses.

Points made, issues raised from the panel

*The panel for the outcome of the SCHR Certification Review comprised of representatives from SCHR member organisations and included: **Hans van den Hoogen**, Oxfam Novib; **John Plastow**, CARE International; **Anita Bay Bundegaard**, Save the Children International; and **Lisa Henry**, DanChurchAid for ACT Alliance*

Hans van den Hoogen: “External verification and certification leading towards certification would enable us to have a **more coherent way to strengthen internal systems**. I also think certification is an **important tool for southern NGOs**, to help build capacity at the local level.”

John Plastow: “CARE hasn’t gone through a significant certification process, but CARE does plan to engage in a pilot to test the hypothesis that certification can lead to better results. We see certification as potentially challenging to ourselves, and will give us an **opportunity for us to demonstrate our legitimacy**. We’re excited about certification against the CHS as a mechanism but its got to be done properly, at the proper speed.”

Lisa Henry: “We are incredibly pleased that we have the CHS. The experience of ACT Alliance is that though you start slowly, the momentum does grow. In ACT Alliance first one organisation was HAP-certified and gradually the interest grew and now there are six. There now exists a **common platform for discussions on quality and accountability**, and it gives us a common space to have a dialogue in a more

standardized way. We can talk about quality and accountability using the same terms. **For those who say there is no hard evidence about the impact of certification – we have a lot of orgs in our alliance who ARE documenting improvement**, they're getting more feedback from communities, we're changing our programming based on what we're hearing. There is an obligation for those who have the resources like ACT Alliance, of rolling out the CHS, making sure it's accessible and available to all in our networks. So that's responsibility we will take on with our partners."

Anita Bay Bundegaard: "Our approach is pragmatic. We see the key benefit of certification as a way of distinguishing ourselves collectively. Those who are certified will distinguish themselves as a principled humanitarian organisation. And we also believe this is an opportunity to **level the playing field for smaller organisations**. From our analysis we think that in the longer perspective, the governments and maybe international bodies will at some point require some level of quality assurance/verification. So certification against the CHS is a way of pre-empting and preparing ourselves and being able to respond."

Points made, issues raised from the plenary

There was some concern that voluntary certification would promote a two-tier system, whereby certified organisations existed alongside those that were not certified. However, it was pointed out that this is the system as it is currently, which does not appear to cause too many problems.

The question of **how smaller and national organisations would be funded** was raised. It was noted that there was a number of different ways in which resource-poor organisations could be supported, perhaps through a pooled-fund mechanism. It was reiterated that the proposed approach would be **flexible enough to give organisations lots of time to work towards certification if they want to**. One other option for cost-reduction would be joint certification, where two NGOs in the same country might look at being certified at the same time.

There was a call for greater clarity in terms of **what the new proposed model meant for those organisations already certified by HAP and People In Aid**. It was noted that more work was needed on this front, but that a transitions strategy would be one of the priority areas of work in the coming months.

There was concern that an independent certification body would be open to private sector involvement. The project coordinator remarked that the project did look at many different options and models, including the ISO commercial auditing. However, using commercial auditors was found to be very expensive, and commercial auditing firms generally had little understanding of the complexities of the humanitarian sector. He continued: **"The body will have a very clear mandate to provide a high quality service in a financially sustainable manner."**

It was asked if there has been any thought given to **decentralizing the certification body**, either regionally, or by locating the head office of the certification body in the global South. It was suggested that this would be possible over time as enough experience and participation accrues. But before that could happen the body would first need to start certifying in order to build a momentum.

There was a call that if certification was taken as an absolute position by donors, then it could become an **obstacle for emerging actors**, and it was agreed that any certification/verification scheme would need to be accessible by all humanitarian actors. It was noted that certification should not be seen as a pass/fail, but as a longer-term evolving process that brings along all those organisations that engage.

The summing up

Mr. Willem van Eekelen, Chair of the Board of People In Aid took stock of the day by noting that what the Core Humanitarian Standard had achieved and the support for the Core Humanitarian Standard was currently impressive, but that work needed to be done in order to maintain that support and keep the momentum going. Regarding the proposed certification model, he noted a paradox – the success of voluntary certification, both in terms of donor support and the number of organisations **being certified, would have the consequence of making the scheme less voluntary**. Read the [summary](#).

Mr. Einar Hebogård Jensen, Head of the Department for Humanitarian Action, Civil Society and Advisors, Danida gave the closing statement in which he thanked those who orchestrated and took part in the consultation on the Core Humanitarian Standard, seeing the result as a great success. He also reiterated that **Danida, “would like to see the setting up of an independent, professional organisation with a mission and focus on external verification and certification services for the humanitarian sector.”** Read the full [speech](#).

The presentation from the conference can be downloaded [here](#) more information about the Core Humanitarian Standard, please visit www.corehumanitarianstandard.org. For more information about the findings of the SCHR Certification Review Project, please visit: <http://www.schr.info/certification>