



Emergency Capacity Building Project  
A collaborative effort of the Interagency Working Group on Emergency Capacity



The Sphere Project



# Complementarities, Competition and Convergence in Humanitarian Quality Assurance

Report of meeting held on  
13th March 2007  
at St Hugh's College, Oxford, UK

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## 1. Background

ALNAP, Coordination Sud, ECB, Groupe URD, HAP, People In Aid and Sphere are involved in promoting better quality and accountability in humanitarian action. Convening biannually, the group of seven meet to collaborate and promote improved humanitarian responses. Thus far, this process has generated a “questions and answers” information sheet about the Initiatives, shared web links and increased bilateral cooperation. There is an assumption that greater synergy can be found among the initiatives. At their October 2006 meeting in London, the Initiatives agreed that a mapping of current and potential complementarities, areas of competition and options for closer cooperation was desirable.

It was also recognised that recommendations of the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) and the launch of the Clinton Global Initiative have renewed the debate around quality in the humanitarian sector and specifically regulation, accreditation and certification. As many of these issues are closely related to the mandates, objectives and goals of the Initiatives, it was recognised that they should be prepared to facilitate and influence the debate on quality in the humanitarian sector. Group meetings could help develop coherence of action and further enable initiatives to contribute, individually and perhaps collectively, to the sector debates on issues such as professionalisation, quality assurance, certification, regulation. Additionally, discussions in different fora regarding the potential for more coherent approach of the Initiatives suggest that key stakeholders believe that more practical cooperation is both desirable and feasible.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- identify any further issues and challenges;
- identify a collective or majority shared strategic vision for enabling better quality and accountability in the humanitarian sector;
- identify the key drivers for the changes in the relations between the initiatives proposed in the report;
- consider proposals for responding to the above points, specifically identifying new operational linkages between the initiatives present, and possibly also with others.

## 2. Summary

The one-day meeting of executive heads of the quality and accountability (Q & A) initiatives took place on 13th March 2007 in Oxford. It was clear that there were misperceptions by and about each initiative, clarification of which would help advance or increase bilateral work and make collaborative work more likely to succeed. The meeting itself further helped clarify views, improve the Initiatives’ understanding of existing similarities and differences and identify where the Initiatives can work together.

Initiatives recognised that their overarching goal is the same: to improve quality and accountability in humanitarian action. There was a discussion of potential synergies and concrete opportunities for working together. All agreed that there is a gain to working together and provided details on their initial disposition for engagement. Each initiative defined at what level they foresaw their possible engagement and with which initiatives they felt they could embark upon joint work with.

Key issues discussed:

- i. The importance of appropriate **communication** was emphasized as a key point throughout the meeting. It was generally felt that there should be more coherent way of

relaying what Q & A efforts are all about so that they can be more readily understood by those expected to use the initiatives' tools and services. Additionally, the initiatives need to be able to describe themselves much more clearly in order to relate to different audiences: this includes people who do not know about their work and, in particular, field workers and those undertaking training. This is also dependent on being able to convince people at head office/field levels). The group appreciated that stakeholders perceived that there were many Q & A initiatives and referred to the so-called "plethora of initiatives" argument. It was felt that this was partially due to confusion and lack of clarity with regard to the differences and similarities between the different approaches and mandates of the various initiatives

- ii. The Initiatives separately reconfirmed that there may be some advantage in engaging in further significant **cooperation** but that 'integration is not seen as the obvious answer'. To varying degrees, it was felt that greater collaboration is desirable and worth exploring and that more information and guidance is required to understand where the initiatives lie and on how to put quality and accountability into practice. The review of the initiatives in both strategic and operational terms showed greater potential for collaboration.
- iii. Despite the steady and progressive change in the Q & A sector, **differences**, both philosophical and practical, still exist between different initiatives. Discussions reflected the diverse approaches and understandings of Q and A. While all recognise that affected populations are at the heart of Q & A efforts, differences remain. While some of the initiatives are described as projects, others are networks. Differences will have implications for group efforts aimed at collectively improving performance in humanitarian action. However discussions highlighted that the two are not mutually exclusive, and each contains elements of the other. Universal standards in Sphere, for example, are qualified by indicators, which should be adapted as appropriate to individual contexts. On the other hand, discussions also highlighted potential for working together. For example, an important difference is between approaches starting from a rights base applied through universal standards, and others focusing more on individual contexts. An important positive result of the meeting was that Sphere and Groupe URD, once poles apart, confirmed an earlier commitment to work together to explore the potential for complementary use of the Quality Compass and Sphere handbook, particularly at field level.
- iv. The issue of **certification** was discussed both as a means of promoting Q & A and in the light of current debates in the sector. All present agreed that making compliance with regulatory processes mandatory - one of the recommendations of the TEC synthesis report - was unlikely to solve the question of how to improve quality and accountability more effectively. This was an important point in which the group revealed that they shared a consensus. HAP and People In Aid promote voluntary certification.
- v. Most recognise that the **major implementing agencies** which launched and/or participate in the governing structures and networks of many of the Initiatives or are part of their networks have a role to play in rationalising Q & A efforts in the sector and properly communicating positions and approaches to their staff.

### 3. Actions proposed

The following priority action points were identified to define specific short term targets as a starting point for future collaboration.

*At a collective level:*

- i. The chairs of the Initiatives should consider meeting on an annual basis. Some of the Chairs are already speaking bilaterally. It is important that the Chairs assist the Heads of the Initiatives to work out cooperative strategies and provide clarity in Q & A efforts.
- ii. Additionally, the initiatives agreed on the importance of reviewing and redefining the qualifying criteria to be part of the Q & A group. Currently, attendance is open to any interested agency. Who should be part of this group and for what reason? What should a new initiative specifically share with the group? It was felt that an organization or network seeking to join should subscribe to a common shared vision of the Q & A group.

**Action:** Further discussions are needed to define qualifying criteria for Q & A network members. This will be discussed at the next Q & A meeting. In the meantime the “membership” remains the same.

- iii. The idea of a **joint website** was raised and has been discussed in the past as a possible option. There needs to be further discussion on how to take this forward.
- iv. The initiatives committed to articulating their shared vision and a joint statement on quality and accountability. The joint questions and answers information sheet, currently available on each initiative’s website, is being updated.

**Action:** URD & Sphere start the process of jointly drafting a common vision and circulating this via email for comment by others and discussion during the next Q & A meeting.

- v. The importance of mapping how the Initiatives link and fit within Q & A efforts in the sector was discussed throughout the meeting. It was felt that this could only be fully achieved through additional research and trialling at the field level. Piloting of the joint use of the Quality Compass and Sphere would be part of the process.

**Action:** As an initial step, ECB will prepare a visual jigsaw puzzle showing the relationships between the initiatives. This will be used at an internal ECB event in April and electronic copies will be sent to the initiatives to adapt as understanding of the links are better defined.

- vi. Explore developing joint training modules where the trainers are able to deliver a course on the different initiatives. These can be pooled together by collectively training key resource persons

**Action:** This will be looked into by HAP, Sphere & URD.

- vii. Adopt a strategic approach to communicate with national platforms and umbrella bodies such as ACFID, BOND, ICVA, Interaction, SCHR, VOICE. This was advised so as to avoid confusion and not deliver a diluted message.

**Action:** Coordination Sud as a national platform could lead this process.

*At a multilateral level:*

viii. Regarding collaborative projects and the possibility of receiving joint funding, or pooling and investing resources in common activities, further consultation is required at three levels:

- to determine **which initiatives** are ready and willing
- where at organizational and field level further joint activity is most desirable, and
- for what **joint purpose and activity** (i.e.: research, field deployments and projects, trainings, events, handbooks or seminars).

ix. Most of the Initiatives also recognized the need to develop a joint emergency protocol for field deployments in humanitarian emergency contexts.

**Action:** HAP and Sphere will explore the possibility of a joint protocol.

x. The Initiatives will explore possibilities for joint e-learning, and further discuss and exchange lessons learned. As Initiatives share a consultative methodology with NGOs for the development of methods, guides and standards, approaches and lessons from these processes will be exchanged.

**Action:** People In Aid and Sphere will lead the process and potentially URD will collaborate.

*At a bilateral level:*

xi. Those initiatives that share similar methods of verification based on social audit will explore how joint audits can be carried out for their common members.

**Action:** HAP and People In Aid will address this bilaterally.

xii. The suggestion of a trial of HAP certification in France was proposed by HAP. Initially a meeting would be organized with French NGOs to explain the process

**Action:** To be confirmed by Coordination SUD, through a dialogue with URD and HAP in order to identify a date and programme.

xiii. To map potential synergies between different approaches, Q & A Initiatives should be trialled jointly in the field.

**Action:** Sphere and URD through exploring, in one or two places with individual operational agencies, the complementary use of the Quality Compass and Sphere.

## 4. Next Steps

The Initiatives agreed on the next steps forward:

- It was decided that Sphere host the next meeting in Geneva in June.
- It was recognized that a joint message on the importance of quality and accountability should be developed for improving performance in humanitarian action. The meeting would discuss and make efforts to finalize a joint vision for the Q & A group based on an overall statement on quality and accountability. The Initiatives would also establish an overall objective in terms of the changes they are looking for. This would provide the basis for shared strategic vision, explaining the way the Initiatives fit together and what the different approaches are.

- The result would then be presented at the ALNAP Biannual meeting in Plaisians hosted by Groupe URD.

## Annex 1: summary of views expressed at the meeting on 13th March 2007

The table must be read as follows: the Initiatives, as listed on the left column, refer to their views on those mentioned the top row.

Initiatives	ALNAP	C. Sud	ECB	URD	HAP	People In Aid	Sphere
ALNAP		Do not know enough about the platform and encourages at least ALNAP observer membership for Coordination Sud	Provide learning, forums for discussion (multilateral differences)	Bilateral Provide learning, forums for discussion (multilateral differences)	Provide learning, forums for discussion (multilateral differences) Compatible approaches but haven't worked sufficiently	Bilateral Provide learning, forums for discussion (multilateral differences)	Provide learning, forums for discussion (multilateral differences)
C. Sud	Provide learning, forums for discussion (multilateral differences) Core resource information on evaluation		Not discussed yet	Worked with Quality Platform and Quality Project approach	Working group. Invited to explain process of certification to French NGOs	Work on HRM and tools, exchange LL	Dialogue, better understanding
ECB	Provides a platform for engagement with wider sector	Mutual reinforcement of good practice at field level.		Understanding of Quality COMPAS needs to be improved	Mutual reinforcement of good accountability practice at field level.	Mutual reinforcement of staff capacity development (ECB 1)	Mutual reinforcement of good practice at field level.
URD	Quality management Community of practice		Would like to present them our work		Debate on certification	Need to think further. Reference in next edition	Sphere as Pilot of compass
HAP	Compatible approaches but haven't worked sufficiently	Working group. Invited to explain process of certification to French NGOs.	Objectives/membership (direct overlap)	Debate on certification		Joint audits	E-learning
People In Aid	Evaluation questions for HR	Different Levels	Training		Joint audit. Promotion of voluntary certification		Reference People In Aid in next edition of Sphere
Sphere	Training/questions on Sphere	NGOs using Sphere would pilot QC, and or vice versa. Idea to concretise	Mutual references. In publications Benefit for the group to have ECB	NGOs using Sphere would pilot QC, and/or vice versa. Idea to concretise	Mutual reinforcement at field level Mutual references in publications Scope for more cooperation	Make reference in next edition of Sphere	

## **Annex 2: Participants in the meeting on 13th March 2007**

ALNAP, John Mitchell  
Coordination Sud, Nathalie Herlemont  
ECB, Pauline Wilson  
Groupe URD, Véronique de Geoffroy  
HAP International, Nicholas Stockton  
People In Aid, Jonathan Potter  
Sphere, Alison Joyner

Facilitator, Isobel McConnan  
DARA Consultants, Silvia Hidalgo, Riccardo Polastro  
Challenger, Tim Foster