

## Joint Standards Initiative

### Introductory materials for JSI Consultation, last updated 11 Dec 2012

#### 1. THE BASIS FOR THE JOINT STANDARDS INITIATIVE

Over the last 20 years the humanitarian sector has grown into a multi-billion dollar enterprise and consequently has become increasingly professionalised. With this has come the creation of a variety of standards and accountability mechanisms to ensure that humanitarian assistance is high quality, which is especially important given that crisis affected people are often vulnerable and voiceless.

Increasingly the general public, donors and governments are seeking robust assurances that the funding and resources they provide will be used in the best possible way, both in terms of value for money as well as programmes being effective and focused on affected people. Clearly defined and rigorously applied standards can offer this assurance.

Whilst the early 1990's saw an absence of standards, the current situation may pose the opposite problem, with at least seventy<sup>1</sup> standards initiatives now in existence in the humanitarian sector. Field workers and others have experienced a challenge in combining and implementing the number of standards in an efficient, complementary, and effective way. In a sector characterised by high turnover, the need to rapidly train new staff in the wake of disasters and a wide variety of agencies, from small community based organisations to enormous federated networks, has rendered it difficult to reliably and consistently apply the main standards.

In response to the perceived confusion, lack of awareness and inconsistent application of standards, three of the leading standards initiatives (HAP International, People In Aid and the Sphere Project) have launched a process to seek greater coherence for users of standards, in order to ultimately improve humanitarian action to people affected by disasters. This pioneering collaborative effort is called the Joint Standards Initiative (JSI) and has the potential to significantly improve quality and accountability across the sector.

The JSI Stakeholder Consultation is a key element of the JSI process, which will generate evidence from a wide range of actors across the humanitarian sector and in turn this will shape how the process develops and inform the decisions made by the Boards of the three standards bodies on their future development. The focus of the 3 month JSI Stakeholder Consultation is exploring how to achieve improved coherence through a rigorous inquiry that is consultative, open, evidence-based and responds to aid-workers' needs.

#### The case for standards?

Whilst the initiatives acknowledge that standards and accountability mechanisms are not the panacea for improving organisational performance, they contend that better standards will contribute to better humanitarian response.

Standards need to be robust and comprehensive, yet simple and user-friendly. Coherent, easy-to-use standards are more likely to be put into practice and hence to make a difference in the lives of conflict and disaster-affected people. The Joint Standards Initiative is about contributing to a standards system which is more straightforward for users and agencies.

#### 2. BACKGROUND & HISTORY OF Q&As

The common starting point for many of the quality and accountability initiatives was the **The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief**, which in turn has its roots in International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian principles.

The genesis can be traced back to 1991, when the French Red Cross proposed a Code of Conduct. The Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) took this

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<sup>1</sup> Quality & Accountability Mapping Exercise undertaken by Liza Cragg on behalf of JSI in Dec 2012

idea and developed it into the current Code of Conduct, published in 1994, which today has become the guiding framework for the humanitarian sector. However, the Code does not include any compliance mechanisms.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide highlighted the accountability deficit in humanitarian assistance and the 1996 Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda included numerous recommendations around further promoting the Code of Conduct, improving staff management, learning and including the voice of affected people. These recommendations were taken up as the starting point for the 3 standards initiatives.

**People In Aid** emerged as a result of a specific research project on the management and support of staff during the Rwanda crisis. After 1995, 12 agencies led a sector-wide collaboration and consultation from which the People In Aid Code of Good Practice was published in 1997. People In Aid became a registered charity in 2000 and the Code was revised and became the Code of Good Practice in 2003.

Rooted in efforts to gather best practice in disaster relief work dating back to 1995, **the Sphere Project** was officially launched by a group of NGO's and the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement in July 1997. Its goal was to develop a set of universal minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian response; resulting in the Sphere Handbook. After a trial edition in 1998, the first handbook was published in 2000; with revised editions published in 2004 and again in 2011. As well as minimum standards the handbook includes the Humanitarian Charter.

The **HAP International** story is more complex. After the Rwanda evaluation, the British Red Cross suggested the idea of a humanitarian ombudsman. The idea gained international traction, along with concerns about its feasibility. The Humanitarian Accountability Project was established with three field trials in Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Cambodia. The report on these trials recommended an international self-regulatory body focused on affected populations. This prompted a move from the idea of an ombudsman to a quality and accountability membership organisation. The HAP Standard, a quality assurance system against which humanitarian organisations can self-regulate, was published in 2007 and revised in 2010.

The three initiatives were thus developed in parallel, whilst developing their own distinctive characteristics (human resources, technical standards and the humanitarian charter and beneficiary accountability). While a clear identity was important, there was also a lot of overlap in membership and constituency.

Since then, Sphere, HAP and People In Aid have conducted some joint deployments to disaster-affected countries, the latest joint deployment between all three taking place in the Horn of Africa in Summer 2011.

### **3. WHY IS 'COHERENCE' BEING CONSIDERED**

**Tools and standards** - there is a sense that there is a proliferation of tools and standards in the sector, with some overlaps and possibly some gaps, making it difficult for aid workers and agencies to rapidly train new staff, integrate the standards into a coherent system, and ensure consistency amongst approaches. In addition there may be some duplication in content and process amongst the standards. This also may result in agencies and individuals combining and training on the standards in a sub-optimal way, potentially missing out important elements.

**Support to field programmes** - there is an overload of information going to the field, and humanitarian staff often struggle to have a clear picture of what is relevant to their work and are confused by the number of handbooks, indicators and approaches. This can lead to a "pick and choose" attitude, and sometimes humanitarian organisations have to provide further guidance themselves about what is required.

**Consistent application of the Standards** - whilst many humanitarian organisations claim to follow the standards, the reality is that there is inconsistent application of the standards across programmes and organisations. This may be related to the ease of use and accessibility of standards, competing pressures on time, staff training, the compliance mechanisms in place etc.

#### 4. COMMONALITIES AND DISTINCTIVENESS BETWEEN THE 3 STANDARDS

**Commonalities** – the three initiatives have much in common, particularly common roots and history, ultimately the same ultimate target audience i.e. affected people; the desire to improve based on consulting affected populations; all seek continuous improvement of their standards; and there is some commonality of membership.

**Distinctiveness** – despite the commonalities, the initiatives each have a unique history and have developed distinct approaches and have different constituencies. Some of the more obvious areas of difference are as follows:

Humanitarian vs Development - whilst the current focus of the JSI is on the humanitarian sector, (both Sphere Project and HAP International having a predominantly humanitarian focus, whilst People In Aid cover both the humanitarian and development sectors). Nevertheless the standards are applicable across the humanitarian and development sectors.

Compliance vs certification – Sphere takes a voluntary approach with its minimum standards, whereas both HAP and People In Aid have external verification mechanisms available, to demonstrate compliance with their standards.

Technical standards vs Process standards – as well as the Humanitarian Charter and Core Standards, the Sphere Project includes a series of technical standards, whereas the HAP and People In Aid standards are focused on processes to ensure accountability to affected populations and to staff, volunteers and organisational effectiveness respectively.

Membership vs Open – HAP and People In Aid are membership based organisations, whereas the Sphere Project is governed by a Board of 18 agencies, without a membership.

#### 5. POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF JSI

A variety of possible outcomes *could* emerge from the Joint Standards Initiative consultation. At one extreme, the consultation may conclude there is such limited common ground between the three initiatives, that they should continue to operate as they are, seeking opportunities to collaborate on an ad-hoc basis. At the other extreme, the findings may point to a high degree of common ground and a need to closely collaborate even to the point of integrating the standards.

Nevertheless there is no predetermined outcome to the JSI process. The stakeholder consultations are designed to encourage all interested parties to be able to provide their views on the future of the humanitarian quality and accountability landscape, with particular reference to HAP, People In Aid, and the Sphere Project and we look forward to hearing your feedback over the coming months.

Robert Schofield, 11 Dec 2012