2020 - 2023
Strategy

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List of Acronyms

CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard for Quality and Accountability
DAC	Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
HQAI	Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative
IEC	International Electrotechnical Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SCHR	Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response

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HQAI 2020 – 2023 Strategy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard for Quality and Accountability (CHS) in 2014, HQAI was created in 2015 as a not-for-profit association to offer independent certification and verification, to promote quality and accountable assistance and protection to vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities.

The evolution of the humanitarian environment since 2015 presents HQAI with opportunities that relate to the reaffirmation on the part of major stakeholders, such as in the 2016 Grand Bargain, of their commitments to the quality and accountability of humanitarian action. Challenges are linked to evolutions that tend to limit the effectiveness of humanitarian actors and their capacity to uphold humanitarian principles.

Since 2016, HQAI has developed into an efficient and reliable organisation. HQAI's business model is built on the assumption that the income from its services will cover the cost of running the organisation. Presently, a wide range of humanitarian and development organisations benefit from the auditing services it provides. A recent independent review of the CHS Alliance verification scheme confirms HQAI and its partner the CHS Alliance are moving in the right direction. However, the efforts must continue as the uptake of verification against the CHS is not as rapid as originally predicted. Donors in particular and host governments increasingly recognise independent audits as a tool that completely or in part satisfies their due diligence requirements. This recognition is however progressing slower than initially expected.

The 2020-2023 strategy is based on HQAI's first four years of existence as a not-for-profit start-up and define the roadmap to ensure the sustainability of an institution designed to build trust among its stakeholders and enhance the quality and accountability of humanitarian and development actors.

Values, mission and vision

HQAI is driven by its **values** of competence, responsibility, openness and confidentiality. Its mission to **provide professional independent quality assurance services to improve the work of humanitarian and development organisations** aims at enhancing the trust of various stakeholders, that the work of these organisations is effective and accountable.

Strategic objectives

HQAI is committed to:

1. **Enable organisations to improve and maintain quality and accountable services for vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities by**

   - Working in partnership with the CHS Alliance on the implementation of its Verification Scheme;

   - Identifying and developing meaningful quality assurance services that preserve the operating space for quality and accountable aid by working with partners along the chain of delivery, from donors to vulnerable populations.

2. **Develop the evidence to evaluate the impact of independent quality assurance on organisations' responses to the needs of vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities by**

   - Collecting and analysing a unique range of data on the practices of organisations in their efforts to implement principles and standards;

   - Communicating and sharing evidence-based data with stakeholders.

3. **Secure the widest possible support for independent quality assurance by**

   - Enhancing communication on the value of certification for all stakeholders;

   - Facilitating access to HQAI services for national and local responders;

     - Ensuring the Subsidy Fund is sufficiently resourced;

     - Further developing the group scheme in the national context (with the view to creating a national auditing capacity) and around specific crises or clusters (with the view to measuring collective performance);

   - Promoting the value of independent quality assurance for humanitarian and development organisations including local and national responders by encouraging donors and governments of countries affected by disasters and crises to recognise HQAI's quality assurance.

4. **Adapt and strengthen HQAI's organisational capacities to sustain its growth and the continued relevance of its actions by**

   - Ensuring that the appropriate skills and experiences are available to guide its governance and operations;

   - Working to ensure that its core work i.e. the provision of independent quality assurance, will be self-supporting by the end of 2023;

   - Maintaining a dialogue with its donors on HQAI's contribution to the evolution of quality assurance for humanitarian and development actors.

Part 1

1.1 Origin of HQAI

In the aftermath of the 2010 humanitarian response to the Haiti earthquake and the Pakistan floods, SCHR organisations, recognising the increasing number and diversity of actors involved in responding to humanitarian needs in highly complex situations, and the proliferation of standards applicable to humanitarian organisations and staff, embarked on a two-pronged initiative:

- The promotion of a core humanitarian standard, which would both specify what people and communities affected by crisis can expect from good humanitarian action and what this entails for the organisations and their staff involved in the response;

- The exploration of the potential of verification and certification to contribute to improved quality, accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian action guided by the following problem statements:

  - 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 and communities;

  - 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 SCHR decision to promote a core humanitarian standard triggered the Joint Standards Initiative, which resulted in the launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard for Quality and Accountability (CHS) in December 2014.

Research and consultations by the SCHR Certification project (2012 – 2014) resulted in the proposal of an initial model for independent verification and certification, which was tested in four studies carried out in different humanitarian contexts with different types of non-government organisations (NGOs). These studies reviewed NGOs' use of standards and verification mechanisms and assessed how relevant, compatible and feasible such a model could be in adding value to existing quality assurance processes. The final model was approved by SCHR Principals and announced at the launch of

the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) in December 2014 together with a road map for a way forward developed in association with HAP and People In Aid which had also wanted to set up a certification organisation. This resulted in the creation of the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI) in July 2015.

As outlined in the Articles of Association, HQAI's purposes are:

A. To provide third-party quality assurance of aid providers against recognised humanitarian principles and standards, so as to promote quality and accountable assistance and protection to vulnerable people and communities affected by or at risk of crisis.

B. To develop and administer quality and accountability third-party quality assurance methodologies applicable to different aid providers in different contexts;

C. To monitor and report on the impact of third-party quality assurance against the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and other relevant standards on the quality of assistance and protection provided to populations affected by or at risk of crisis;

D. To promote third-party quality assurance against the CHS and other humanitarian standards to encourage demand and support for the services of the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative;

E. To promote the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative as widely as possible to encourage support in the form of donations, gifts, grants, and subventions of any kind, whether as monies, goods or services.

1.2 Evolution of humanitarian environment since 2015

The evolution of the humanitarian and development environment since 2015 presents HQAI with both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities relate to the reaffirmation on the part of major stakeholders of their commitments to the quality and accountability of humanitarian action, such as in the 2016 Grand Bargain. The challenges are linked to evolutions that tend to limit the space for humanitarian action as humanitarian principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence - are ignored by some parties to conflicts or trumped by security-related considerations. More recently, the humanitarian sector was badly shaken by sexual misconduct scandals which have put back the question of do-no-harm and accountability of organisations to the forefront of public concerns. Nevertheless, the slower than expected uptake of quality certification against the CHS by humanitarian and development organisations indicates that the merits of independent verification and certification are not yet sufficiently recognised.

Since 2015, large-scale violations of international humanitarian law have continued to take place in many conflict situations. Moreover, the space for humanitarian action has, at times, also been subjected to limitations inspired by state-security concerns or migration policy considerations. These trends affect not only the effectiveness of humanitarian actors but their capacity to uphold humanitarian principles, hence their credibility. Challenges also include ensuring the security of vulnerable peoples' personal data collected during humanitarian operations.

1.2.1 Implications for HQAI's Mission

The 2016 Grand Bargain reaffirmed four commitments of major humanitarian stakeholders that are particularly relevant to HQAI's mission and may contribute to its enhancement:

A. The 'participation revolution' i.e. the necessity to include people and communities receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives. The implementation of this concern, still in its initial stages, has the CHS at its heart;

B. The empowerment of national and local responders to disasters and crises by, *inter alia*, granting them a more direct access to international funds. Certification of local and national humanitarian actors may contribute to that objective as it becomes increasingly recognised both by international donors and relevant national authorities;

C. Enhanced engagement between humanitarian and development actors, a reality in the field, strengthens the need to use a common framework, such as that provided by the CHS, to assess the quality and accountability of their action;

D. As it enhances accountability and risk management against recognised standards, certification may also contribute to the harmonisation and simplification of due diligence and reporting requirements.

There is an urgent need to reaffirm the rationale for upholding humanitarian principles and more broadly the do-no-harm concept that is at the root of accountability of humanitarian and development action. As humanitarian and development actors come under increased public scrutiny, the quality and accountability of their activities based on these principles is more than ever relevant. Independent certification against internationally recognised standards may contribute to enhance the standing of humanitarian and development organisations vis-à-vis their stakeholders by recognising the quality and accountability of their actions. This recognition, in combination with other elements, may in turn contribute to safeguard the space for quality and accountable aid.

1.3 The HQAI Business Model: challenges and opportunities

1.3.1 A start-up

HQAI was founded in 2015, as a not-for-profit NGO. HQAI was developed to offer professional high-quality auditing services which are tailor-designed for organisations working with vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities.

Initially, the idea of HQAI was conceived for organisations which were specifically operating in humanitarian contexts, but as the concept matured and in line with the thinking behind the CHS, it became clear that most dual or multi-mandated organisations institutionally have one accountability framework which cuts across both humanitarian and development action. So, to be relevant, HQAI offers services which span both.

HQAI audits the quality and accountability of humanitarian and development organisations.

The business model is built on the assumption that charging a fee for independent quality assurance services will cover the cost of running HQAI once a critical mass of partners uses its quality assurance scheme.

HQAI has developed and continues developing tools and mechanisms to make its quality assurance scheme accessible to all, including small national NGOs. This includes the establishment of a Subsidy Fund and a Group scheme allowing several independent organisations to jointly apply for an audit.

A Group audit assesses the capacity of the Group to undertake its own quality assurance. Groups can be formed by national networks of NGOs, which de facto means creating a local auditing capacity within an internationally recognised system. The Group scheme also offers the possibility to assess collective performance, for example of agencies responding to a specific crisis or within a cluster.

1.3.2 Auditing services and standards

HQAI implements and complies with the auditing principles of impartiality, competence, responsibility, openness, confidentiality and responsiveness to complaints. HQAI applies these principles in its engagement with all actors along the chain of quality and accountability. The implementation of the auditing principles, along with the quality and professionalism of its processes, is annually demonstrated through HQAI's formal accreditation against the ISO/IEC 17065:2012 standard.

1.3.3 Securing quality and accountability for vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities

A key condition for the delivery of quality and accountable aid to vulnerable and/or at-risk populations is that all actors along the chain, from donors to NGOs and vulnerable populations, have the space to operate according to their mandates and principles.

HQAI works closely with its partner organisation, CHS Alliance, holder of the CHS Verification Scheme, which has benefitted from significant uptake by organisations, donors and governments in the last few years. By using the CHS as a basis for its audits, HQAI participates in establishing a common reference throughout the chain, both for implementing good practice by organisations and for the benefit of affected populations, and assessing their application, by donors and host governments.

With a quality assurance audit under their belts, organisations can measure their actions against indicators and better integrate external and internal quality control mechanisms. Accordingly:

1)   the CHS becomes integrated in the day-by-day operations; and

2)   external audits become "routine", being understood as a tool for improvement rather than a threatening process.

HQAI has found that while this work is important and beneficial for organisations of all sizes and types, it is essential for many national organisations. Indeed, HQAI's quality assurance against the CHS can and should be an important tool to contribute to the implementation of Grand Bargain commitments.

1.3.4 Challenges and opportunities

There is significant uptake of verification against the CHS, even though our initial expectations for this to happen were more ambitious. We will continue to cooperate with all our partners, including operational organisations and governments, to ensure that verification can facilitate the effective delivery of accountable humanitarian and development action. In that perspective, we will work towards a broad recognition by donor and host governments of:

1)   the CHS as the reference standard to measure the quality and accountability of aid; and

2)   independent audits as one tool that can at least partially satisfy their requirements in terms of access to funds or authorisation to operate, and lessening the related administration burden.

It has been demonstrated that registrations for HQAI's services surge when donors recommend, recognise or require independent quality assurance against the CHS from their partners. Some progress is being made with donors, but little has been done with host governments.

Thus, neither the centrality of the CHS nor the incentives for and benefits of independent quality assurance are currently sufficiently understood or tangible enough to

convince a high number of organisations to invest both in the CHS and HQAI's audits against the CHS.

The systemic benefits accrued from independent quality assurance are real, but complex to grasp. HQAI has developed significant communication and training efforts to integrate this understanding within the sector. This challenge is of particular importance since understanding goes hand in hand with knowledge of quality assurance and of HQAI's auditing processes. This knowledge will, in turn, increase with the uptake of independent quality assurance in the sector. It is recognised however that a greater integration of quality assurance into the sector will take time.

Early indications are that high-quality independent quality assurance is of benefit to the sector. There is important potential for rebuilding the current trust deficit that plagues the sector, offering reliable cost-saving tools to minimise administrative requirements for organisations and donors, thus creating tangible incentives for the use of HQAI's services. More importantly, these benefits are ultimately advantageous for vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities who work with reliable, efficient and accountable organisations they can trust.

HQAI has analysed the trends and integration of quality assurance into the sector and believes that the business model on which the strategy is predicated is sound and deliverable. As incentives will be gradually established, the cost of HQAI's auditing services will be more bearable for the sector and income from HQAI's auditing services will generate sufficient resources to cover core activities by the end of 2023. The strategy allows for HQAI to consider developing tools to address other aspects of quality assurance. For example modules bridging CHS audits with more specific standards or sets or requirements. These can be related to donors due diligence or specific themes that may be addressed in more details by other standards than the CHS.

Part 2

VALUES

HQAI is driven by its values of competence, responsibility, openness and confidentiality.

HQAI works in partnership with humanitarian and development organisations which work with vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities. HQAI is committed to promote, through its audits and standards, the best practices of the aid sector.

VISION

Organisations that work with vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities are effective and accountable to their stakeholders.

HQAI's vision is to ensure its independent services enhance the trust of various stakeholders, from affected populations, governments and donors, that the work of organisations with vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities is effective and accountable.

MISSION

HQAI provides professional independent quality assurance services to improve the work of organisations with vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities.

HQAI works independently to review the effectiveness and accountability of organisations against standards that are applicable to their work with vulnerable and/or at-risk people and communities.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

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