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## **Being Good at Doing Good? Quality and Accountability of Humanitarian NGOs**

**Dorothea Hilhorst**  
**Disaster Studies**  
**Wageningen University**

*Quality enhancement of humanitarian assistance is far from a technical task. It is interwoven with debates on politics of principles and people are intensely committed to the various outcomes these debates might have. It is a field of strongly competing truths, each with their own rationale and appeal. The last few years have seen a rapid increase in discussions, policy paper and organisational initiatives regarding the quality of humanitarian assistance. This paper takes stock of the present initiatives and of the questions raised with regard to the quality of humanitarian assistance.*

*Keywords:* humanitarian NGOs, humanitarian principles, quality, accountability.

This paper is based on a review of literature and on 27 interviews about ideas and practices to do with humanitarian quality held in 2001 with representatives of humanitarian NGOs, donors and staff members of humanitarian quality initiatives (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The interviews were particularly valuable in bringing out the interweaving nature of different aspects of the discussions. Where literature normally addresses either the politics and principles of humanitarian assistance or matters of organisation, the interviews show how highly principled statements seamlessly intertwine with organisational politics and patterns.

After providing a background to the discussion, the paper distinguishes four different approaches to quality that may partly overlap in practice, but mark different principles and styles of assistance. These are the organisational management approach, the rights approach, the contingency approach and the ownership approach. The discussion then moves to discuss the use of standards in humanitarian assistance. This issue has recently raised a lot of controversy, in particular in relation to the Sphere Project for standards of aid. This is followed by addressing the relationship between quality and accountability and, finally, a discussion of some of the current methods of quality enhancement.

Although the discussion on the quality of humanitarian assistance has focused mainly on the implementing humanitarian organisations, it is important to note that they are certainly not the only ones responsible for the quality of humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian complex is composed of many other actors that all have an impact on the quality of assistance. Among these are foreign policy actors, donors, UN organisations, peacekeeping forces, the media and a range of local institutions. Although many of the points raised about NGO quality sometimes apply equally or more to these other actors, this is outside the scope of this paper. I shall return to this point, however, in the section on quality and accountability.

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|---|---|
| Name:<br>Address:<br>Year of initiation:<br>Objective:<br>Participants:<br>Main activities:           | International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)<br><a href="http://www.icva.ch">http://www.icva.ch</a><br>1962<br>• To promote and support NGO network and advocacy<br>Over 70 member agencies around the world.<br>• Interactive information system<br>• Advocacy<br>• Partnership in Action programme, UNHCR-NGO cooperation   |
| Name:<br>Address:<br>Year of initiation:<br>Objective:<br>Participants:                               | International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies<br><a href="http://www.ifrc.org">http://www.ifrc.org</a><br>1994<br>Voluntary code which seeks to guard standards of behaviour<br>207 signatories  |
| Name:<br>Year of Initiation:<br>Objective:<br>Main publications:<br>Contributors:<br>Main activities: | People in Aid<br><a href="http://www.peopleinaid.org.uk">http://www.peopleinaid.org.uk</a><br>1996<br>Improve support and management of field staff and volunteers<br>People In Aid Code Of Best Practice in 1997<br>11 NGOs/ networks<br>• Three-year auditing trial with 11 development and relief NGOs.  |
| Name:<br>Year of initiation:<br>Objective:<br>Main publications:<br>Contributors:<br>Main activities: | The Sphere Project<br><a href="http://www.sphereproject.org">http://www.sphereproject.org</a><br>1997<br>Universal minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian assistance<br><i>The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response</i><br>A coalition of European and US NGOs<br>• 1997–1998 Phase 1: Preliminary edition of a Sphere handbook<br>• 1998–2000 Phase 2: Dissemination, debate and implementation<br>• 2000–2003 Phase 3: Continuation and evaluation  |
| Name:<br>Year of initiation:<br>Objective:<br>Participants:<br>Main activities:                       | Humanitarian Accountability Project<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:haproject@hotmail.com">haproject@hotmail.com</a><br>2000<br>To strengthen accountability towards those affected by crisis situations<br>CARE, CARITAS, DANIDA, DFID, DRC, FUNDEMOS, IFRC, OFADEX<br>OXFAM, SLANGO, SSRIC, UNHCR and World Vision International<br>• At field-level: action-research to promote accountability<br>• At organisational level: accountability mechanisms that work<br>• At sector-wide level: generate commitment to accountability |

**Figure 1** Five examples of humanitarian quality initiatives

## Background to the quality discussion

Ever since Henri Dunant witnessed the Battle of Solferino in 1859, there have been currents and undercurrents of debate on the responsibilities and qualities of humanitarian assistance. During the 1990s these swelled into a cascade of discussions, publications and initiatives, especially after the Rwanda crisis in 1994. The interagency evaluation (1996) held the year after sadly concluded that, once political failure led to the crisis, many more lives could have been saved had humanitarian organisations better coordinated and acted more professionally. Discussions on the

quality of humanitarian action were related to the proliferation of humanitarian principles, to an increasing critique of humanitarian organisations and to increasing ambiguities on the question what constitutes humanitarian action.

### *The proliferation of humanitarian principles*

The heightened concern for issues of quality stems partly from (and found further expression through) a proliferation of humanitarian principles. Humanitarian principles may be considered the basis of any definition of quality of humanitarian assistance. It is important to note that the term ‘humanitarian principles’ refers to moral principles to mitigate the destructive impact of war, but is also used — as is the case here — to refer to principles of humanitarian action. Principles of humanitarian action are derived from international humanitarian law but are not integral to the conventions that regulate warfare (Leader, 1998). Humanitarianism started with the Geneva Convention of 1864 and recognition of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). After the Second World War, with its massive abuse of humanitarian ideals, three more Geneva Conventions elaborated the rules of war. Through the Geneva Conventions, belligerent parties are obliged to provide access for humanitarian assistance. ICRC was given this space to operate on the condition that it remained neutral and impartial. The latter became two major humanitarian principles (Leader, 2000: 12).

Conflicts in the last two decades have often made the implementation of international humanitarian law extremely complicated. They are mostly intra-state in nature and occur in societies where the legitimacy of the state is low or even completely lacking, at least in the eyes of some of the groups in the society. The civil population is often the direct target group of violence and accounts for 90 per cent of all victims, while warfare is spread over a large area and fragmented in nature. The characteristics and status of belligerents are hard to define, and they are difficult to hold accountable for their obligations according to humanitarian law, increasingly turning humanitarian action into a ‘mission impossible’. Where international conventions seem hardly feasible, humanitarian organisations have had to reconsider their missions and have become more diversified in the interpretation of principles. Leader distinguishes, for instance, three different approaches to neutrality that each imply different strategies for humanitarian action (Leader, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

In addition, we might say that humanitarian activities have become elaborated, setting increasing numbers of parameters for quality. On the basis of a survey among humanitarian organisations, Minear and Weiss identified eight widely shared principles. Apart from the so-called classic principles, like neutrality, impartiality, independence and voluntarism, humanitarian organisations had come to adopt a new generation of principles including accountability and the need for appropriateness and contextualisation (Minear and Weiss, 1993). Humanitarian organisations have, to different degrees, also adopted additional, but not always equally compatible, sets of principles such as human rights, justice (directed to fair and equal relationships), sustainable development, and conflict prevention and peace building. This proliferation of principles was partly transmitted from the field of development, partly imposed by public pressure, but mainly followed from lessons learned from the humanitarian experience. The principles reflect increasing concern about the effectiveness and impact of aid. Rather than resolving humanitarian crises, humanitarian action is thought liable to be part of the problem by feeding into the

economies of war, acting as a diversion of political solutions or undermining people's coping and livelihood capacities. Concerned about the impact of their work, humanitarian organisations have to different degrees expanded their explicit or implicit goals far beyond the immediate alleviation of human suffering.

Where the proliferation of principles may lead to debate, another area of conflict with a long pedigree concerns the question how binding the principles actually are (Macrae, 1996). One view about this aspect rests on the idea of the humanitarian imperative, stipulating that humans suffering life-threatening circumstances have the right to protection and assistance. The humanitarian system, as a consequence, has the obligation to deliver quality protection and assistance. On the other hand, there are those who emphasise the humanitarian spirit. This is the expression of the idea that humanitarian action is voluntary. Humanitarian crises, in this view, are the results of political failure, in particular the lack of adherence to international humanitarian law. Humanitarian assistance, then, is not an answer to the crisis, but a civil response triggered by the humanitarian impulse to alleviate human suffering. As we shall see, the two views present different ramifications for the issues of quality, standards and accountability discussed in this paper.

### *Critique of humanitarian organisations*

Another impulse to the current interest in quality issues is formed by increasingly critical questions about the performance and accountability of humanitarian agencies.<sup>3</sup> The number of these agencies has dramatically increased, as has the size of their operations, especially since the early 1990s when humanitarian crises increased. Budgets for humanitarian assistance began to rise since the mid-1980s. DAC donors' budgets rose from US\$600 million in 1985 to over \$1.0 billion in 1990, to \$3.5 billion in 1994. After 1994 it started to decline again and in 1998 it stood at \$2.8 billion, then, mainly because of the Balkan crisis, it increased to \$4.4 billion in 1999 (ICRC, 1999, 2001).

The increase has led to mounting confusion on what constitutes a humanitarian organisation. A great diversity of organisations have taken on humanitarian programming. These range from 'pure' humanitarian NGOs to development organisations taking on this additional aspect, to all kinds of organisations that have no clear history but wish to 'jump on the bandwagon'. Among these, one may find organisations that take on a humanitarian identity to disguise a political agenda or an interest in profiting from humanitarian activity. One may also find well-intentioned individuals who have humanitarian motives but no expertise in delivering the required services. Without clear criteria of what constitutes humanitarian organisations, it is hard to distinguish the good from the bad.

In addition, there have been increasing allegations that humanitarian organisations are competitive over funding, media exposure and even beneficiaries and that they would be unaccountable, especially towards their beneficiaries. Furthermore, it has been argued that humanitarian organisations are disinclined to coordinate their activities. This concern was particularly heightened by the Kosovo crisis, which was called a 'circus where the international community was arguing over institutional self-interests while at the same time telling the Kosovars to live harmoniously together' (van Brabant, 2000: 23). Of course, there are large differences among organisations in the extent to which they fit this bill. Humanitarian action is given by a mixture of organisations and there is concern that the better organisations may be damaged (in

work or image) by less professional, unethical or fraudulent NGOs or by organisations that intentionally or unintentionally meddle in political, ethnic or religious conflicts. This provides one of the motivations from within humanitarian organisations to seek measures to enhance the quality of humanitarian assistance on a sector-wide basis.

### ***What constitutes humanitarian action?***

This paper concerns humanitarian action in the sense of preventing and alleviating human suffering by providing care and assistance. However, in the last years, humanitarian action has attained an additional meaning in a military sense. During the Kosovo crisis, NATO bombing was presented and legitimised as a humanitarian intervention. This unfortunate label of humanitarian action to denote the causing of suffering and destruction in order to prevent further suffering, has evoked ambiguity regarding the definition of humanitarian action, especially in 'recipient' countries and has led to increased discussion regarding the question of what is good humanitarian assistance. This was further complicated when the war on terrorism combined bombing and food aid in Afghanistan. Although the questions raised by humanitarian (military) interventions fall outside the scope of this paper, they form an important background to the discussion.

### ***Quality politics***

Taking these recent developments together, it becomes obvious that discussions on the issue of quality are highly political. This is complicated by the fact that two kinds of politics are at stake and intertwine. Underlying different positions are real controversies over principled politics from which different quality policies follow. However, in practice these get entangled with more mundane organisational politicking and rivalry, which may magnify or pollute the principled discussions.

## **Four approaches to the quality of humanitarian assistance**

From literature, statements and the interviews, it appears there are four emerging traditions when one examines the issue of quality of humanitarian assistance.

### ***The organisational management approach***

Humanitarian organisations are increasingly adopting notions and instruments of quality enhancement that originate from business and industry. The best known of these is the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), where ISO 9001 and 9002 provide a comprehensive model for quality assurance, through the development and operation of a Quality Management System (Griekspoor, 2000: 10). With the ISO, organisations submit themselves to developing a set of procedures, mainly focused on finance and the project cycle, and design mechanisms to make their performance transparent and accountable. Apart from the ISO, there are numerous other quality systems, some of them developed specifically for the voluntary or health sector. A

number of these have been adopted by different humanitarian organisations, most notably the Excellence Model developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (Griekspoor and Sondorp, forthcoming; see also Borton, 2001). In the US, 160 private relief, development and refugee assistance agencies form InterAction, a coalition that developed the Private Voluntary Organizations' Standards (PVO standards) ensuring accountability to donors, professional competence and quality of service.

Quality systems emphasise different philosophies. Many focus on process and rest on the assumption that investing in better decision-making and management procedures will result in better performance or output. Others emphasise quality as an attitude, as always on the horizon: never to be achieved (total quality) but something to aim for always (Slim, 1999: 23). This idea of continuous improvement resonates with the idea of learning organisations that emphasise the adoption of mechanisms that build into the organisation the capacity to learn from one's own and others' mistakes and best practices. The notion has become increasingly popular in the field of humanitarian assistance, among others through the work of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). ALNAP tries to foster a culture of active learning, accountability and quality throughout the humanitarian sector (ALNAP Vision Paper, April 2002).

The upsurge of quality management systems in development and humanitarian organisations partly follows from a political and public climate that increasingly demands transparency and accountability. It also results from the management needs imposed by the larger scale of organisations and humanitarian operations, as well as from changes in organisational set-ups, notably the increased tendency to work with local partner organisations, and from agency globalisation or the formation of 'organisational families'. These changes have reinforced the demand for harmonisation and standardisation to ensure coherent operations (Slim, 1999: 31).

Quality management systems have often been considered overly managerial, and lacking in substance. Shorthand for their approach would read: 'say what you do, do what you say and show that you do what you say'. However, there seems to be a recent trend to develop the systems beyond this adage, by incorporating such questions as 'do organisations do the right things considering their objectives?' and 'do stakeholders consider that organisations do the right things?'. Nevertheless, some observers question whether quality management systems that do not differentiate between the requirements for managing a biscuit factory, a ballet dance group or a humanitarian operation are not too blunt an instrument to be appropriate. Another problem is they seem premised on predictable situations with foreseeable problems and a consensus on what to do to solve them. A recent trend in quality management thinking therefore seeks to develop alternative systems that are more inspired by complexity theory than predictability. According to this line of thinking, the complex situations in which humanitarian operations take place would be better served by innovative responses guided by simple rules, such as 'keep abreast of developments in your field, adapt these to the situation and do no harm' (Griekspoor and Sondorp, 2002).

On a positive note, quality management systems are considered to lead to more beneficiary consultation and participation, given the high premium put on 'customer satisfaction'. On the other hand, there is concern that the introduction of the same systems with local partner organisations may, if not done through a meaningful and thoroughly participatory process, lead to the imposition of yet another Western discourse. Although some find such considerations of lesser importance than the

obligation to ensure quality in humanitarian assistance, their ethical and political ramifications may be substantial, as real or perceived impositions of external systems may easily provoke resentment or resistance.

### ***The rights approach***

The second approach to quality is grounded in international human rights standards. Although human rights standards emerged in 1948, they only entered into development and humanitarian practice in the 1990s. Rights-based development is considered the new paradigm for development. Human rights standards are different from business standards because they do not dictate everyday practice but have an aspirational undertone. In addition, standards based on human rights not only conceptualise the ends and means of development, but also stipulate operational principles of practice, in particular participation (Slim, 1999).

For humanitarian assistance, the rights-based approach is epitomised by the Sphere standards, which set minimum, universal standards to which disaster-affected people are entitled. The Sphere standards focus on five key areas of assistance (food aid, nutrition, health, water supply and sanitation, shelter and site planning). They cover both quantitative product standards and qualitative process standards, for instance regarding participation.

The rights-based approach is commended for offering an agenda for development that breaks away from earlier patronising paradigms. A number of humanitarian organisations, however, consider it irrelevant to humanitarian action. With reference to the notion of humanitarian spirit, these organisations do not agree that humanitarian organisations (not being government and being voluntary) can have an obligation to fulfil people's rights. Not only would it be erroneous, but it would also divert attention away from addressing the political failures underlying the humanitarian situation.

### ***The contingency approach***

The third approach to quality assistance may be called the contingency approach. This approach is based on the notion that the quality of humanitarian assistance is contingent upon the complexities of the situation in which it is given and the network of other actors involved. It has recently been explicitly formulated by the NGO Platform for a Different Quality Approach to Humanitarian Action. The contingency approach starts from the notion of diversity. It stipulates that humanitarian action must be adjusted to take account of the contingencies and vicissitudes posed by different types of disaster, countries and cultures and diversity among aid recipients. The victims are not considered as 'mere recipients of aid' but as socially differentiated, economically heterogeneous and often politically motivated actors. Humanitarian action, in this view, must be grounded in situational analysis. It would also have to be adjusted to an assessment of how the crisis will evolve, i.e. whether it is expected to be of short or long duration. Rather than relying on standards, staff should be equipped to understand the complexities with which they are confronted (Grunewald, 2001).



### ***The ownership approach***

The ownership approach emphasises participation and ownership. In this approach, quality is a negotiated concept that ideally should be formulated in a bottom-up rather than a top-down fashion. The approach is associated with third-way humanitarianism and focuses on fostering local capacities for peace, disaster preparedness, aid and development. It can be found primarily among organisations that work both in development and in relief, but also gains popularity among some humanitarian organisations, who shift to capacity building after years of lessons learned operating relief programmes without strengthening local society. More significantly, the approach has begun to be propagated by representatives from humanitarian agencies that are based in those countries where humanitarian crises have occurred and the benefits and unintended consequences of humanitarian actions are felt. A representative of an African NGO recently charged that:

Many programmes are formulated in foreign offices instead of being built around local realities and so fail to respond to real needs. Root causes are ignored as programmes neither reduce poverty nor prevent conflict. In this context, African NGOs have become little more than subcontractors supplying cheap labour for project-based aid. Capacity building, to the extent that it occurs, rarely aims for more than building a better sub-contractor: more transparent, more accountable; in sum, a more reliable recipient of aid funds (Zawde, 2001).

### ***How different are the approaches?***

The four approaches sketched out can all provide a definition of what distinguishes good from bad humanitarian actions and organisations. That does not mean that they are mutually excluding or incompatible. Beneficiary participation, for instance, is important in every notion of quality as a vehicle for consumer satisfaction, a human right or an aspect of doing a situational analysis. Yet only in the ownership approach does it have central importance. Each of these approaches is comprehensive and incorporates to more or less extent the other approaches.

The difference between the approaches thus becomes a difference of language, priority and emphasis. Nonetheless, these are important distinctions. The approaches are based on different rationales that imply different strategies, organisational styles and cultures, practices and ideas about quality and accountability. With the limited resources, people and time constraints that humanitarian organisations have to deal with, the differences become more prominent. To illustrate this with a simple example: if time and space allows to give one person training, it makes a difference whether it is chosen to concentrate this training on administrative procedures, on humanitarian law, on the crisis situation or on a joint evaluation of head office policies. The differences also becomes more pronounced when, as is often the case, they lead to incompatible demands on agencies and choices must to be made between them.

## **The use of standards**

Standards are implicit in every reference to quality and accountability. Recently, there has been much discussion over the use of standards, which has mainly focused on the above-mentioned Sphere standards. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the use of standards is much broader than Sphere (Stockton, 2000). Individual agencies and families have elaborate manuals, policies and instructions regarding a large range of aspects of their work. Inter-agency initiatives include the Code of Conduct, the People in Aid Code of best practice in the management and support for aid personnel, and country specific coordination and operation arrangements, such as the Sudan ground rules, or the joint policy of operations in Liberia. The UN and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC-OECD) have issued guidelines on working with refugees and working in conflict. Finally, independent foundations have developed normative frameworks varying from systems for early warning to the Local Capacities for Peace Project (Do No Harm).

### ***Are standards too prone to abuse?***

Much of the debate regarding standards concerns their possible political abuse and misuse by governments, NGOs and other actors. First, it is feared that undue attention to standards turns humanitarian action into a technocratic endeavour at the expense of addressing ethical and political dimensions of responding to humanitarian crises. Second, when standards are made conditional, they infringe on the independence of NGOs, and may facilitate the abuse of humanitarian assistance for foreign policy. Third, when the adoption of standards is conditional to making funding available, this may lead to a humanitarian establishment that is inaccessible to new organisations or closed to organisations that do not meet the institutional requirements (mainly Southern and Eastern). Fourth, standards may be abused to disqualify local products for relief, even though these are up to local standards, and instead rely on imported goods. Proponents of standards, on the other hand, share these concerns, but they find the risk of abuse is no reason to abandon standards altogether, given the potential contribution they have for the enhancement of the quality of humanitarian action.

### ***Are standards realistic in poor host environments?***

A different set of problems is that related to the use of standards in poor host environments. The largest majority of refugees are received in the disaster region itself, often in the least-developed countries in the world. In many cases, refugees are directed to the poorest, less-fertile and remote, rural areas where host populations live under very fragile and marginal conditions. Relief given to refugees and the basic facilities and services provided to them, often surpass the levels that the host population enjoys, leading to perceived and real inequities and injustices. To use minimum quality standards for refugees, while not applying them to the host environment, may create imbalances and, in the end, undermine the preparedness of local populations to host refugees.

### ***Are standards too rigid?***

A final concern with standards concerns the risk they bring of inertia and rigidity. First, standards may lead to mechanistic implementation and become (expensive) objectives in and of themselves rather than a means to improve practice. Second, some people are concerned that standards tend to multiply until they become ineffective, and that obsolete standards continue to linger in organisational practice. Third, it is feared that standards stifle creativity and improvising skills. This is all the more problematic considering that the accessibility, conditions and funding are often not favourable to meeting standards. The way standards are developed does not usually include guidelines on how to adjust them in practice when they cannot be met. For instance, how thinly can one spread resources when the number of people in need far exceeds the available supplemental food (Griekspoor and Collins, 2001)? This set of problems brings forward the challenge of how to make smart standards, i.e. standards that enhance the capacity of people to adjust and adapt in specific situations, and standards that invite adjustment or removal when they have lost their relevance.

### ***The status of standards***

Concerns about abuse, feasibility and rigidity are partly related to the status attached to standards. According to a dictionary, standards, in order to be standards, are meant to be set, met and checked. In relation to humanitarian assistance, this seemingly obvious property is under discussion. While there are always standards whether they should be always be met is questioned and, especially, whether they should be checked. More than on their content, concerns focus on the status attached to them. Should they be absolute or relative? Should they be imposed or voluntary? Should they be subject to external accountability or met and checked within the organisations only?

Much of the controversy regarding the Sphere standards is about whether they are absolute standards that lay down people's rights, or aspirational objectives one should always try to achieve. Or, as a third alternative, do they merely provide a common language, a vocabulary in which humanitarian action can be discussed and a benchmark against which objectives and performance can be explained? Although Sphere speaks of minimum standards, the project also emphasises that working with the standards is a learning process (Lowrie, 2000). According to our interviews, organisations using the standards tend to regard them as aspirational. The Sphere Project also emphasises the voluntary nature, and has no mechanisms by which it can monitor compliance (Lowrie, 2000). On the other hand, occasional suggestions have been made to turn Sphere into legislation or into a condition for funding.

The concern about the status of standards has far-reaching implications. Once standards are imposed and become part of funding conditions or even law, they become more liable to political abuse. Among others, it has been suggested that the question whether scrutiny of operations is really conditionality through the back door of humanitarian action (Macrae and Leader, 2000). In other words, the more status is attached to standards the more effective they become in the eyes of proponents, and the more liable to political abuse and rigidity in the eyes of opponents.

## **Quality and accountability**

Quality and accountability are interlinked but do not automatically go hand-in-hand. NGO accountability is often defined as ‘the means by which individuals and organisations report to a recognised authority, or authorities, and are held responsible for their actions’ (Edwards and Hulme, 1996: 8). In order to be accountable, organisations have to be transparent and responsive regarding their compliance with agreed standards on organisational policies and practices. Accountability, seen this way, requires agreement on clear roles and responsibilities, and a set of agreed standards of performance or at least a set of clear objectives against which performance can be measured.

It is often claimed of late, that NGOs are unaccountable. Upon scrutiny, this claim boils down to a complaint that NGOs lack transparency in their external accountability relations. It is important to note, however, that there are other forms of accountability too. In the first place, quality enhancement measures taken by humanitarian organisations often increase internal accountability. Judging from interview results, the increase in guidelines, reporting mechanisms, evaluation and monitoring, and investments in human resource development, such quality enhancement is gaining momentum. However, in order to maximise the space for candour and learning, a lot of internal reports and evaluations are treated as confidential, in order to avoid out-of-context media exposure of findings that may undermine public support for humanitarian action in general.<sup>4</sup>

In the second place, external accountability also takes place outside formal channels. This can take many forms, including responsiveness to public pressure and media reporting; engagement in public debate; responding to feedback from beneficiaries; informal consultations with local populations, other humanitarian organisations, peacekeepers and belligerents; silent diplomacy; socialising with local government officials; and the removal of personnel or management when complaints are received. These forms of accountability may not be without problems: because they are not transparent (at least not to all stakeholders), their political ramifications cannot be checked, and NGOs may respond to undue pressures. But they are operative and often they are very effective, efficient and sensitive to security issues (Hilhorst, forthcoming). Finding no formal external accountability systems in place does not warrant, then, the conclusion that NGOs are not accountable.

### **Complexities of accountability**

Nonetheless, compelling reasons are given for why transparent external accountability is a concern for humanitarian organisations. In the first place, several people turn the question of why NGOs should be accountable around by asking: why should they not? Considering that humanitarian organisations challenge political actors to be accountable, why should they themselves be made an exception? In the second place, it is suggested that, in view of increasing public pressure, NGOs had better get their own house in order before someone else does it for them. In the third place, it is suggested that increasing external accountability should be seen as an additional opportunity for learning and improving, and hence to contributing to more effective humanitarian assistance.

As the importance of external accountability rises higher on the agenda of humanitarian organisations and their stakeholders, it is important to remain aware of the complexities involved. Accountability is not a quick fix to possible problems. If it is to amount to more than a simple add-on to organisational rituals, or a ready stick to use against organisations that for one reason or another have provoked resentment among stakeholders, then the complexities are considerable. One major complication is how to accommodate situational factors, such as how to translate roles and responsibilities in particular humanitarian crises, and how to define to what extent standards could be met in a given situation.

Another major difficulty is found in the number of stakeholders involved with humanitarian organisations, the complex relations that evolve around them, and the often conflicting demands they make on NGOs. In the case of donor organisations, the accountability relation is relatively simple given that there is a contract specifying obligations and that donors have a clear exit option when these are not met. In comparison, the relation with beneficiaries — to whom NGOs should primarily be accountable — is much more confused. There is no contract with agreed standards. Local people may not have effective mechanisms for representation, are not homogeneous in their expectations and often lack recourse to appeal if these are not being met. For accountability to be effective, ‘authorities’ need to have either a voice (to enforce change in the desired direction) or an exit (to sever the relation) (Hirschmann, 1970). In practice, beneficiaries often have neither. The picture is further complicated when taking into account other stakeholders and the nature of different obligations, including legal requirements of local governments to duties following from coordination agreements.

### ***Accountability beyond humanitarian organisations***

It is even more difficult to address the issue of accountability beyond the level of humanitarian organisations to include all actors that have a bearing on the quality of assistance. For NGOs to deliver good humanitarian assistance, they need access, resources and protection for themselves and their beneficiaries. Furthermore, political solutions are needed to resolve humanitarian crises. Donor governments, international government organisations, the UN, peacekeeping operations, local governments (if any) and institutions, and belligerents, all have roles and responsibilities in determining the quality of assistance. Conceptualising and experimenting with these other accountabilities are less advanced than is the case with NGO accountability. It is obvious, however, that, again, the complexities are many. Roles and responsibilities are not just unclear (and needing clarification), they are interwoven with politics. Governments, for instance, have an important role to play in pursuing humanitarian politics, by resolving conflict, reducing vulnerability and ensuring access, resources and protection for assistance. In practice, however, the line between humanitarian politics and foreign policy is thin, complicating accountability in this respect (Leader, 2000). Furthermore, the relation between donors and NGOs is also complicated because of the inequality of the relations where NGOs have less space to demand compliance from donors than the other way around.

### **Accountability: system or culture?**

It has been suggested that efforts to improve NGO quality and accountability would have some spin-off for the other accountability relations, starting with donor accountability. The Sphere standards, for example, could be used to negotiate the terms for resourcing humanitarian programmes. In a similar vein, it has been suggested that ensuring NGO accountability will finally lead to a system of accountability spanning the entire humanitarian system (Raynard, 2000: 20). Given the complications elaborated above, this notion may be too detached from the everyday realities of humanitarian assistance. There is no humanitarian system in the sense of an assembly of parts that fit together and feed each other with complementary roles and responsibilities. Rather, one faces a humanitarian complex consisting of shifting actors, diffuse boundaries, partly conflicting interests and values and a high diversity of relations, organisational forms and work styles. The same dynamics that render humanitarian assistance problematic similarly enter into accountability processes. As a consequence, accountability is liable to become just as complicated and prone to power relations and politics as the 'real' thing (Hilhorst, forthcoming).

Although it is unfeasible to consider an all-encompassing accountability system, it remains worthwhile to institutionalise different accountability mechanisms. None of these in itself will provide the ultimate accountability cure. Instead of an accountability system, this would entail the fostering of an accountability culture. Such a culture would not depend on one single form and format of accountability but constantly seek to maximise a diversity of accountability processes.

Before concluding, let me discuss a number of quality-enhancing measures for humanitarian assistance. Given the magnitude of possible measures, the list is not exhaustive. Moreover, the focus is on measures combining quality and external accountability. Internal quality management systems, human resource development activities, communication techniques, and other management tools are thus not dealt with here.

### **Beneficiary participation and accountability**

There appears to be much less experimentation, implementation and documentation of beneficiary participation than would be expected on the basis of the widely proclaimed importance of this issue (Callamard, 2001; Kaiser, 2000). This is even more the case for the host populations living with and around refugees and for participation beyond the level of implementation. One reason cited for this is the emergency character of humanitarian assistance. However, this argument is not so convincing since most humanitarian action takes place after the immediate crisis is over. Beneficiary participation and accountability is more than a right to be obliged. It can unveil some problems in humanitarian action, regarding needs assessments, performance, relationships and impact, as well as ensure a better articulation of humanitarian aid with local coping capacities.

On the other hand, participation is not a panacea and can occasionally create new problems. Participation can reflect socio-economic differentiation, ethnic, religious and political differences and gendered patterns that occur in society and are often part themselves of the humanitarian problem. In addition, the security implications of participation should be monitored. Nonetheless, there may be a considerable gain by enhancing participation. This will require, among other things,

the continued mapping of the diversity of culturally appropriate forms of accountability processes emerging from the ground. There are probably more such forms than currently assumed.

### ***Complaint handling***

Complaint handling is a special form of beneficiary accountability. It has been used in NGO contexts, for instance by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid. The main initiative in the humanitarian sector has been the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project. This project aimed to develop a system-wide ombudsman that used the Red Cross/Red Crescent NGO Code of Conduct, the Humanitarian Charter and the Sphere standards as references to raise and address the concerns of people affected by disaster and conflict. This initiative faced significant opposition because its legitimacy and feasibility was questioned, and because of concern for possible unintended and negative consequences. Recently, when entering its third phase, the project was re-baptised as the Humanitarian Accountability Project, and the ambition to develop a mechanism to address complaints about the compliance with humanitarian principles was abandoned. Experiences with complaint handling suggest that it is difficult to operate an effective system because these mechanisms often receive only a very limited number of complaints compared to the problems encountered in the field. This leaves open, for the moment, the questions of where (intended) beneficiaries might report misconduct, abuse and incidents, who is responsible for investigating and following up these reports, and whether or not humanitarian workers can and should be held liable for abuse.

### ***Participation and accountability towards local partner organisations***

Participation and accountability to others working in the field of humanitarian action has also received attention, in particular through the 'People in Aid' project. One of the seven principles constituting the People in Aid Code stipulates that 'We consult our field staff when we develop human resource policy'. Questions of participation and accountability of local humanitarian organisations, be they local implementing partners, 'family' or 'Federation' members, field offices, or local divisions of international organisations, have occasionally been raised by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, but is not often taken into account in general discussions regarding accountability in humanitarian action. Yet, the relation between the Southern and Eastern organisations, based where most crises occur, and their European- or American-based headquarters, may often be problematic. The question is how to ensure bottom-up participation in the formulation of quality and in the design of accountability?

### **Evaluation and monitoring**

Given the long history of evaluation and monitoring compared to most quality enhancement initiatives, it is important to pay attention to experiences to date. There has emerged a set of criteria to evaluate humanitarian assistance, i.e. relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, coverage, connectedness, coherence

and appropriateness. They are widely shared and have been adopted by the OECD. Note, however, that their interpretation and different weight attached to different aspect still accounts for diverse interpretations (Frerks and Hilhorst, 1999). ALNAP has an extensive file of evaluation reports and has undertaken a number of initiatives to make evaluation more effective, including the use of meta- and inter-agency evaluations (ALNAP, 2001). One problem remains that the potential of evaluation has not always been realised because follow-up measures have been lacking (Wood, Apthorpe and Borton, 2001). This observation gives some food for thought for the introduction of new quality enhancing mechanisms. Initiating management systems and other organisational measures requires translation in administration, communication and relations with beneficiaries, partner organisations and external linkages to become fully effective. Hence, there seems a lot of room for enhancing quality and accountability by maximising existing strategies and arrangements.

### **Codes of conduct**

The most well-known is the Code of Conduct of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, presently signed by 207 organisations. However, some interviewees expressed concern with the manner in which it is being dealt with in practice. They wondered whether signing up made much difference for organisations since the code is hardly referred to in reporting and everyday practice. Apart from this code, and several other inter-agency codes, there have increasingly been initiatives to draw up field-level codes of conduct and agreements concerning collaboration and operation (see, for example, Bradbury and Leader, 2000; Atkinson and Leader, 2000). These have included different ways of monitoring the compliance of signatories. The Code of Conduct for NGOs in Ethiopia, for instance, includes an Observance Committee to respond to complaints. It would be useful if further documentation about the impact of compliance measures incorporated in field-level agreements were to result from these experiences.

### **Social audit**

In the field of humanitarian action, social audits have mainly been implemented by the People in Aid project, which introduced these in their pilot phase (from 1997–2000) among 13 organisations. The social audit is an accountability mechanism that adopts a stakeholder approach in order to assess the performance of an organisation in relation to its aims and those of its stakeholders. One powerful aspect of the social audit is that it combines internal stakeholder accountability with an external auditing process. It is also recommended because it combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. An Oxfam UK workshop highlighted a number of advantages of using social audits for exploring accountability beyond single organisations. It also raised a number of reservations (Raynard, 2000: 16). These included the questions of who enjoys respect enough to act as the external auditor and how to reach common standards against which to measure performance when dealing with a range of organisations. An additional concern is that social audits are expensive in human and financial terms.



### **Peer review**

Several interviewees considered peer reviews a possible method for enhancing accountability. As far as we know, this has not yet been piloted. It was a part of the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project that was abandoned and is mostly known through the work of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC/OECD). This organisation uses a peer review process to review members' aid programmes, to make recommendations to one another and to generate good practice and shared objectives. It would have to be seen, what the impact of these peer reviews is in practice and how applicable they are for humanitarian organisations.

### **Accreditation**

Accreditation involves an independent body that monitors compliance with a set of standards or codes and decides on accreditation accordingly. The independent body is normally an organisation from, and mandated by, the sector concerned. The accreditation process can vary in its methodology and scope. We can distinguish two models of accreditation, which may be relevant for the humanitarian sector.

In the first model, accreditation is formal and legalistic. It controls whether organisations fulfil particular conditions regarding finance and management. In the Netherlands, such a system is operative for fund-raising organisations, that checks, for example, whether annual reports are made available and whether institutional overheads remain below a certain percentage of the budget (although this organisation is now trying to include more substantive issues in the accreditation). ECHO is working to establish such accreditation mechanisms for NGOs wishing to apply for funding with this organisation.

In the second model, accreditation is qualitative and value-based. It is more comprehensive and combines self-evaluation with a peer-review or an external visitation. This kind of accreditation is mainly known from Academe. It allows for both quality assurance and quality improvement by ensuring compliance to standards while providing guidance, training, and exchange of best practices among peers. There have been several NGO initiatives that focus on accreditation or certification. In the US, many humanitarian organisations are affiliated to InterAction, whose member organisations have to certify compliance with the PVO Standards. At the end of every calendar year, each InterAction member is asked to review the standards and re-certify compliance (self-certification). There is no present initiative among European humanitarian NGOs to explore the possibilities for accreditation.

Accreditation is thus a label under which different membership arrangements can be headed, varying in scope, level of control by the accreditation institution and level of attention for qualitative processes and learning. Variations pose different institutional requirements and have different impact on quality and accountability. One question is whether a formal system of minimal requirements for accreditation can be fruitfully combined with a value-based comprehensive system, or whether these should be developed as alternative, complementary systems.

As an alternative to organisation accreditation, it has occasionally been suggested to work towards a system of personal accreditation for humanitarian workers. There is indeed an upsurge of courses and degrees for humanitarian work, and introductory courses within organisations. The question is if it is feasible to define

and impose a minimum level of specialised training for humanitarian workers. Who defines the minimum curriculum? Who would be entitled to give the accreditation? There is also the question whether all humanitarian workers need to be accredited and what implication this would have for local staff.

## Legislation

In the *World Disaster Report 2000*, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies opened the discussion about an international disaster response law. There is a need for this because international humanitarian law (IHL) mainly covers warfare, while peacetime disasters — triggered by natural hazards or technological accidents — account for a large number of humanitarian crises. Furthermore international humanitarian law does not offer standards or guidance for work in the field. Such a body of international disaster response law would provide internationally agreed standards for donor and beneficiary government action, as well as predictable mechanisms to facilitate an effective response to disaster. Among the areas proposed to be in need of further legal development are: humanitarian standards of professionalism; humanitarian standards of conduct; transport, immigration and customs; standards for relief goods; information sharing; access and security; contingency planning; interface with IHL; lessons learned, and disaster preparedness and mitigation. A separate box in the article discusses Sphere's minimum standards as a possible 'body of customary international law in the making', provided that a number of important questions are solved, including the question whether they are absolute or aspirational and how they could be enforced. According to the report, it could take a long time before the standards have demonstrably attained customary legal status, upon which, some day, 'they may become the standards required by international law' (IFRC, 2000: 145–57).

## Conclusions

Looking at the present state of affairs, it is clear that issues of quality and accountability are high on the agenda of humanitarian organisations and their stakeholders. The question is whether this will converge into a system-wide agreement on standards and a single institution that monitors compliance. Given the current lines of discussion, this is doubtful.

First, there is no single definition of quality of humanitarian action. In this paper, I distinguished between four approaches to quality: the management, rights-based, contingency and ownership approaches. As they are grounded in different rationales, the four are not mutually excluding, but differ in language, priority and emphasis and often lead to incompatible, equally just, demands forcing agencies to choose between them in practice. Furthermore, set in organisations with different styles and cultures, these differences can be magnified and aggravated by rivalry and politicking. Heated debates in recent years regarding issues of quality and standards, often (inaccurately) referred to as the debate between anglophone and francophone NGOs, are perhaps cases in point. However, it is important to note that underneath such organisational problems are indeed different approaches to quality that each are

based in legitimate rationales and will continue to lead to diversity in humanitarian practice.

Second, there are the complicated and delicate questions if, how and by whom quality standards could and should be imposed and controlled. As the paper elaborated, there are different levels of possible control, ranging from formal checks on management and finances to more qualitative and value-based accountability. The first can be imagined as imposed by donors or legalised by governments, whereas the second seems only feasible when implemented by organisations from within the sector.

Direct or indirect external control, on the one hand, may be a way of dealing with organisations that operate under the guise of humanitarian action but do not meet any of the prevailing quality notions. Such organisations often operate outside of any of the quality circles with private funds and thus escape scrutiny from donors. On the other hand, external control brings the risk of conditionality and political abuse and adds new problems — like the question of who controls the controllers? Self-control from within the sector could take the form of regulation by an independent body, governed by members and mandated to monitor, report or even sanction members. Such sectoral arrangements could enhance overall quality and deal with occasional or structural malpractice. However, they do risk becoming exclusive and turning into vehicles to defend the interests of well-resourced and established humanitarian organisations.

It is unlikely that there can ever be one uniform sectoral approach to quality control. It is much more likely that there will continue to be different quality ‘circles’, each evolving in different ways. This would not make the humanitarian sector exceptional, since parallel sectoral associations are common in most professions. Given the sensitive complications of sectoral regulation, quick-fix ways of establishing and mandating such quality circles seem unwarranted. Stakeholders like donors, the media and local institutions can all play a role in enhancing them, but in order to become meaningful and effective, sectoral quality control, ultimately, will have to grow out of ongoing activities in the humanitarian organisations.

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### Notes

1. To avoid misquotation or breaching confidentiality, references are only to written texts and not to individual interviews. Queries about sources can be addressed to the author.
2. The first is *neutrality elevated*, which sees humanitarian action for the relief of suffering only, emphasises universal legal principles and propagates strict adherence to the rules of impartiality and neutrality. The second is *neutrality abandoned*, a position which argues that humanitarian action should be subordinated to (good) political goals, partisan if necessary, in order to reduce suffering in the long run. Then there is a *third-way humanitarianism*, which

- stresses the role of humanitarian aid for development relief, peace building and dealing with root causes, without taking political sides (Leader, 2000).
3. See, among others, Smillie, 1995; Anderson, 1996; Prendergast, 1996; Macrae, 1996; de Waal, 1997; Leader, 2000.
  4. The wisdom of this practice may be questioned in light of the recent experiences in UNHCR. This organisation has decided to put all evaluations on the internet which so far seem to have had a positive impact on the credibility of the organisation rather than having a negative impact (Crisp, 2000).

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**Address for correspondence:** Wageningen Disaster Studies, Hollandseweg 1, PO Box 8130, 6700 EW Wageningen, The Netherlands. E-mail <<Thea.Hilhorst@alg.asnw.wau.nl>>