



Medair believed to be first humanitarian aid organization worldwide to achieve ISO 9001:2000

BY DAVID VERBOOM¹⁾

1) David Verboom, Operations Director and Quality Manager, Medair International Headquarters, Chemin du Croset 9, CH-1024 Ecublens, Switzerland.

Tel. + 41 21 694 35 35.
Fax + 41 21 694 35 40.
E-mail david.verboom@medair.org
Web www.medair.org

Medair, the international humanitarian aid organization – with headquarters in Switzerland – which has sent teams to alleviate major crisis situations around the world, has been awarded ISO 9001:2000 certification covering the activities of its European offices and international projects. It believes itself to be the first such non-governmental organization to achieve the standard.

We decided to implement ISO 9001:2000 as part of a wider effort in organizational learning and improvement. While Medair has embraced quality as a core value since its foundation in 1988, ISO 9001:2000 quality management system (QMS) certification marks a significant step forward. This article highlights the importance of the learning process for a humanitarian organization like Medair, as well as the trials and tribulations encountered during implementation.

Medair and quality

The organization has its international headquarters in Switzerland and national offices in France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. It employs 25 staff at its Swiss headquarters, 75 at field level and over 400 in the project locations. We have project and support offices in Pakistan (Peshawar),



Photo: Medair

Afghanistan (Kabul), North Sudan (Khartoum), South Sudan, Kenya (Lokichoggio and Nairobi), Uganda (Kampala), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Bunia), Angola (Luanda) and Madagascar (Tana).



Photo: Medair

Beneficiaries of Medair's feeding programme at its centre in Yiröl, South Sudan, 1998.

Medair implements a wide variety of relief and rehabilitation projects, ranging from emergency food distribution in Afghanistan, to sophisticated eye surgery programmes in South Sudan, from the distribution of household emergency kits to flood victims in Mozambique, to psycho-social work with war-traumatized children in Kosovo. In every crisis situation, Medair is mandated to meet the real needs of the people it assists by applying optimal standards in quality, efficiency, effectiveness and performance. These beneficiaries are central to its mandate and quality approach.

Our definition of quality reads:

Quality is the process through which a humanitarian organization can continuously improve its work so as to deliver services that meet the real needs of the people it assists, in accordance with their requirements, values, cultural standards and dignity.

Medair and ISO 9001:2000

Implementation started in October 1999 stimulated by an internal change process called "Quality and Institutional Knowledge". We contracted the Swiss office of SGS²⁾, the international certification organization, to audit our Swiss HQ and Kosovo project in July 2001, and to audit our field and HQ operations annually for a further six years.

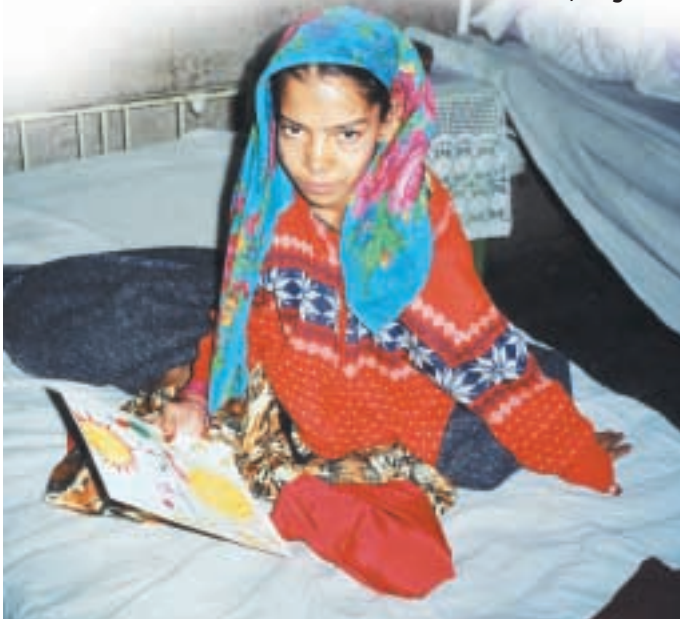


Photo: Medair

In 2002, Medair carried out an anti-tuberculosis programme for children in Kabul, Afghanistan.

An aspect of ISO 9001:2000 that appealed to us was its evaluation of "the spirit of the law" rather than "the letter of the law". In other words, it focuses on the overall learning process within an organization. For example, SGS auditors visiting HQ and our Kosovo programme evaluated the actual involvement of families in the construction programme

2) SGS Switzerland, Rue Thalberg 6, P.O. Box 2136, CH-1211 Geneva 1, Switzerland.

Tel. + 41 22 739 94 24.
Fax + 41 22 739 98 80.
E-mail sgs_ch@sgs.com
Web www.sgs.ch

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and how their feedback was followed up, instead of merely examining the paper work.

ISO 9001:2000 required implementation of the following activities within Medair:

- Establishing a quality policy in line with the humanitarian mandate of the organization, i.e. meeting the needs of beneficiaries.
- Drafting and maintaining manuals describing the way the organization works and improves (like most humanitarian aid agencies, Medair was already using internal manuals due to high staff turnover and the complexity of the work environment).
- Setting up and maintaining a feedback and improvement cycle allowing beneficiaries, national and expatriate staff, donors, authorities and other stakeholders to be involved in the quality improvement process.

The SGS audit evaluated conformity with the following requirements derived from ISO 9001:2000 and “translated” for Medair’s context:

- Is the organization directed by quality objectives in line with its humanitarian mandate? If so, this should result in activities that meet the needs of beneficiaries in accordance with their requirements, values and cultural standards.
- Is the organization seeking feedback from its stakeholders? If a humanitarian organization professes to work on behalf of people in need, it should set up mechanisms to receive feedback on its activities from those primary stakeholders.
- Is the organization learning and improving? The feedback given by beneficiaries, staff, donors and other stakeholders needs to feed into a quality improvement process.

Photo: Medair



A Medair doctor carries out consultation during the health programme in South Sudan in 1999.

- Is the organization maintaining appropriate support documentation?



Photo: Medair

The Medair reconstruction programme in Kosovo in 1999.

How does Medair's quality system work?

We designed a QMS around three major improvement cycles at three levels (see **Figure 1**), starting with that closest to the beneficiary:

1. Project Cycle at project field level
2. Country Strategy Cycle at country level
3. Three-Year Strategy Cycle at organizational level.

The *Project Cycle* describes Medair's core process – the implementation of relief and rehabilitation projects at field level. It consists of six project phases: research, survey, proposal, implementation, evaluation and exit. These are linked together by six decisions: research, survey, go/no go, implementation, evaluation and exit. Each project and phase is linked by a collective, transparent decision coordinated between key personnel at field and HQ level, and demands the involvement and participation of beneficiaries.

For example, we delayed a recent programme in Madagascar until we had conducted in-depth field assessments to evaluate the needs of the people themselves. Once we had their feedback, we made a project proposal aimed at meeting that need. We also sent out health, water and project management experts to conduct independent assessments in different locations and built their feedback into the proposal. The result was a water sanitation project north of Fort Dauphin in the south of the country.

The three improvement cycles of Medair's quality system

3. Medair's Three-year Strategy Cycle

- *Responsible*: Management Team
- *Scope*: Organization
- *Time*: Three-year Cycle

2. Country Strategy Cycle

- *Responsible*: Country Director
- *Scope*: Country Programme
- *Time*: Once-year Cycle

1. Project Cycle

- *Responsible*: Project Manager
- *Scope*: Project
- *Time*: Project Period

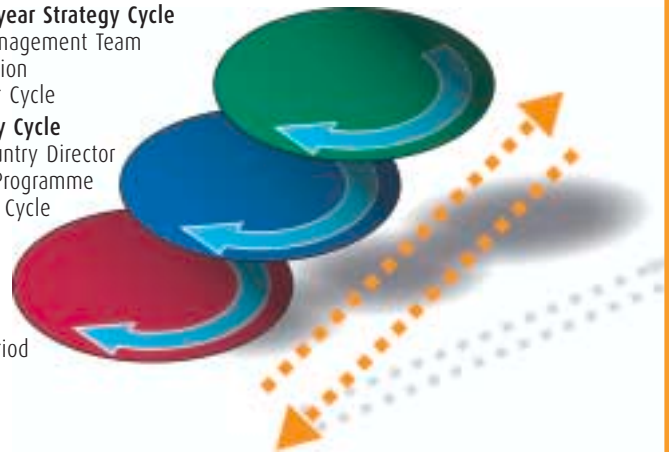


Figure 1

In another example, we had just organized what was considered to be a successful non-food distribution project in South Sudan. However, on talking to local families, we discovered that the impregnated mosquito nets which were distributed were being used for clothing and blankets. In response, we used the Project Cycle to design a new project phase focused on preventative health teaching and distribution of clothes.

The *Country Strategy Cycle* operates at Country Programme level and helps Medair improve its work in a given country taking into account long-term impact and sustainability. This is especially useful in countries such as Afghanistan, Congo, Angola and Sudan where ongoing complex crisis situations have continued unchecked for years.

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Only by focusing on rehabilitation and training, and not just relief, can Medair's work become self-sustainable in collaboration with the beneficiaries.

The *Three-year Strategy Cycle* at organization level allows Medair constantly to improve its knowledge in every department, sector and programme. It sets out strategies to reduce any weaknesses and maximize strengths.

Here, the quality manual (QM) has proved to be a vital quality improvement tool. It describes the quality system and every aspect of Medair's operations, both in the field and at HQ. The QM gives the big picture, such as the overall *Three-year Strategy*, and also the minutiae, such as detailed radio operating instructions. It is available to all staff in the form of an extremely user-friendly, quick and accessible Internet-based resource centre, installed on all Medair com-

puters, to save time and increase knowledge-sharing.

One other vital aspect of the QMS is the standard feedback format used by all staff, beneficiaries and stakeholders to suggest improvements to Medair's operations. These suggestions are followed up by the quality manager who regularly reports on improvements and progress to the management team.

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Overcoming objections

ISO 9001:2000 will just mean more administration in our already overstretched work schedule.

ISO 9001:2000 is nice for HQ but it will not help us in the field!

These were typical criticisms raised at the start of the ISO 9001:2000 quality improvement process. In response, we decided to meet with staff and discuss the reasoning and implications of ISO 9001:2000 to help them understand

Distribution of essential relief items in Afghanistan, 2002.



Photo: Medair



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the benefits of implementation. This helped us maintain our focus and prevented us from seeing ISO 9001:2000 as a goal in itself. We agreed to view it as an additional tool that would help us to be more accountable and to improve our quality.

- **Efficiency and effectiveness** – ISO 9001:2000 is a means to evaluate, via the QM, whether Medair's activities are in line with its objectives and are effective in reaching its goals. In essence, it evaluates whether or not the organization "practises what it preaches".

Photo: Medair



Advantages of ISO 9001:2000 implementation

We agree that ISO 9001:2000 helps us in the following ways:

- **Accountability** – As an organization accountable to the people we serve, we have been entrusted with financial and human resources to achieve objectives in accordance with quality standards. We take this responsibility seriously by inviting external auditors to evaluate our work in accordance with ISO 9001:2000.
- **The learning organization** – Because of the complex and ever-changing nature of humanitarian aid, such organizations need to change and improve to remain relevant, effective and appropriate. Since ISO 9001:2000 emphasizes the improvement cycle, it can help Medair strengthen its capacity as a learning organization.



Photo: Medair

The feeding programme in South Sudan, 1998.

- **Involvement and participation of beneficiaries** – ISO 9001:2000 emphasizes "customer satisfaction", or, in humanitarian terms, the level to which the needs of the beneficiaries are met. At Medair, we operate using "downward" accountability (to the people we serve), rather than "upward" accountability (to donors, etc.).

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An example of the logistic challenges that have to be overcome: here, during the distribution of essential medicines in the DR Congo, 2000.

- **Standardization** – We followed ISO 9001:2000 structural guidelines and designed a QM that is lean, simple, to the point and easily accessible to all Medair staff, and has improved structures, procedures and standards.
- **Institutional knowledge** – ISO 9001:2000 has helped Medair improve its institutional knowledge base in the form of an internal QM that has also greatly helped to improve the induction of new staff and their familiarization with our organizational processes.

objective of ISO 9001:2000 – to improve our performance and quality.

There is no doubt that ISO 9001 has proved itself as a useful additional tool to reinforce our accountability to stakeholders, increase our efficiency and effectiveness, and most importantly, increase the positive impact of our operations for the people we serve. ■



Photo: Medair

'ISO 9001:2000 has proved itself'

Despite initial reservations, our staff soon became fans of the ISO 9001:2000 change process once they saw the benefits take shape. Involving them all helped us to strip the process of any hidden motives and to increase transparency. We were able to reinforce the principal

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