

Can ISO 9001:2000 aid the humanitarian aid sector?

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The necessity of improving the quality of humanitarian aid has intensified, particularly in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. In the two linked articles making up this Special Report, author David Verboom, Operations Director and Quality Manager of the Swiss nongovernmental humanitarian aid organization, Medair, proposes ISO 9001:2000 implementation as a mechanism to improve the quality and credibility of the humanitarian aid sector, and uses his own ISO 9001:2000-certified organization as a pioneering example.



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Photo: Medair

ISO 9000
and
humanitarian
aid



Does the humanitarian aid sector need quality standards?

The humanitarian aid sector has been overwhelmed by major changes during recent years and the situation has been intensified by the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and their repercussions around the world. This dramatically changing environment has increased the need for standards to help improve the quality and performance of aid, and, through self-regulation, to protect the sector from infiltration by non-humanitarian organizations. The following points illustrate the changes in the environment.

- **The proliferation of NGO's and humanitarian aid organizations** – International non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have more than quadrupled from 6 000 to 26 000 in the last decade. An independent quality evaluation mechanism is becoming vital to separate the good from the bad.

Photo: Medair



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- **The infiltration of fake "humanitarian" organizations** – These organizations are not driven by humanitarian imperatives, but pursue hidden commercial, political, military or religious agendas and undermine the sector's credibility. A self-regulating quality mechanism could distinguish such motives and practices from genuine humanitarian operators.
- **Increasing scrutiny of the sector** – Humanitarian organizations should take the initiative by implementing the quality regulating mechanisms by choice, before host governments, donors and other stakeholders do it for them.
- **Growing professionalism and institutionalization** – Humanitarian aid is the only human welfare sector without professional mechanisms to ensure compliance with minimum quality standards and redress procedures should lapses occur.

Essential household supplies are distributed during the Mozambique emergency programme in 2000.



Photo: Medair

House reconstruction in Mozambique, 2000.



Photo: Medair

Numerous initiatives have already been undertaken in an attempt to meet the need for sector-wide quality standard mechanisms, for example; the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and NGO's (www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/index.asp), the Sphere Project (www.sphereproject.org), People in Aid (www.peopleinaid.org.uk), the Quality Project by URD (Groupe Urgence Rehabilitation Développement – www.urd.org), the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP – www.alnap.org), and the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP – www.hapgeneva.org). However, an additional initiative, incorporating the internationally recognized ISO 9001:2000 quality management standard, could be of added value to the humanitarian aid sector.

How can ISO 9001:2000 apply to the humanitarian aid sector?

Although ISO 9001:2000 is often believed to apply more to the manufacturing sector, it addresses the “process” rather than the “product”. As such, ISO 9001:2000 implementation can help any organization improve its quality management, whatever its size, product or service, scope or mandate. It can be applied as successfully to an international humanitarian aid organization as to a multinational corporation, or a local bookstore.

Customer focus is one of the key quality management principles of ISO 9001:2000. In humanitarian terms, “customer” can be interpreted to mean “beneficiary”. It is imperative that any organization mandated to assist people in need should recognize them as its customers. Quality management concerns everything an organization does to ensure that its services meet or exceed the beneficiary's needs. Thus, ISO 9001:2000 provides a benchmark, or a best practice model, against which an organization's processes and management systems can be evaluated.

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Points for and against applying ISO 9001:2000 to the aid sector

In favour

- *ISO 9000 is an internationally recognized model for quality management – The ISO 9000 series of*

which ISO 9001:2000 is the latest evolution has a legal and institutional track record that cuts across national, sectoral and cultural boundaries, enabling it to positively impact the quality and credibility of the humanitarian aid sector.



ISO 9000

and

humanitarian

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Photo: Medair

Medair's clinic at Camp Omdurman-el-Salaam, Khartoum (North) Sudan, 2000.

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'Customer satisfaction'
during Medair's Khartoum
health programme, 2000.

- *ISO 9001:2000 promotes "downward accountability" to beneficiaries* – It emphasizes an organization's responsibility to deliver the quality the beneficiaries require, thus encouraging beneficiary participation and involvement, rather than "upward accountability" to donors.
- *ISO 9001:2000 encourages compliance with quality management principles* – If aid agencies choose to use ISO 9001:2000 as a regulating tool, it will provide a means to highlight any lapses in adherence to such principles and to apply corrective actions.
- *ISO 9001:2000 does not promote "standard" solutions* – ISO 9001:2000 can be applied in any situation or context. In the case of an emergency organization, for example, the auditors would evaluate if processes were set up to accommodate rapid and appropriate emergency responses. In the case of a developmental organization, an ISO 9001:2000 audit would evaluate the long-term activities.

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- *ISO 9001:2000 can be applied broadly or specifically* – Since the ISO 9001:2000 audit uses internal manuals and policies as a reference point, organizations mandated to address issues of protection and human rights, or, conversely, aid delivery, would be evaluated against the specific mandate.
- *ISO 9001:2000 promotes evaluation and learning* – ISO 9001:2000 enhances an organization's capacity to evaluate its work and learn from past experiences. Far from the misconception that it is rigid and stifles creativity, audited organizations testify that ISO 9001:2000 actually promotes dynamism in the drive for change and continual improvement.

Against

- *ISO 9001:2000 has a negative image* – ISO 9001:2000 is sometimes perceived as a tool exclusively for industry and business. However, just as the business principles of project cycle management and learning organizations have been beneficial to the aid sector, I believe ISO 9001:2000 will also offer added value.



Photo: Medair

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evaluate and improve certain aspects of quality performance, but it should not be over-estimated as the solution to all the humanitarian aid sector's quality problems.

(Left) Inspection of oil and fortified biscuits stored in the Medair warehouse during its 1998 feeding programme in South Sudan.

- *Misuse of ISO 9001:2000 for marketing or control purposes* – There is a risk that ISO 9001:2000 could be implemented merely as a marketing tool, for example, to attract institutional or private donors. Similarly, it could be seen as a tool to control staff. However, the costs would eventually outweigh the benefits of such misuse.

- *Using ISO 9001:2000 certification as a “once and for all” quality stamp* – An ISO 9001:2000 certified organization should not necessarily be perceived as one that will always implement quality-assured projects. The ISO 9001:2000 audit is a snap shot of an organization's quality performance and should be repeated regularly if it is to be an effective evaluation and improvement tool.



Photo: Medair

- *ISO 9001:2000 can create unnecessary administration and bureaucracy* – If an ISO 9001:2000-based quality management system is not well managed, it can create added paper work. It is essential first to understand the ISO 9001 concept and then to implement it in a simple and goal-orientated manner.

- *ISO 9001:2000 is not the solution to all quality problems* – ISO 9001:2000 is a tool that can help to

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Conclusion

ISO 9001:2000 can be a helpful additional tool for the humanitarian aid sector, as long as it is applied in context, and in a balanced and appropriate manner. If so applied, it has the potential to improve

self-regulation of the sector, re-focus activities on humanitarian imperatives and stimulate aid agencies to meet the quality requirements of its beneficiaries. ■

Distribution of emergency supplies in Mozambique, 2000.