
HQAI CHS audits to unlock trust in locally led quality aid

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A Sector at a Turning Point

HQAI's 2026 Round Table convened institutional donors, UN bodies, INGOs, local and national actors (LNAs) and networks at a moment widely described as critical for the aid system. Participants underscored a shared reality: rising needs, shrinking resources, and systems that are no longer fit for purpose; yet a sense of optimism regarding existing trends and solutions. A clear call emerged for pivotal change anchored in the needs of people affected by crisis.

*"This is not business as usual anymore...
it is about pivoting or perishing."*

Local and national actors (LNAs) are central to this transition. They remain however constrained by structural barriers, including lack of trust and fragmented, duplicative due diligence processes that drain capacity rather than strengthen it.

Against this backdrop, this Round Table explored how HQAI CHS audits can serve as a practical and scalable solution to build trust, reduce inefficiencies, and sustainably enable locally led quality aid.

Building Trust: The Role of CHS Audits

At the core of the discussion was a shared recognition that trust needs to be grounded in credible evidence.

Independent CHS audits, based on the globally recognised Core Humanitarian Standard, were consistently highlighted as a robust mechanism that ensures people affected by crisis are placed at the centre of accountability. Far from being a compliance checklist, they provide a comprehensive assessment of how organisations operate from theory to practice, including governance, safeguarding, risk management, and community engagement. The audits were described as supporting shared learning and shared ownership of risk and to help the sector move beyond compliance towards a culture of accountability that puts communities and people first.

*"We particularly appreciated the fact that
the process was not meant to sanction but
to better understand us and help us improve."*

CHS audits offer a dual value: For organisations, they provide objective, recognised evidence of capacity and areas for improvement; For funders, they deliver reliable, standardised assurance.

This combination positions CHS audits as a bridge between operational reality and donor confidence. A particularly relevant area, thoroughly covered by the Core Humanitarian Standard, was highlighted repeatedly: Protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment and the push for a shift towards collective action.

Empowerment and Equity: A Shift in Power Dynamics

The Round Table highlighted the transformative potential of CHS audits in rebalancing relationships within the aid system.

LNAs participating in various case studies in the Middle East, West Africa and Colombia illustrated how CHS audits translate into tangible organisational benefits. They reported strengthened transparency, enhanced systems, increased confidence, stronger institutional identity, and greater recognition of their expertise.

“CHS audits need to be considered as investments into the capacities of national actors, because it strengthens their systems, reduces risks and improves performance.”

Crucially, audits also contributed to a shift in positioning. LNAs were better able to demonstrate their capabilities, engage with donors on a more equal footing, and advocate for recognition of their role. Certification was also seen as a catalyst for:

- Access to new funding opportunities
- Greater visibility in coordination mechanisms
- More equitable partnerships with international actors

At a systemic level, this contributes to challenging entrenched hierarchies. However, participants raised a related challenge, describing increased competition between LNAs and International NGOs. They also were clear that sustained progress requires long-term, flexible funding, integration of audit costs into financing models and broader donor recognition and uptake.

“Local and national actors want to be held to the same standards and they want to be recognised for their work.”

For funders of the presented case studies this Round Table offered an important space to collectively reflect with peers and partners on how to reduce duplication, strengthen accountability, and better support local and national actors. The external assessments were not considered as a mere burden but a means of showcasing LNA's capacities.

“As a funder, we stand ready to work with other donors to further promote and harmonise the use of CHS audits.”

Reducing Duplication: Efficiency Gains for the Whole System

A central theme was the inefficiency of current due diligence and capacity assessment practices. Multiple, overlapping assessments remain the norm, consuming significant time and resources from both donors and their partners, be they INGOs or LNAs.

Evidence presented during the Round Table demonstrated that CHS audits can substantially reduce this burden:

- A single CHS audit can cover 60-90% of donor due diligence requirements
- Importantly, several donors have already begun to act on this evidence by passporting CHS audits, i.e. accepting them (partially or fully) in lieu of individual due diligence processes. The Sahel Regional Fund (SRF) and UK's FCDO were cited as examples.
- A cost efficiency study conducted within the case study from West Africa (LoCAL) revealed that replacing repeated assessments can save 11 to 50 staff days per LNA annually.

“One audit recognised by multiple donors will reduce duplication whilst strengthening quality and accountability.”

This creates a compelling efficiency case, particularly in a context of reduced funding and increased stress on resources. The case study from West Africa demonstrated how CHS audits can be scaled through coordinated, multi-actor approaches. By aligning around a common standard and promoting a shared use of audit results, stakeholders have begun to unpack assessment frameworks, facilitate data sharing and transparency and build trust across organisations and funding streams.

These initiatives highlight the potential for CHS audits to underpin system-wide alignment, rather than isolated organisational compliance.

A Window of Opportunity: A Practical Pathway to Locally Led Aid

Across interventions, a strong sense of urgency, and opportunity, was evident. Momentum is building: an increasing number of funders are recognising CHS audits as a credible, efficient tool, and along the delivery chain interest is growing in collective approaches. Participants warned against the risk of developing multiple, parallel mechanisms that would further fragment the system.

“This is a now or never moment to demonstrate the value of a functioning, proven system.”

Funders indicated that CHS audits offered them a way of understanding the capability of partners with a quality of assurance that goes beyond their expectations. It made it easier for them to allocate funding to LNAs which are right at the other end of the delivery chain from the funder, much harder to access, assess and support.

The Round Table demonstrated that HQAI CHS audits are not a theoretical idea but a tried and tested, scaleable solution, already delivering measurable results across diverse contexts.

They provide:

- Independent, credible assurance that builds trust
- Significant efficiency gains through reduced duplication
- A pathway for LNAs to demonstrate capacity and access funding
- A foundation for more equitable, locally led partnerships

Above all, they offer a practical means to align accountability with localisation, ensuring that quality, transparency, accountability and community focus remain at the centre of humanitarian action.

“If localisation is to move from policy to practice, national actors must maintain quality and accountability and be recognised for it.”

The discussion was moderated by **Nigel Timmins**, member of the Board of Directors at HQAI, with the expert contributions from

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Romain Sztark, Head of multi-country operations West Africa, Danish Refugee Council

Tanya Wood, Executive Director of the CHS Alliance

Participants collectively represented institutional donors (from Canada, Denmark, European Union, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Nations, United Kingdom), as well as networks and alliances (BOND, CHS Alliance, DEC).

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