



Third-party quality assurance policy

POL114 - Third-party quality assurance policy - 2018-10-25

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POL114 - Third-party quality assurance policy - 2018-10-25		
Replaces	POL114 - Third-party quality assurance policy - 2018-06-12	
Nature of change	added points 2.7 and 2.8 of part 2/ reinstatement (PH)	
Approval of the original document:	ED	2016-10-06
Formal approval	BoD	2018-10-25
Approval of the current version:	BoD	2018-10-25

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Introduction

I. The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative

HQAI's objective is to improve the Quality and Accountability of organisations working with people in need through the provision and promotion of meaningful and adapted independent quality assurance. Its services are intended to build capacity in the sector and provide consistent measurable data in the delivery of quality action, thus improving principled, accountable, efficient provision of aid to vulnerable and at-risk populations.

To all its stakeholders, HQAI is an accountable, open and trustworthy partner, which applies the internationally recognised ground rules of auditing that are impartiality, competence, responsibility, openness, confidentiality and responsiveness to complaints. Our policies, procedures and tools for independent quality assurance follow relevant ISO standards requirements.

HQAI has developed robust tools to measure efficiently where an organisation stands in relation to the [Core Humanitarian Standard \(CHS\) on Quality and Accountability](#). Tools related to other standards may be developed in the future.

HQAI operates third-party quality assurance against the CHS within the framework of the CHS Alliance's Verification Scheme.

II. Scope

This policy contains the generic process requirements applicable for HQAI third-party quality assurance services. It provides general information about the benchmarking, independent verification and certification schemes. Detailed information on the process of an audit is provided in PRO114 - third-party quality assurance procedure.

III. References

The following referenced documents complement this policy. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

ISO/IEC 17065 - Conformity Assessment Requirements for bodies certifying products, processes and services (2012)

HQAI POL103 - Claims policy

HQAI POL200 - Subsidy Fund policy

HQAI PRO048 - Complaint Management procedure

HQAI PRO049 - Appeals procedure

HQAI PRO200 - Subsidy Fund procedure

IV. Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions (based on relevant ISO standards) and the humanitarian principles apply.

Auditor	Person who conducts an audit.
Benchmarking audit	Audit carried out by an auditing body independent of the organisation and the parties that rely on benchmarking, for the purpose of establishing the degree to which the organisation applies the standard at a point in time.
Certification audit	Audit carried out by an auditing body independent of the organisation and the parties that rely on certification, for the purpose of certifying the organisation's management system.
Certification scheme	Conformity assessment system related to management systems to which the same specified requirements, specific rules and procedures apply.
Organisation	Organisation that is being audited for quality assurance purposes.
Confidentiality	Strict non-disclosure of any confidential information.
Impartiality (auditing principle)	Presence of objectivity, making no distinction on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.
Independence	Being autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that might put pressure on a decision by the certification or verification body
Non-conformity	Non-fulfilment of a requirement.
Major non-conformity	Non-conformity that affects the capability of the organisation to achieve the intended results.
Minor non-conformity	Non-conformity that does not affect the capability of the management system to achieve the intended results.
Neutrality	Not taking sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.
Openness	Disclosure of appropriate and timely information about the audit, verification and certifications processes and about the verification or certification status (i.e. the granting, maintaining of quality assurance, expanding or reducing the scope of quality assurance, renewing, suspending or reinstating, or withdrawing of quality assurance) of any organisation.
Principle of Humanity	Addressing human suffering wherever it is found, protecting life and health and ensuring respect for human beings.
Responsibility	Assessment of sufficient objective evidence upon which to base a certification or verification decision. <u>Note:</u> The organisation, not HQAI, has the responsibility for consistently achieving the intended results of application of the referenced standard <u>Note:</u> Any audit is based on sampling within an organisation's management system and therefore is not a guarantee of 100 % conformity with requirements
Site	Any place where the organisation has activities, including the head office, country programmes and project sites.
Country programme	Country where the organisations has a long-term presence.

Project site	Site within a country programme where an organisation carries out work. A site can include all land on which activities under the control of an organisation are carried out, including any project implemented through partners.
Verification audit	Audit carried out by an auditing body independent of the organisation and the parties that rely on verification, for the purpose of verifying the organisation's continuous improvement in the application of a standard.



Part 1 : Generalities

1 Schemes

1.1 HQAI offers three schemes:

- i. Benchmarking is a one-time independent and objective diagnosis of the situation of one or a group of organisations with regard to a given standard, good practices or commitments. It is a first step towards aligning and integrating working approaches with those outlined in the specified standard, good practices or commitments.
- ii. Independent verification (sometimes referred to as third-party verification) is an independent and objective assurance that one or a group of organisations are making demonstrated, continuous and measurable progress applying a given standard, good practices or commitments. The requirement is that the most serious weaknesses in the application of the standard are eliminated within a four-year cycle. Unlike certification, this option assesses continuous improvement, according to an agreed action plan and is not a pass/fail test of compliance with the standard.
- iii. Certification is the independent and objective assurance that an organisation meets the requirements specified in a given standard, good practices or commitments. A certificate is valid four years, providing periodic checks confirm the continuing conformity with the requirements of the standard.

1.2 Under no circumstances will HQAI provide management system consultancy or participate by any of its activities or services in the establishment, implementation and maintenance of the audited management systems of its audited organisations.

2 Value and objectives

2.1 The dual overall objective of third-party quality assurance services, is to provide:

- i. an objective and independent assessment of where an organisation stands in the application of a reference standard so as to allow learning and improvement;
- ii. confidence to all parties that an organisation fulfils or is continuously improving in the fulfilment of specified requirements.

2.2 The value of the processes lays in their professionalism, impartiality and in the robustness of the third-party quality assurance mechanisms. The impartial and competent assessment of performances in the application of a reference standard builds stakeholders' confidence and strengthens the position of an organisation towards partners and in the sector.

2.3 HQAI third-party quality assurance services follow the principles of impartiality, competence, responsibility, openness, confidentiality, responsiveness to complaints and a risk-based approach. Those principles are generally agreed to create trust and public confidence in HQAI services.

3 HQAI registered auditors

- 3.1 Audits shall be undertaken by specially trained HQAI registered auditors.
- 3.2 To be registered, an auditor shall have followed a training, both theoretical and practical that ensures their competence in terms of generic rules of auditing, the standard against which the assessment is carried out, and HQAI's specific mechanisms.
- 3.3 Auditors who have acquired and demonstrated a sufficient practice of HQAI auditing to be able to lead audits become senior auditors.
- 3.4 Only senior auditors can lead audits, in which case they are referred to as lead auditors.
- 3.5 Lead auditors have authority for the management, control and performance of audit activities including planning the process with support from HQAI's Secretariat, the management of other members of the audit team and the quality and timely delivery of the audit report.
- 3.6 HQAI registered auditors shall regularly perform audits at satisfaction to maintain their registration. They shall also participate regularly in continuous training provided by HQAI.
- 3.7 The list of registered auditors shall be published and kept up-to-date on HQAI's website.

Part 2 : HQAI third-party quality assurance schemes

Benchmarking, certification and independent verification schemes involve document reviews, interviews with staff, partners, the direct input of communities and affected people receiving assistance from the organisation, people not receiving assistance from the organisation, other stakeholders (donors, local authorities, etc.), and direct observation at selected country programme(s) and project site(s). Special emphasis is given to the validation of internal quality control mechanisms, and when relevant the output of self-assessments and other control mechanisms (e.g. peer review) the organisation may undergo so as to:

- i. avoid duplicating or replacing what exists and works well;
- ii. minimise the number of assessments the staff and other stakeholders are submitted to;
- iii. avoid the creation of “audit fatigue”.

All HQAI third-party quality assurance schemes follow the requirements for bodies providing audit and certification set by the ISO 17065 standard.

1 Benchmarking

The main steps of the benchmarking process are:

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Benchmarking	Self Assessment Initial Audit	X	X	X	X
	Diagnosis				

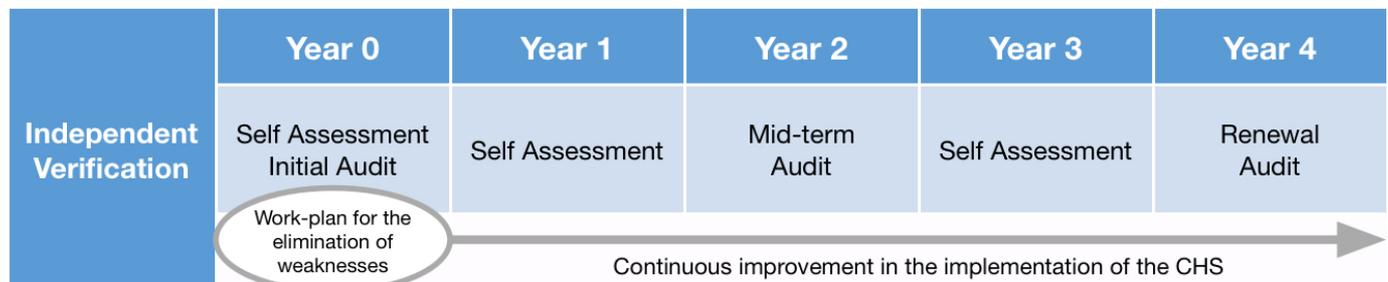
1.1 The benchmarking process comprises the following steps.

- i. The organisation undertakes an Initial HQAI self-assessment using HQAI’s tool (STD014);
- ii. A team¹ led by a lead auditor undertakes the audit;
- iii. The audit team produces an audit report, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the standard’s requirements;
- iv. Upon consent of the organisation, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website.

¹ Depending on circumstances (risk, complexity of the organisations, etc.) the team can be composed of only the lead auditor.

2 Independent verification

The main steps of the independent verification process are:



Note: Except under justified exceptional circumstances, an organisation can be withdrawn from the programme if it significantly fails to implement the work plan, fails to follow the verification process in due time or if major weaknesses have not been addressed within 4 years after their identification by an audit. Exceptionally the process can be extended by two years, but not more.

2.1 Initial audit and development of the work plan.

- i. The organisation undertakes an Initial HQAI self-assessment using HQAI's tool (STD014);
- ii. A team² led by a lead auditor undertakes an initial audit;
- iii. The audit team produces an initial audit report identifying strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the standard's requirements;
- iv. Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website;
- v. The organisation develops a 4-years work plan for continuous improvement in the application of the standard;
- vi. With the organisation's prior consent, a public summary of the work plan can be made available to stakeholders requesting it.

2.2 Maintenance self-assessment

- i. Within one year after the initial audit report is finalised, the organisation undertakes a maintenance self-assessment using HQAI tools;
- ii. The organisation reports back to HQAI on the work plan implementation and progress towards the application of the standard.

² Depending on circumstances (risk, complexity of the organisations, etc.) the team can be composed of only the lead auditor.

2.3 Mid-term audit

- i. Within two years after the initial audit report is finalised, a team³ led by a lead auditor undertakes a third-party mid-term audit;
- ii. The audit team produces a mid-term audit report;
- iv. Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website.

2.4 Within three years after the initial audit report is finalised, the organisation undertakes a maintenance self-assessment, as per 2.2;

2.5 Within four years after the initial audit report is finalised, the organisation can renew the process or switch to another quality assurance scheme. The process, as relevant, follows the steps described from 2.1 on.

3 The certification process

The main steps of the certification process are:

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Certification	Self Assessment Initial Audit	Maintenance Audit	Mid-term Audit	Maintenance Audit	Recertification Audit
	Certificate issued	Certificate maintained	Certificate maintained	Certificate maintained	Certificate renewed

3.1 Initial audit

- i. The organisation undertakes an Initial HQAI self-assessment using HQAI's tool (STD014);
- ii. A team⁴ led by a lead auditor undertakes an initial audit;
- iii. The audit team produces an initial audit report, including levels of conformity with the standard:
 - a. Non-conformities are expressed in major or minor corrective action requests (CARs) and observations;
 - b. A major CAR issued at an initial audit prohibits an organisation to be certified;
 - c. If the major CAR is demonstratively addressed and closed within six months of the audit, a certificate can be issued without further audit;

³ Depending on circumstances (risk, complexity of the organisations, etc.) the team can be composed of only the lead auditor.

⁴ Depending on circumstances (risk, complexity of the organisations, etc.) the team can be composed of only the lead auditor.

- d. If more than six months pass between the audit and the correction of a major CAR, a full initial audit is required to issue a certificate.
- iv. HQAI under the responsibility of its Executive Director evaluates the report, its finding, the recommendation on certification and decides whether to follow the recommendation. This decision cannot be outsourced.
- v. Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website;
- vi. As relevant, a certificate of conformity is granted, with the right to use the certification mark (logo) in organisational communications and public relations.

Note: A certificate is valid four years provided the steps for its maintenance are followed.

3.2 Maintenance audit

- i. Within one year of the issuing of the certificate, a team led by a lead auditor undertakes a maintenance audit⁵;
- ii. The audit team produces a maintenance audit report, including levels of conformity with the standard:
 - a. A minor CAR that has not been corrected in time leads to a major CAR;
 - b. A major CAR issued at a maintenance audit leads to the suspension of the certificate;
 - c. If the major CAR is demonstratively addressed and closed within 3 months of the audit, the certificate is reinstated;
 - d. This timeframe can be extended by the lead auditor up to six months maximum for justified reasons;
 - e. Passed this timeframe, the certificate is withdrawn or the scope of certification is reduced, as relevant.
- iii. HQAI under the responsibility of its Executive Director evaluates the report, its finding, the recommendation on the maintenance of the certificate and decides whether to follow the recommendation. This decision cannot be outsourced.
- iv. Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website.

3.3 Mid-term audit

- i. Within two years of the issuing of the certificate, a team led by a lead auditor undertakes a mid-term audit⁵;
- ii. The audit team produces a mid-term audit report, including levels of conformity with the standard:
 - a. A minor CAR that has not been corrected in time leads to a major CAR;
 - b. A major CAR issued at a mid-term audit leads to the suspension of the certificate;

⁵ If the audit is not conducted within the set timeframe, HQAI suspends the certificate for a maximum duration of 6 months. If after 6 months, the audit is not conducted, the certificate is withdrawn.

- c. If the major CAR is demonstratively addressed and closed within 3 months of the audit, the certificate is reinstated;
 - d. This timeframe can be extended by the lead auditor up to six months maximum for justified reasons;
 - e. Passed this timeframe, the certificate is withdrawn or the scope of certification is reduced, as relevant.
- iii. HQAI under the responsibility of its Executive Director evaluates the report, its finding and recommendations, and decides whether to maintain the certificate. This decision cannot be outsourced.
 - iv. Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website.

3.4 Maintenance audit.

- i. Within three years of the issuing of the certificate, the organisation undertakes a new maintenance audit, as per 3.2.

3.5 Recertification audit.

- i. Within 4 years of the issuing of the certificate and upon request from the audited organisation a new cycle of certification starts with a re-certification audit and follows the steps described above.
- ii. The re-certification audit needs to take place before the end of validity of the certificate of conformity to ensure the continuous validity of the certificate
 - a. A minor CAR that has not been corrected in time leads to a major CAR;
 - b. A major CAR issued at a re-certification audit leads to the suspension of the certificate;
 - c. If the major CAR is demonstratively addressed and closed within 3 months of the audit, the certificate is reinstated;
 - d. This timeframe can be extended by the lead auditor up to six months maximum for justified reasons;
 - e. Passed this timeframe, the certificate is withdrawn or the scope of certification is reduced, as relevant.

4 Public summaries

- 4.1 The principle of transparency being core to its work, HQAI publishes on its website a summary of audit reports. For the benchmarking scheme this public summary is optional.
- 4.2 The public summary reports contain at a minimum:
 - i. The levels of application of the standard at the level of commitments and an explanation of their meaning;

- ii. The major and minor corrective action requests (CARs) or weaknesses, and their times for resolution;
 - iii. Generic information on visited sites and communities.
- 4.3 Exceptions may be allowed for justified security reasons through an official request to the Secretariat.

5 Bridges between HQAI third-party quality assurance schemes

- 5.1 HQAI third-party quality assurance schemes are built on the same principles, processes, methodology, tools and results and are in line with the requirements of ISO 17065.
- 5.2 An organisation engaged in a benchmarking, independent verification or certification can transfer to another scheme at no cost or additional audit within three months after the approval of the initial audit report.
- i. The transfer to the certification scheme is only possible if the organisation meets the requirements of the standard;
 - ii. The validity of a certificate or of an independent verification process shall be four years from the approval of the audit report by HQAI, not the time of the approval of the transfer to another scheme;
 - iii. The transfer from the certification scheme to the verification scheme corresponds to a withdrawal of the certificate if it is the result of the issuance of a major CAR, or a cancellation if it is for any other reason.

6 Internal quality controls

- 6.1 HQAI counts with several internal quality control mechanisms to ensure that it operates to the highest standards and consistently in conformity with its policies and procedures. These mechanisms address:
- i. Finances: fees and expenses paid to auditors and invoices sent to audited organisations through a system of double signature and periodic reporting to the Board of Directors.
 - ii. Performance of the process: through satisfaction questionnaires to be filled in by audited organisations after each audit.
 - iii. Quality and consistency of audit reports: review by the secretariat of each report before sending it to the audited organisation.
 - iv. Performance of the auditors: addressed by ii. and iii. Additionally, through the witnessing on behalf of the secretariat by registered senior auditors of 80% of the square root of audits.
 - v. Performance of the decision-making on certificate: through a review of 60% of the square roots of decisions by the Advisory and Complaint Board;
 - vi. Conformity with the accreditation requirements: through an annual internal audit by a HQAI registered auditor reporting to the Board of Directors.

7 Staff qualification for quality control or decision-making

- 7.1 Internal quality control of audits is the responsibility of the Head of Quality Assurance.
- 7.2 The minimum qualifications for the Head of Quality assurance to fulfil this task are:
- i. University level in a relevant subject;
 - ii. Experience in the humanitarian and/or development sector;
 - iii. Be registered as a Senior auditor by HQAI;
 - iv. Excellent analytical and problem solving skills with attention to details;
 - v. Experience in dealing with different cultures;
 - vi. Good writing skills; fluent in written and spoken English and ideally other UN languages.
- 7.3 Decisions on verification and certification are the responsibility of the Executive Director.
- 7.4 The minimum qualifications for the Executive Director to fulfil this task are:
- i. Master degree in Business administration or other relevant degree;
 - ii. Experience in managing a conformity assessment scheme at senior level;
 - iii. Experience in ISO standards relevant to conformity assessment activities;
 - iv. Good knowledge of the humanitarian and development sector;
 - v. Good knowledge of NGO organisational models;
 - vi. Business management experience, at senior management level;
 - vii. Demonstrated track record in the field of organisational performance audits, or monitoring and evaluation;
 - viii. Good writing skills; fluent in written and spoken English and ideally other UN languages.
- 7.5 The minimum qualifications described in 7.2 and 7.4 shall be part of the job descriptions of the Head of Quality Assurance and the Executive Director respectively.