

# Third-party quality assurance policy

POL114-Third party quality assurance policy-2024-11-06

POL114-Third-party_quality_assurance_policy-2024-11-06		
Replaces	PRO114-Third-party_quality_assurance_policy-2022-09-30	
Nature of change	<p>1. Removal of references to Stage 1 and Stage 2 of an audit process: in line with our efforts to simplify and make our audit processes more efficient we have introduced a 1-stage audit process, rather than 2 separate stages, with two separate reports.</p> <p>2. Maintenance Audits: Focus reviewed and streamlined to keep to minimum checks for HQAI's assurance of continued conformity.</p> <p>3. Independent Verification Work-plan : clarification on purpose of this document from HQAI perspective (action is being taken).</p>	
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# Third party quality assurance policy

## Introduction

### I. The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative

HQAI's objective is to improve the Quality and Accountability of organisations working with vulnerable and at-risk populations 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's CHS certification scheme is accredited against ISO/IEC 17065:2012.

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 is committed to the nine fundamental principles of the CHS and implements them as far as they are applicable to its own activities.

These are:

- delivery of services that respond to the needs of users
- timely delivery of these services
- avoidance of negative effects
- transparency and participation in decision-making
- provision of safe complaint mechanisms
- avoidance of duplication
- responsible management of staff, including non-discrimination
- responsible use of resources.

### II. Scope

This policy describes the framework within which HQAI third-party quality assurance services operate. It provides general information about the benchmarking, independent verification, and certification schemes. Operational processes are described 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)
- POL103 - Claims policy
- POL200 - Subsidy Fund policy
- PRO048 - Complaint Management procedure
- PRO049 - Appeals procedure
- PRO050 - Advisory & complaints board
- PRO200 - Subsidy Fund procedure
- PRO105 - Auditors training, registration & performance tracking
- PRO114 - Third party quality assurance procedure

### IV. 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 based on 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	<p>Assessment of sufficient objective evidence upon which to base a certification or verification decision.</p> <p><u>Note:</u> The organisation, not HQAI, has the responsibility for consistently achieving the intended results of application of the referenced standard</p> <p><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</p>
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:

- 1.1.1 Benchmarking is a one-time independent and objective diagnosis of the situation of one or a group of organisations regarding 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.
- 1.1.2 Independent 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 three-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.
- 1.1.3 Certification is the independent and objective assurance that an organisation meets the requirements specified in any given standard, good practices, or commitments. A certificate is valid three years, providing periodic checks confirm the continuing conformity with the requirements of the standard.

#### 1.2 HQAI does not provide consultancy related to the implementation of a standard.

### 2 Value and objectives

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

- 2.1.1 An objective and independent assessment of where an organisation stands in the application of a reference standard to allow learning and improvement.
- 2.1.2 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 lies in their professionalism, independence, 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 independence, 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, auditors 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. Refer to PRO105-Training and registration procedure.
- 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 and responsibility 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 satisfactorily 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 and partners and the direct input of vulnerable and at-risk communities supported by the organisation, people not receiving assistance from the organisation, other stakeholders (donors, local authorities, etc.), and direct observation onsite (offices, programmes and projects). 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 to:

- i. avoid duplicating or replacing what exists and works well;
- ii. minimise the number of assessments that staff and other stakeholders undergo;
- 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.

### 4 Benchmarking

4.1 The benchmarking process comprises the following steps.

- 4.1.1 The organisation undertakes a preliminary organisational profiling exercise using HQAI's tool (ADM105).
- 4.1.2 A team<sup>1</sup> led by a lead auditor undertakes the audit.
- 4.1.3 The audit team produces an audit report, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the standard's requirements.

### 5 Independent verification

The main steps of the independent verification process are:

- 5.1 Initial audit and development of the work plan.
  - 5.1.1 The organisation undertakes a preliminary organisational profiling exercise using HQAI's tool (ADM105).
  - 5.1.2 A team<sup>2</sup> led by a lead auditor undertakes an initial audit.
  - 5.1.3 The audit team produces an initial audit report identifying strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the standard's requirements.
  - 5.1.4 HQAI under the responsibility of its Head of Quality Assurance, evaluates the report, its findings, the recommendation on registration in the verification scheme and decides whether to follow the recommendation. This decision cannot be outsourced.

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

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



- 5.1.6 Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website.
- 5.1.7 The organisation develops a three-year work plan for continuous improvement in the application of the standard.
- 5.2 Within 12 months after the initial audit is finalised, the organisation submits a Work Plan (HQAI tool STD021) to HQAI.
- 5.3 Within three years after the initial audit is finalised, the organisation can renew the process or switch to another quality assurance scheme.
- 5.4 If HQAI identifies that no action is taken by the organisation to address weaknesses between the initial and renewal audit, HQAI may consider delisting the organisation from the scheme.
- Note: HQAI shall consult with the CHS Alliance before delisting an organisation from the independent verification scheme.

## 6 Certification

The main steps of the certification process are:

- 6.1 Initial audit
- 6.1.1 The organisation undertakes a preliminary organisational profiling exercise using HQAI's tool (ADM105).
- 6.1.2 An audit team<sup>3</sup>, led by a Lead Auditor, undertakes an initial audit.
- 6.1.3 The audit team produces an initial audit report, including levels of conformity with the standard and recommendation for certification:
- i. Non-conformities are expressed as major or minor corrective action requests (CARs).
  - ii. Observations can be raised, denoting compliance with an indicator but with an issue that risks non-compliance if unaddressed.
  - iii. A major CAR issued at an initial audit prohibits an organisation to be certified.
  - iv. If the major CAR is demonstratively addressed and closed within six months of the audit, a certificate can be issued without further onsite audit.
- 6.1.4 HQAI under the responsibility of its Executive Director evaluates the report, its findings, the recommendation on certification and decides whether to follow the recommendation. This decision cannot be outsourced.
- 6.1.5 Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website.
- 6.1.6 As relevant, a certificate of conformity is granted.
- Note: A certificate is valid three years provided the steps for its maintenance are followed.

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

## 6.2 First maintenance audit

6.2.1 During the first audit cycle, a maintenance audit is undertaken within one year of issuing of the certificate.

6.2.2 The auditor produces a maintenance audit report, including a review of actions taken to address open CARs and a claims review.

6.2.3 HQAI under the responsibility of its Executive Director evaluates the report, its findings, the recommendation on the maintenance of the certificate and decides whether to follow the recommendation. This decision cannot be outsourced.

6.2.4 Upon control by the audited organisation that no confidential information is displayed, HQAI publishes a public summary of the report on its website.

## 6.3 Second maintenance audit.

6.3.1 Within one year of the first maintenance audit (signed report), the organisation undertakes a new maintenance audit, following the process outlined above (point 6.2).

6.3.2 Where the organisation decides to renew its certificate, the second maintenance audit includes an additional scoping exercise as the first step in the renewal audit process.

## 6.4 Renewal audit.

6.4.1 Within three years of the issuing of the certificate and upon request from the audited organisation, a new cycle of certification starts with a renewal audit and follows the process outlined above (points 6.1.2 to 6.3).

6.4.2 The renewal audit must be completed before the certificate of conformity expires to maintain its validity.

## 7 Public summary reports

7.1 The principle of transparency being core to its work, HQAI publishes a summary audit report on its website.

Note: In the benchmarking scheme, the publication of this summary report is optional.

7.2 The public summary reports contain at a minimum:

7.2.1 The overall performance and level of application of the standard at the commitment level.

7.2.2 The major and minor corrective action requests (CARs) or weaknesses, and the timeframes for resolution in case of certification.

7.2.3 Generic information on the organisation and the audit, including the sites and communities visited and remotely assessed.

7.3 Exceptions to publicise the audit summary report may be allowable if justified and formally requested to HQAI Secretariat.

## 8 Transfers between HQAI third-party quality assurance schemes

- 8.1 As far as relevant for each scheme, all HQAI quality assurance schemes are built on the same principles, processes, methodology and tools, which are in line with the requirements of ISO 17065.
- 8.2 As such, 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 or renewal audit report.
  - 8.2.1 The transfer to the certification scheme is only possible if the organisation meets the requirements of the standard.
  - 8.2.2 The validity of a certificate or of an independent verification process shall be three years from the approval of the initial or renewal audit report by HQAI, not the time of the approval of the transfer to another scheme.
  - 8.2.3 The transfer from the certification scheme to the verification scheme results in either the withdrawal of the certificate, in case of a major CAR, or its cancellation for any other reason.

## 9 Quality controls

- 9.1 HQAI relies on 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:
  - 9.1.1 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.
  - 9.1.2 Performance of the process: evaluation forms are required to be completed by the audited organisation after each audit and through observations by the secretariat or an assigned senior auditor of 80% of the square root of audits planned in that year (ref. PRO105).
  - 9.1.3 Quality and consistency of audit reports: the secretariat manages a quality assurance review process for audit reports.
  - 9.1.4 Performance of the auditors: included in 9.1.2. and 9.1.3, and, through onsite and remote observation by the secretariat or an assigned senior auditor of 80% of the square root of audits planned in that year (ref. PRO105).
  - 9.1.5 Performance of the decision-making of a certificate: through a review of decisions made by the Advisory and Complaint Board (ACB) (ref. PRO050).
  - 9.1.6 Conformity with the accreditation requirements: through an annual internal audit conducted by a HQAI registered auditor, which reports to the Board of Directors (ref. PRO900).
  - 9.1.7 External accreditation audit: through the regular audit by the Accreditation authority responsible for HQAI accreditation.

## 10 Staff qualification for quality control or decision-making

- 10.1 Internal quality control of audits is the responsibility of the Head of Quality Assurance.
- 10.2 The minimum qualifications for the Head of Quality assurance to fulfil this task are:
  - 10.2.1 University level in a relevant subject.
  - 10.2.2 Experience in the humanitarian and/or development sector.
  - 10.2.3 Completed training on ISO 19011.
  - 10.2.4 Excellent analytical and problem-solving skills with attention to detail.
  - 10.2.5 Experience in dealing with different cultures.
  - 10.2.6 Good writing skills; fluent in written and spoken English and ideally other UN languages.
- 10.3 Decisions on verification and certification are the responsibility of the Executive Director.
- 10.4 The minimum qualifications for the Executive Director to fulfil this task are:
  - 10.4.1 master's degree in business administration or other relevant degree.
  - 10.4.2 Experience in managing a conformity assessment scheme at senior level.
  - 10.4.3 Experience in ISO standards relevant to conformity assessment activities.
  - 10.4.4 Good knowledge of the humanitarian and development sector.
  - 10.4.5 Good knowledge of NGO organisational models.
  - 10.4.6 Business management experience, at senior management level.
  - 10.4.7 Demonstrated track record in the field of organisational performance audits, or monitoring and evaluation.
  - 10.4.8 Good writing skills; fluent in written and spoken English and ideally other UN languages.
- 10.5 The minimum qualifications described in 10.2 and 10.4 shall be part of the job descriptions of the Head of Quality Assurance and the Executive Director respectively.