

To members of the CHS Alliance

To organisations registered with HQAI

01 March 2018

## Open letter: Using the CHS to strengthen safeguarding mechanisms

The recent safeguarding breaches have, justifiably, upset our sector and the public at large. They have brought quality and accountability to people affected by crisis back into the spotlight. They have also reminded us how vital it is to apply existing standards and use all available tools.

The CHS Alliance, as one of the copyright holders of the Core Humanitarian Standard<sup>1</sup> (CHS), and the Humanitarian Quality and Accountability Initiative (HQAI), as a provider of independent verification and certification services, join forces to reassure you that the CHS and its Verification Scheme are delivering - and will continue to deliver - effective improvements in our sector, including in the critical area of safeguarding.

Sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse of power is unacceptable. Understandably, there are calls for assurance that organisations have robust safeguarding systems in place. Since 2001, standards, policies, guidelines and tools, have been developed but their application has not been systematic and fall short in providing sufficient safeguarding measures. Leadership and resources are now needed to ensure that the CHS and related standards are adopted and that the sector – from NGOs to the UN, from donors to private sector contracts – are committed to demonstrating the application of such standards.

### In applying and verifying against the CHS, you are leading by example

Numerous organisations have already stepped up and want to lead by example, building on successes and failures, and continuously improve. They have put in place solid internal procedures, policies and mechanisms, and openly demonstrate their commitment to high standards of quality and accountability to crisis-affected and vulnerable people by applying the CHS and its Verification Scheme.

Verification is a structured, systematic process to assess the degree to which an organisation is aligned with the CHS. The Verification Scheme offers four verification options with various degrees of rigour and trustworthiness: self-assessment, peer review, independent verification and certification. Although each option is a stand-alone, the indicators are common to all four options. To avoid potential conflicts of interest and following international good practice,

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<sup>1</sup> CHS Alliance, Groupe URD and Sphere jointly hold the copyright of the CHS on behalf of the humanitarian sector

independent auditing (verification and certification) is undertaken by HQAI, a certification body that was established for this purpose. It is totally independent from the CHS Alliance, the CHS standard/setting process and, of course, the organisations that go through auditing.

## The CHS: a robust Standard to prevent abuse

The CHS is a voluntary standard that has been adopted by many organisations including over 200 member organisations of the CHS Alliance . In order to join the CHS Alliance member organisations must demonstrate that they have a code of conduct in place that includes prevention and respond to sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse. All full members of CHS Alliance commit to verifying their application of the CHS.

The CHS and its Nine Commitments directly or indirectly refer to the protection from sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse of affected populations (PSEA) and staff (SHA). The Standard requires that a “code of conduct be in place, which establishes, at a minimum, the obligation of staff not to exploit, abuse or otherwise discriminate against people” (8.7). It also demands that “staff adhere to the policies that are relevant to them and understand the consequences of not adhering to them” (8.2). Furthermore, the CHS stipulates that organisations must “identify and act upon potential or actual unwanted negative effects in a timely and systematic manner, including areas of ... sexual exploitation and abuse by staff” (3.6).

The CHS offers a suitable framework for organisations to put in place adequate safeguarding mechanism and for auditors to assess if these are functional. What's lacking, though, is the unquestionable application of the Standard and its related policies across the sector. The CHS Verification Scheme, particularly its independent quality assurance component, can have a strong impact here.

## Third-party quality assurance: we measure, you improve

In the wake of the current crisis, organisations and policy-makers alike have called for independent mechanisms and control bodies to assure stakeholders that humanitarian organisations have the mechanisms in place to avoid, detect, remedy and communicate cases of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse. Third-party quality assurance is an objective and independent assessment of where an organisation stands in the application of the CHS. HQAI audits involve document reviews, interviews with staff, partners, the direct input of communities and affected people, other stakeholders and direct observations of selected country programmes in the field. Auditors also examine the output of other independent review processes. All these elements are interconnected to draw a reliable and objective picture of the organisation and incentivise organisations to make consistent investments into improving the quality and accountability of their work with crisis-affected and vulnerable people and communities.

During an audit against the CHS auditors will assess not only if mechanisms are in place to identify gaps and weaknesses but also, in case of identified breaches, if adequate measures to correct and redress the issue are implemented. This applies to SEA and SHA safeguarding mechanisms, as well as other elements of quality and accountability.

## Together, in a period of change

Our respective experience at the CHS Alliance and HQAI has demonstrated that the CHS is perfectly adapted to its role as a core standard, describing the essential elements of principled, accountable and high-quality humanitarian action. We trust that our joint commitment to apply, measure, explain and work up to the standard will contribute to the continuous improvement of quality and accountability in the sector.

Our experts at CHS Alliance and HQAI stand ready to support organisations in this important/changing period.

We look forward to pursuing our strong support and endorsement of organisations working with affected populations.

Please feel free to contact us for more information and feedback.

Yours sincerely,



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