
Part III: The HAP Certification Scheme

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5. What is the scheme and how does it work?

Overview of the HAP Certification Scheme

Expression of interest

An agency will register its preliminary interest in HAP Certification through submitting a short statement of intent to undertake a baseline analysis and a declaration of compliance with the qualifying norms for HAP Certification.

Baseline analysis

An agency with a registered interest will complete a baseline analysis of its current state of conformity with the HAP Standard.

Application

An agency requesting certification will register its interest through submission of an application file.

Document review

The audit team will review all the relevant documentation listed in the application file and submitted by the agency. Documents will need to be received by HAP at least **ten days before** the on-site audits take place.

Head office audit

A head office audit will be carried out to verify that procedures/processes specified in the documentation are being carried out. This normally takes **three days**.

Project site audit

One or more project sites (selected by the audit team) will be audited to verify that procedures/processes are being carried out at project level. These will include interviews with people affected by the disaster, staff, partners, and other specified stakeholders, where applicable.

Audit report

Based on the findings of the document review, the head office, and the project site(s) audits, the audit team will submit a report to the Certification and Accreditation Board. Observed cases of major non-compliance will delay certification until corrected. A minor non-compliance may not delay certification, but will result in a corrective action request to be undertaken by the agency within an agreed timeframe.

Introduction

Agencies may approach HAP at different stages. Some may feel that they already meet the requirements of the HAP Standard and therefore choose to apply for Certification straight away. Others may consider that they need to improve or get help in assessing their systems before they can decide whether to seek HAP Certification. This part of the Guide explains how the Certification process works, for both categories of applicants. It explains what Certification is; who carries it out; how it is carried out, and what it might cost. The box below gives a quick impression of how the scheme works.

What is Certification?

Certification is the formal evaluation of an agency against the HAP Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management Standard (2007), using an established method to measure compliance. The strengths of the HAP Certification process are:

- independent validation of good practice with respect to humanitarian accountability and quality management;
- verification through soliciting opinions of key stakeholders, including and most importantly, people affected by disaster;
- strengthening of accountability and professionalism within the humanitarian sector;
- improvement of knowledge management and good practice throughout the agency;
- provision of an informed choice to stakeholders;

- voluntary code that enables agencies to hold themselves to account;
- appeals and complaints-handling process.

Who carries out Certification?

The HAP General Assembly is the governing body of HAP, and thus holds final authority over the content of the HAP Standard and the process of Certification. The General Assembly has delegated the responsibility for awarding HAP Certification to its Certification and Accreditation Review Board. The HAP Secretariat is charged by the General Assembly with responsibility for the continuous improvement of the Standard through ongoing consultation, research, and evaluation. It is also responsible for providing training and support in helping HAP's member agencies and new applicants to prepare for Certification.

Certification and Accreditation Review Board

The Certification and Accreditation Review Board is appointed by the HAP General Assembly and is composed of an equal number of full member representatives and independent members (i.e. having no professional affiliation with any of HAP's full members).

The HAP Secretariat provides administrative and executive support to the Certification and Accreditation Review Board. The Certification and Accreditation Review Board is responsible for:

- examining audit reports, determining whether audit recommendations are valid, and deciding whether applicants can be certified as being compliant with the HAP Standard;
- examining applications for accreditation by other bodies wishing to carry out HAP audits and determining whether this accreditation should be given;
- Holding the register of certified and accredited agencies and monitoring usage of the Certification mark/certificate.

Complaints concerning the processes of certification and accreditation, or appeals against the recommendations of the independent auditors, will be handled in the first instance by the Certification and Accreditation Review Board. If a complaint cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties at this level, it will be referred to the HAP Standing Complaints Committee to be dealt with in accordance with the HAP Complaints Against Members procedure.

HAP Secretariat

The HAP Secretariat is responsible for the day-to-day management of the Certification process. This involves:

- handling all applications for Certification and accreditation:
 - managing and reviewing the application file
 - agreeing dates and locations for the audit
 - documentation
 - mid-term audit management
 - preparation of recommendations for Certification and accreditation.
- managing relations with the auditors and ensuring:
 - identification and recruitment of suitably qualified auditors
 - training of auditors to recognised HAP Standard auditing proficiency
 - accrediting and registering auditors who are proficient and qualified to audit agencies with the HAP Standard
 - allocating tasks to auditors and ensuring ongoing training and briefing for them.

HAP-registered independent auditors

Auditors used by HAP are contracted as independent consultants/ auditors. They have a minimum of 5–10 years' experience in the humanitarian sector and are trained and registered as competent to audit against the HAP Standard. Only those who are accredited by HAP will be authorised to conduct HAP audits.

How is Certification carried out?

The timing of an application for Certification should be considered carefully, as the agency will first need to review the status of its quality and accountability commitments, and perhaps take a number of steps before being in a position to submit a strong application. A preliminary baseline analysis can help the agency to take stock of how well it measures up against the Standard. This should help to identify the agency's strengths and weaknesses and any changes that are needed to meet the Certification requirements. HAP provides consultancy advice at this preparatory stage, and regularly updated support material is available free of charge on the HAP website. If agencies decide not to apply for Certification, the process of self-assessment will still have been a valuable experience in identifying ways of improving the agency's quality and accountability standards. This section examines each stage of the Certification process in greater detail.

1. Expression of interest

Agencies interested in seeking HAP Certification can contact HAP to register their intent and seek further information about the requirements of the Standard and the Certification process. If the expression of interest is submitted by a non-member of HAP, this must be accompanied by a declaration of compliance with the qualifying norms for the HAP Standard, as described in Part II of this Guide. On application, HAP will provide further information and tools to help agencies decide whether they are ready to apply for Certification and what the next steps are.

Any decision to apply for Certification must be carefully considered and must enjoy the full authority of the agency. As the HAP Standard sets a number of exacting requirements, agencies are encouraged to seek advice from HAP before submitting an application. HAP can assist in conducting a baseline analysis, provide consultancy support on making improvements, and give advice on what steps should be taken in preparation for Certification.

The baseline analysis is like a ‘trial audit’: it will assess the current status of an agency in relation to the requirements contained in the HAP Standard. The rationale behind this is to establish whether there are any major or minor gaps in meeting the HAP Standard, estimate what time it would take to meet these, and plan accordingly. This will help to develop a realistic timeframe for meeting the HAP Standard and for conducting a successful audit.

2. Application for audit or baseline

An agency considering itself ready for Certification can submit an **application file** to the HAP Secretariat. The application file is designed to help the applicant organisation prepare for the Certification audit and ensure that all the documents needed for review by the auditors are in place. The documentation submitted will be verified by the auditors through head office and project site visits, during which they will conduct interviews and focus group discussions.

The application process and the submission requirements are very similar whether an agency is applying for a baseline analysis or for a Certification audit. The documents listed below are mandatory for agencies applying for a Certification audit; agencies applying for a baseline analysis should assemble as many of the required documents as possible, and can request further guidance from HAP in doing this.

The pro-forma **application file** can be downloaded from the HAP website. A completed application file will include the following documentation:

- **An application statement** that the agency meets the HAP Standard qualifying norms (described in Chapter 2 of this Guide), and signed by a duly authorised representative of the agency. This statement should confirm the agency’s standing with regard to its:
 - commitment to the principle of impartiality

- not-for-profit status
- financial propriety
- humanitarian accountability framework.
- **Supporting documentation** to be submitted with the application statement:
 1. Evidence of the agency's not-for-profit status e.g. registration as a charity or NGO, or if no independent evidence can be provided, a statement by the governing body of the agency (this is not required for HAP full members).
 2. Statement of financial accountability requirements in the agency's country of incorporation or registration (not required for HAP full members).
 3. Independently audited accounts for the three financial years immediately prior to the date of the application (not required for HAP full members).
 4. Budget or expenditure plan for the current financial year.
 5. Presentation note with summary volume and financial indicators of the level of humanitarian activity over the past three years, and a list of current humanitarian projects outlining locations, start and end dates, budget totals, and humanitarian partners.
 6. Humanitarian accountability framework (if the agency is applying for a baseline analysis rather than a full audit, it can submit a draft framework that includes a list of commitments, a plan for implementation, and the agency's self-assessed baseline analysis).
 7. Organisational chart (or organigram) showing governance and relevant management structures.
 8. Declaration of additional interests – affiliations, interests, values etc. (See Chapter 3 on the Humanitarian Accountability Covenant for guidance).

9. Baseline analysis of compliance with the HAP Standard and improvement plan (if an agency is applying for a baseline analysis rather than an audit, it can instead confirm its intention of future compliance with the HAP Standard).

The application statement should be in English. All other documents can be in the language normally used by the agency (with a copy in English if available). Documents should be submitted by e-mail in electronic format (preferably PDF) where possible.

3. Review of application

HAP will first examine the application file for completeness. If the file is complete and the application appears satisfactory, HAP will advise the agency to request either a Certification audit or a baseline analysis. If the application is not complete, HAP may ask for additional information from the agency or suggest further steps to be taken to improve the application.

4. Audit design

On the basis of the application file, HAP will propose an audit plan and quote. The size, structure, complexity, and partnering arrangements of an agency will affect the length of the audit and project site verification requirements. The audit design will cover:

- **Location:** The audit will take place at the agency's humanitarian management and administrative centre (usually its head office) and at selected project sites.
 - **For a Certification audit:** HAP will make the final decision concerning the number and choice of project sites that will be included in the audit, although it will take account of advice offered by the agency in relation to timing of visits, travel and accommodation costs, security, and other factors affecting accessibility.
 - **For a baseline analysis:** The agency can propose which project sites will be included, although HAP reserves the right to

suggest alternative locations subject to concerns relating to cost, accessibility, security, travel times, and the schedules of HAP staff and auditors.

- **Participants:** The audit will at a minimum include interviews with people affected by the disaster, senior staff, project staff, and partners where applicable.
- **Project sites not selected for audit:** These will be required to complete a short self-assessment questionnaire to be returned to HAP. This questionnaire is designed to obtain a general analysis of all operations while keeping audit costs to a minimum.

Further information concerning the rationale of audit design and its probable costs can be obtained from HAP's website (www.hapinternational.org) or by contacting the Secretariat.

5. Audit

Auditors of the HAP Standard follow audit guidelines developed by HAP. The guidelines cover the agency's head office, with a focus on policy and processes, and project sites, with a focus on verifying application. Either a single auditor or a team of two will audit head office. Auditors will be fluent in the language used by the applicant organisation in its application file. One or two auditors will audit project sites in the language customarily used by the agency at that site. If there is no auditor fluent in the relevant language available, an independent interpreter may be recruited to assist. If the management and project sites are all in one country or region, the same audit team may visit both.

6. Certification audit report

Based on the findings of the document review and the audits of head office and the project sites, the audit team will prepare a report covering the following topics:

- **Agency description**

- **Audit process**
- **Minor non-conformities:** A minor non-conformity could be due to a number of reasons, such as:
 - occasional failure to implement commitments
 - incomplete documentation and records
 - occasional monitoring lapses.

Minor non-conformities will not usually result in a delay of recommendation for Certification, but will require corrective action within a specified timeframe.

- **Major non-conformities:** A major non-conformity could be due to a number of reasons, such as:
 - serious violation of the qualifying norms
 - complete absence of a procedure required by the Standard
 - demonstrated lack of control on key quality and accountability commitments
 - serious defects in the quality of services, resulting in danger to beneficiaries
 - a series of minor non-conformities all relating to the same element of the Standard
 - a minor non-conformity detected in a previous audit but not addressed within the specified timeframe
 - false declarations of compliance.

Major non-conformities will result in a recommendation that Certification is deferred until corrective action has been taken and required improvements verified.

- **Exonerations:** When matters beyond the control or reasonable influence of the agency result in a failure to meet a requirement of the HAP Standard, exoneration can be recommended. The rationale for exoneration will refer to the Principles for Humanitarian Action set out in the HAP Standard, but may also introduce other evidence and arguments.

- **Recommendations:** A recommendation is a non-binding improvement proposition given by the auditor on matters that, if not addressed, may, in the auditor's opinion, weaken the reliability of the agency's humanitarian accountability and quality management system.
- **Observations:** The auditor may wish to draw the agency's attention to an issue noted during the audit that could impact the agency either negatively or positively. It may capture good practices, matters where improvement might be considered, or where further research or investigation is indicated, e.g. with regard to compliance with commitments that fall outside HAP's competence to assess.
- **Corrective actions:** Where non-compliance has been identified, specific time-bound corrective actions will be proposed.
- **Conclusions:** Based upon all available relevant information, the audit team will recommend to the Certification and Accreditation Review Board whether or not the agency should be awarded HAP Certification. The recommendation may be made subject to the agency agreeing to undertake the proposed corrective actions within an agreed timeframe.

The audit team will submit its report to the HAP Certification and Accreditation Manager, who will then pass it on to the Certification and Accreditation Board for a decision on Certification. Where non-compliance has been identified, time may be given for the agency to correct the inconsistency. This will be verified through a follow-up audit at the end of the period given for corrective action, and will be limited in scope to the non-conformities identified. Audit reports will remain confidential to HAP and the Certification and Accreditation Board.

7. Baseline analysis

Agencies applying for a baseline analysis rather than a Certification audit will undergo a similar process. The baseline will be carried out by HAP staff and accredited independent auditors. The process will

be more collaborative and consultative than that used in a Certification audit, given that the main purpose of the analysis is to assist in improving the systems and processes of the organisation.

8. Certification

An agency recommended for Certification will receive a certificate of recognition showing that it is in compliance with the HAP Standard. The Certification and Accreditation Review Board will present the certificate and HAP Standard mark to the agency. A register of all certified agencies will be maintained and made public on the HAP website. Certification lasts for three years from the date specified on the certificate. A mandatory mid-term surveillance audit will be undertaken to validate progress. After the three-year period has expired, the agency will need to apply for re-certification to ensure continuity.

Agencies granted Certification are entitled to use the HAP Standard mark and certificate in the following ways:

- Certified agencies may use the terms ‘certified’ or ‘certification’, as well as ‘registered’. They may not use the term ‘accredited’.
- The mark should include reference to the HAP Standard year and title.
- Certified agencies are required to display the HAP certification mark in a prominent place on their official website and on relevant official documents.
- Certified agencies may not adapt or modify the HAP Standard mark.
- Usage of the mark should conform to the agreed guidelines.
- The mark or certificate should not be used as product guarantees.
- Reference to the scope covered by the Certification (e.g. limitations to a particular country or operation) is essential in all communications concerning the certificate. This includes usage in all geographical locations covered by the certificate.

- The mark and certificate should be removed once the Certification period is completed or replaced if the agency has undergone re-certification.

What does Certification cost?

Assessing the full ‘costs’ of Certification is difficult because while some costs are direct and easy to calculate (e.g. the cost of the audit), others are indirect and may involve significant ‘negative costs’ (i.e. benefits) that are hard to measure. This may be due to the fact that benefits can only be predicted, as they are not fully realised at the time of Certification, or it may be because the benefits are hard to measure (e.g. the valuation placed upon lives saved or dignity restored). However, no thorough appraisal of the costs of Certification would exclude such considerations, and arguably the opportunity costs of non-certification should also be assessed. These would include real although unverifiable reductions in fraud, negligence, and mismanagement, and losses due to the effect that these have on an agency’s reputation, and its ability to attract donors and competent staff.

In all cases that HAP is aware of, staff and stakeholders have quickly become convinced of the overall cost/benefit case in favour of compliance with the HAP Standard, especially with regard to its impact on the quality of their humanitarian work, their relationship with their humanitarian partners and, above all, with those people the agency is assisting. HAP recommends that interested agencies should consult organisations that have achieved Certification or have engaged in significant compliance trials.

With regard to the more immediate question concerning the direct costs of Certification, the honest answer is ‘it depends’. The cost of the auditing process itself is directly linked to the number of audit days and travel required to carry out both the head office and the project site visits. As an approximate guide, the charge made for the auditing process is linked to the agency’s average annual expenditure. The current table of costs is available on the HAP website, and

covers the following services: organisation and preparation; review of application file; audit preparation; Certification audit at head office; Certification audit at project site(s); self-assessment reviews; certificate and registration; and mandatory mid-term monitoring audit (18 months post-Certification). Flights and accommodation costs are not included and will be additional. A final quotation will be given when an application is made.

More complicated, of course, is predicting the costs of bringing an agency's systems and processes up to the level where it is able to meet the HAP Standard. A majority of agencies seeking Certification against the HAP Standard will already have a quality management system designed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their operations. The HAP Standard has been designed to draw attention to what are considered to be the 'mission-critical' practices that underpin accountability.

Meeting these requirements will have resource implications, particularly in terms of deploying staff dedicated to working on quality issues. The involvement of staff is essential in turning these standards into a reality, otherwise the whole process risks remaining a paper exercise. While some of the requirements of the Standard may seem burdensome, especially in the midst of a crisis, these costs must be offset against the benefits of maintaining quality standards to beneficiaries, staff, the agency, and donors. Some specific benefits of implementing the HAP Standard are:

- evidence-based rationale for beneficiary accountability and quality management
- evidence-based rationale for the selection of partners
- evidence-based rationale for identifying staff competencies and staff development needs
- evidence-based rationale for reinforcing good practices
- improved efficiency resulting from applying the principle of 'getting it right first time'.

Table 5 below presents an example of estimated resources needed to meet the HAP Standard.

Table 5: Worked example of estimated resources needed to meet the HAP Standard

Section of Standard	Staff	Timeframe
Humanitarian accountability framework (Qualifying norm 4)	1 person: senior manager Has strategy and policy oversight, and is HAP accountability focal person.	1–2 weeks to complete draft in a consultative manner.
Quality management system (Benchmark 1)	1 person: senior manager Has M&E oversight. Has management oversight.	If an agency does not have a recognised or defined humanitarian quality management system, an analysis of the agency will be required. As this is an ongoing activity, it needs to be built into a person’s job description and could be linked to the internal audit/monitoring and evaluation function.
Information (Benchmark 2)	Should be a part of the responsibility of all country managers. No extra staff, just training: this could be done both through virtual training or self-teaching methods and through head office field trips/specific annual meetings, etc.	Draft policy process: 4 days. Roll-out: 12–18 months to ensure that all sites are informed/trained.

Budget	Comments
For consultants: count daily rate for 7 days. For staff: count exclusive time for 7 days.	The most time-consuming activity is not the drafting of the humanitarian accountability framework, but the baseline analysis of where the agency is currently.
If already assigned to existing staff, costs will be minimal. If it involves assigning new tasks and responsibilities, the time for this will need to be counted and budgeted.	<p>Most agencies already have an extensive monitoring and evaluation policy and reporting structure. The quality management system may already be in place, even if it is not referred to in those terms.</p> <p>Benchmark 1 requires that the quality management system is documented and that the agency is able to demonstrate how it enables the humanitarian accountability framework to be implemented.</p> <p>This means that the initial audit will simply check that the system has been established. The surveillance audits and re-certification audits will follow up progress in more detail.</p>
Translation and printing costs could fall under direct project costs. Costs could be a part of normal existing field trips/meetings.	Once the key information needs are decided (as per Benchmark 2, plus whatever else the agency considers important), then a standardised template can be created which can be ready for translation as needed/per context.

Section of Standard	Staff	Timeframe
Participation (Benchmark 3)	Should be a part of all field staff job descriptions. Include in briefing.	Once policy is in place, ongoing M&E and training are needed to establish habits of good practice.
Staff competencies (Benchmark 4)	HR department Field managers who deal with HR issues.	Creation of job descriptions: 1–2 days. Creation of a performance management system: 5–10 days. M&E to assess performance is a role for HR staff, along with managers.
Complaints-handling (Benchmark 5)	Line managers Sector co-ordinators Complaints-handling focal person	Set-up per site: 1 day to 1 month (depending on experience and context)
Continual improvement (Benchmark 6)	Line managers M&E team	Continual improvement may require more management follow-up.

Budget	Comments
Training (see Benchmark 4) Design key points to change behaviour in a methodical way.	It can be difficult to monitor and assess consistency of current practices.
Time taken to create the system. Budget for training staff: this should be developed per agency/project/strategy and incorporated into direct/indirect costs.	Training on the Standard should be included (especially) in induction courses, refresher courses, plus field trips and monitoring of appraisals. Continued staff development and training strategy will be needed.
HAP advises that 1 per cent of the budget per site should be set aside for running the complaints-handling mechanism. This budget will go mainly on a salaried position.	Drafting a policy and set of procedures/formats will take time, though some good examples exist on the HAP website. Training is key in terms of M&E.

HAP offers a variety of services to support interested agencies:

- **consultancy support:** one-to-one support for individual agencies
- **workshops:** when a particular need is identified
- **training of trainers:** developing agency resources and skills through a HAP Training of Trainers course
- **baseline assessment:** helping agencies to identify gaps and providing further support to help meet them.

Where to apply for Certification

Accreditation and Certification Manager

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