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Sigmah - how an information management perspective can influence the adoption of a quality approach

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Abstract

Due to operational and institutional constraints, humanitarian actors have found it difficult to adopt quality approaches and principles developed for the sector. Having previously explored the links between adopting a quality approach and information management, Groupe URD now wants to share more widely the insight it has gained about the adoption of quality approaches from the Sigmah project, which aims to improve the shared management of humanitarian projects.

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1. Introduction

Sigmah is open source software for the shared management of international aid projects. The project is run by a group of 11 NGOs, known as the Steering Cooperative. Their aim is to pool needs and resources in order to produce a resource which is freely available to the aid sector as a whole (humanitarian and development organizations).

At the same time as being a member and facilitator of this project, answering to the Steering Cooperative, Groupe URD has been working on the issue of quality in humanitarian action since the end of the 1990s and developed the quality assurance method, the Quality COMPAS, between 1999 and 2004. The lessons from this innovative project were integrated into the development of Sigmah.

This article presents what we have learned about how a software program can influence the issue of adopting a quality approach.

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2. Overview

2.1. A necessary new response to the challenge of quality

Quality is an ethical responsibility for international aid organizations. The international aid system is not structured so that the beneficiaries of aid exert financial control over organizations. Aid beneficiaries do not have the same power as clients in the business world.

In addition, the central issue of quality in the humanitarian sector, and what makes it difficult, is taking into account the diversity, the complexity and the changing nature of humanitarian contexts. This has been confirmed by fifteen years of evaluations by Groupe URD in a wide variety of contexts. These have shown that a good project in a given context can have disastrous consequences in another context.

Different initiatives to improve the quality of aid have been introduced, such as the development of standards for the sector, the development of good practices, a quality assurance method and the development of an evaluation culture.[†]

But, almost a decade on, experience has shown that NGOs find it difficult to integrate quality principles or approaches in their day to day activities. A number of reasons can be given for this:

- a. The central issues to do with quality are located in the field, at the level of projects. It is through contact with communities that quality management of projects has the greatest impact on results and can be adapted to different contexts. But the adoption of a quality approach has to be applied throughout the organization as a whole to allow collective learning, the reproduction of performance and continual improvement. There is therefore a challenge of centralization in organizations which are, by nature, extremely decentralized.
- b. Staff in the field are subject to a great deal of pressure in terms of workload. They cannot manage the day-to-day aspects of their projects and also deal with the large amount of documentation linked to implementing a quality approach in their organization. There is a risk that staff reject the idea of quality management as it is seen as a source of extra work.
- c. There is great diversity among humanitarian organizations. When an organization wants to adopt a quality approach, it has to make changes. Mechanically applying the reference frameworks developed for the sector without making these changes often leads to failure and can create frustration.
- d. The majority of humanitarian NGOs have too much information to process and the flow and storage of this information is inadequately organized. Some even speak of “infoxication”. Not only does this degree of disorganization cause a loss of efficiency, the fact that information cannot be easily found reduces organizations’ ability to use lessons learned, undermining the cycle of continual improvement which is the foundation of any genuine quality approach.

The adoption of formal quality approaches therefore comes up against these difficulties of concrete implementation. A traditional quality management system is represented by a pyramid with a quality policy at the top and the recording of activities and the managing of information at the base, as shown in Figure 1.

The authors advance the hypothesis that using an appropriate recording system can remove some of the constraints noted above, by changing the perspective on this issue. The Sigmah project has therefore integrated a certain number of principles based on knowledge of humanitarian NGOs, the humanitarian sector and field constraints:

- a. The software has to be adapted to the different levels of the organization. It has to help with managing projects in the field, but also inform strategy and help with managing the organization at each level of the hierarchy.

[†] <http://www.urd.org/Quality-and-Accountability>

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