

# INTRODUCTION

The Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework (HA QF) is a common reference system based on learning outcomes and it acts as a translating and classifying device of qualifications levels and systems throughout the humanitarian sector. It focuses on lifelong learning, thereby including general education, vocational education and training and higher education, as well as informal and non-formal learning. It acts as a neutral reference point for all different sorts of qualifications in the humanitarian sector and follows the approach of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL).

The development of the Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework (HA QF) and its underlying HA Profile and meta-profile is heavily grounded in pre-existing competencies frameworks. The participation of higher education representatives from most of the European countries (30) in the project has helped to get the necessary traction and involvement among European educators. The same has been accomplished for the humanitarian sector through direct involvement from the humanitarian umbrella organisation ICVA and the Sphere Project, renowned for its work on setting humanitarian standards and principles, as well as practitioners from the field through the NOHA Alumni Community.<sup>1</sup> However the ultimate aim is that the framework is accepted by the large humanitarian community. Therefore the next stage is to reach as many sources of legitimacy as possible so the project will continue to invite relevant groups for an open dialogue on the refinement and update of the qualifications framework and its applications.

The HA QF acts as a translating device to make national and sectoral qualifications more readable and promote humanitarian workers' and learners' mobility between countries and organisations. Through its descriptors and levels, it facilitates inter-system transparency and recognition of (non)formal and informal learning by linking occupations, skills & competence and qualifications, thus benefiting the Humanitarian Sector as a whole: humanitarian actors, educators, policy makers, students, volunteers, and the society at large in an effort to further professionalise assistance to crisis-affected people. The HA QF addresses five purposes in particular:

(1) to provide important points of reference for setting and assessing learning standards to humanitarian education providers, (2) to inform international comparability of humanitarian education and training standards in the European context and

where possible beyond that, (3) to assist in the identification of potential progression routes for lifelong learning in humanitarian action, (4) to promote a shared and common understanding of the expectations associated with typical qualifications by facilitating a consistent use of qualification titles across the humanitarian and educational sector, and (5) to support workers' and learners' mobility.

Consequently, there is a variety of users. At first thought it seems that the primary users are the educators and agencies in the humanitarian sector contending with own qualifications systems and competency frameworks. By linking their own education and training programmes to the levels in the HA QF, they are better able to communicate with employers, prospective students, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and other stakeholders how their qualifications compare to qualifications from other countries and different humanitarian education and training systems. As a result, employers that are recruiting humanitarian aid workers will be better equipped to assess differences in levels among the qualifications of prospective candidates, and humanitarian aid workers will be better equipped to explain the extent of their humanitarian action learning.

But this is only one part of the story. Qualifications play an important role in controlling access to and practise of tasks, professions and occupations. This control function is frequently motivated by safety and quality assurance requirements. It is, for example, widely accepted that welding of bridges and treatment of patients both involve risks and require clear and high quality standards. In the field of humanitarian action as Jan Egeland, former UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator noted "... if you're not a professional in this game, you have no right to descend on someone in their moment of crisis and do

on-the-job training (...) Because the poor, dispossessed and disaster-prone should have at least one basic right left to them: to be protected from incompetence."<sup>2</sup> However in other cases use of qualifications to control access and practise may be linked to particular interests of professional groups and bodies. Controlling numbers of practitioners in a profession can be important to safeguard salaries and working conditions with a concomitant risk of creating an exclusive "membership club".

The HA QF has raised questions because of its European origin. However it is international or better global in its vocation. It would be of interest to non-European and global humanitarian actors and educators. On the one hand, the origins and methodology used are decidedly European, but its content in terms of learning outcomes is based on the humanitarian sector globally. As such, the framework could be used outside Europe to the extent that it is contextualised and adapted to the specific non-European needs. With the development of connections between regional meta-frameworks, this process might even become easier.<sup>3</sup>

Another concern that was raised several times relates to how the progression of learning in the qualifications framework can in the end be assessed. Of course, the framework is expressed in qualification learning outcomes and not in individual learning outcomes that can be assessed directly. For that it is necessary to translate these into training programme learning outcomes first. Having said that, the framework categorises qualification learning outcomes into *Knowledge*, *Skills* and *Responsibility & Autonomy*, each of which may require different ways of assessment. Where traditional written exams may often suffice for testing theoretical and factual knowledge and understanding, assessing skills will frequently require a more applied ways of testing, particularly where it concerns practical skills, and testing responsibility & autonomy might be more adequate by means of for instance simulations. As a follow-up on the EUPRHA project, the translation and contextualisation of the qualifications framework into training programmes and subsequent assessment of achieved learning is a logical and highly useful next step, particularly in the light of certification attempts by the sector to recognise informal and non-formal learning. Moreover there is a need to link it with the European classifications of skills/competences, qualifications and occupations (ESCO).

The importance of the elaboration of this transparency tool rests in the fact that it serves as a context in which the different humanitarian professions with their

profiles, competences, skills and levels can be articulated, thus helping with cross-border and cross-sector recognition of diplomas, training, work experience and formal, non-formal and informal learning in the future. Earlier initiatives within the humanitarian sector on this topic clearly show that there is a strong need for this. In close discussion with main actors of the humanitarian sector, the EUPRHA project has integrated these earlier initiatives in its work but specifically adds to this a more developed distinction between levels of learning, thereby also providing a stronger connection between the educational system and the humanitarian sector. A stronger connection is important both for quality assurance in the educational system and for the professionalisation demand of the humanitarian sector. The experience gained with the project process shows that there is a high complexity in purpose, type, coverage and competent bodies involved. This is just the start of a new phase. In the end, this is all in the attempt to better serve people affected by humanitarian crises: the main people for whom this project is created and who, unfortunately are too many in our world. The best result would be if they feel a higher quality in the humanitarian service even though they may not know where this comes from.

<sup>1</sup> To increase further recognition and acceptance the project has presented its outcomes in a series of humanitarian and educational conferences and meetings (e.g. the Humanitarian Partnership Conference in Naitobi, the World Conference on Humanitarian Studies in Istanbul, the NOHA Alumni @20 Event in Brussels and many different occasions on national level in the different European countries).

<sup>2</sup> Jan Egeland "Saving Human Lives is No Place for Amateurs. An Interview with Jan Egeland" in Chris Herlinger, *With Courage, In Hope: Five Years After the Tsunami*, (ACT International, Naturaprint, 2009) p.180.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. James Keevy, Borhene Chakroun, and Arjen Deij, *Transnational Qualifications Frameworks*, draft (Torino: European Training Foundation, 2010).

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