To: the JSI Steering Group and Advisory Group

An Open Letter[1] on the Joint Standard Initiative (JSI)

ICVA – InterAction – VOICE

January 30 2013

As three NGO consortia concerned with humanitarian action, ICVA, InterAction and VOICE have a long term commitment to the humanitarian principles and diversity of professional humanitarian actors as well as to strengthening the quality and accountability of humanitarian response. We are therefore committed to involving our members in discussions related to the Joint Standards Initiative (JSI). Given our role in representing our members, we see it as our responsibility to lay down some expectations on their behalf. In particular, we expect that those who manage the JSI will ensure that their work is informed by the principles below in order to determine progress.

A MEANINGFUL CONSULTATION FOR A SIMPLE PRODUCT

Since the establishment of the current main Quality and Accountability initiatives, the size and diversity of the humanitarian community has grown exponentially and so have the numbers of stakeholders. While commitments have been made to involve a variety of actors in the JSI consultations, we want to stress in particular the need to reach out to local civil society and governments in countries affected by conflict or disasters. The involvement of national and local NGOs in the south, including field based staff, is essential if the resulting standards and mechanisms are to support the aim of strengthening local emergency response capacity. Meaningful consultation takes time and we stress the need to ensure a consultation timeline that allows for broad participation, instead of one that is driven by available project funds. The current JSI stakeholder consultation risks limiting its relevance and therefore compromising its outcomes due to a short timeline which presents difficulties especially in gathering field opinion.

In weighing up possible outcomes related to standards coherence, unnecessary complexity and duplication should also be avoided to ensure that quality standards and mechanisms can be applied at all relevant levels to reach a higher standard in humanitarian aid. This implies that results of the initiative should aim to strengthen professionalism and ensure diversity while avoiding additional administrative burdens on participating organisations.

INTEGRITY AND OPENNESS OF PROCESS

The Joint Standards Initiative has stated its commitment to consultative processes involving a wide range of stakeholders. We note the efforts made to communicate with the wider humanitarian community and to circulate information on the initiative. While welcoming these efforts, we emphasise the need for transparency in decision-making. The governing bodies of JSI should explain how they plan to use the outcomes of the consultations to make decisions which will affect the broader humanitarian community. The legitimacy of the process and the validity of conclusions and recommendations made are at stake: a perception that the process is driven by financial imperative and may result in lack of buy-in and endorsement from the broader humanitarian community.

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[1] This open letter will be shared with the members of ICVA, InterAction and VOICE.

A REAFFIRMATION OF THE CENTRALITY OF HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

The bedrock of humanitarian action is found in the principles that underpin humanitarian response. Strengthening quality and accountability in humanitarian response first of all depends, therefore, on the rigorous and consistent application of these principles. The humanitarian community would be well-served if the JSI reaffirmed the centrality of humanitarian principles and determined how strengthened application of these principles can be achieved. Making humanitarian principles central to the initiatives could help the humanitarian community 'go back to the basics' in realising accountable humanitarian responses of the highest quality.

ANSWER THE REAL QUESTIONS ON STANDARDS

In the discussion to date related to the JSI process a range of critical questions have come up. The JSI will need to provide answers to these questions if ambiguity and confusion are to be avoided. We are ready to assist in supporting discussion on these questions by facilitating discussions on them with our members.

- What is the problem with the fact that there are different Q and A standards?
- Who would benefit from the consolidation of standards?
- What are the ways to ensure better implementation or compliance with the Q and A standards?
- What is the link between the JSI and the SCHR certification process?
- What are the interests of the donors funding the JSI?

PUTTING THE JSI IN A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

The JSI comes at a time when many efforts in the humanitarian community are devoted to improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response, including, for example, the Transformative Agenda, the International Dialogue on Strengthening Partnership in Disaster Response (IDDR), the work to improve needs-assessments/analyses (e.g. ACAPS[2]), and the efforts to increase the predictability of humanitarian funding (including GHD[3], Pooled Funds Working Group, CBHA[4] NGO fund, etc). In ensuring that the quality and accountability standards architecture is one that is fully integrated within the humanitarian coordination architecture, we encourage the JSI to ensure links with these other processes.

We hope that the above principles and suggestions will be given due consideration by the governance bodies and management of the JSI. We, representing the networks, look forward to support our members' fullest engagement throughout the consultation process and to continued dialogue.

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop	Joel Charny	Kathrin Schick
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[2] Assessment Capacities Project see www.acaps.org
[3] Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org
[4] Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies www.thecbha.org.