

## Quality and Accountability

by Christine Etienne<sup>1</sup>

**The number and the complexity of tasks to be taken on by aid agencies all over the world are rising. This article sheds light on the great variety of factors which are decisive for the quality of the work the agencies perform.**

An increasing number of people experience disaster unexpectedly from one day to the next, through catastrophes caused by Nature or man. The chain of afflictions is seemingly unending sometimes. Within the span of only a few years El Salvador, for instance, a country already bitterly poor, has had to cope with civil war, an economic crisis, Hurricane Mitch and an earthquake.

At the same time, the socio-political and social commitment of governments all over the world has weakened, and critical situations are often more than they can cope with. In recent years, therefore, aid agencies have come to play an increasingly important role in alleviating distress and showing the way to a new start in the wake of a disaster. It may be necessary to rebuild the infrastructure, or to set up psycho-social programmes to cope with traumatic experiences, to promote health, rural development or the establishment of small businesses to provide a livelihood. A great deal is expected of the people who run such projects. At best, they should have an inkling of construction work, psychology, health, agriculture, and possess entrepreneurial skills all at the same time.

When major disasters occur, the tasks are gigantic and complex. Time is short. Nevertheless, the aid agency is required to act with the greatest circumspection from the very beginning and to satisfy the highest standards of quality. They must co-ordinate their work with

government agencies and other aid organisations. Aid and rescue work must be provided very rapidly when an emergency occurs. On the other hand, however, projects need to be thoroughly checked as to their priority, feasibility and permanence. After an earthquake, for instance, one cannot simply put up new buildings as fast as possible. It is necessary first to clarify who owns the land (in Central America often a time-consuming procedure). The contribution to be made by the beneficiaries themselves needs to be defined. The construction of homes must take socio-cultural, climatic, safety and technical aspects into account.

This alone is a highly demanding task. But quality is also influenced by many other factors which an outsider is hardly likely to be aware of.

Three groups of factors play a part here, and are thus decisive for the quality of projects. These factors – replete with critical issues – are interdependent, in other words, they also influence one another. What is more, they give rise to conflicts of interest.

### Continuity, contiguity

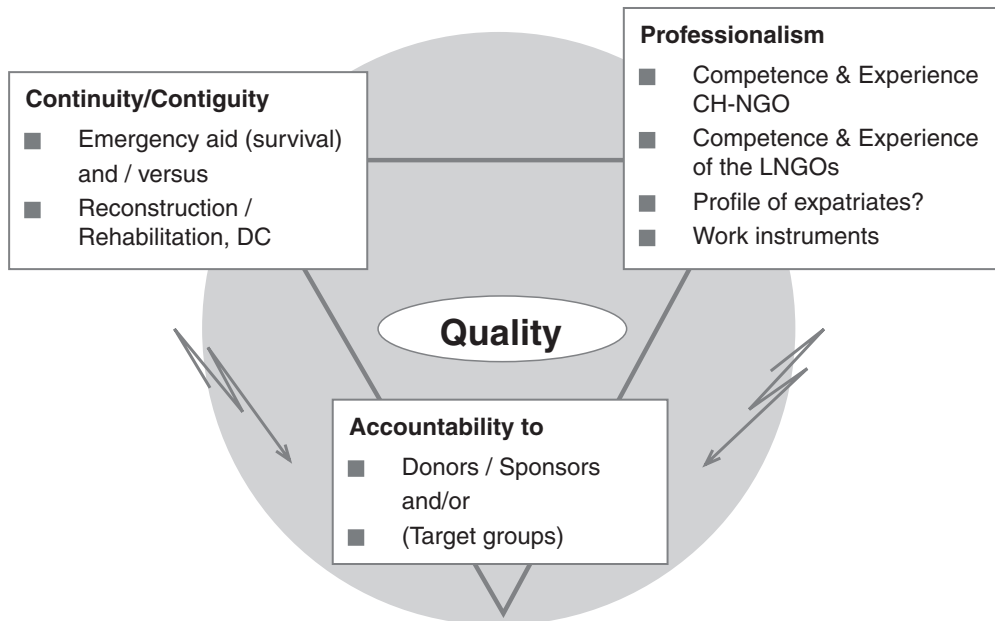
Today, the necessity of a long-term commitment (continuity) after disasters is undisputed in specialist circles. Support is needed if a basis for a livelihood is to be built up from nothing, otherwise future disasters – hunger, epidemics, new wars, etc. – are more or less inevitable. It is also well known that the instruments of emergency assistance, rehabilitation and co-operation in development work, human rights and reconciliation must be applied simultaneously (contiguity).

However, the interest of the media, and thus of the general public and donors, is focussed solely on the actual catastrophic event. Tomorrow, today's victims have already been virtually forgotten. Our attention turns to new events.

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Diagram 1: The key questions



- DC Development Co-operation
- LNGO Local non-government organisations
- CH-NGO Swiss non-government organisation
- Environment / pressures: political, economic environment, other international protagonists, etc.
- ▽ Interdependence of the key issues
- ↔ Conflicts of interests

### Professionalism

The efficiency and effectiveness of aid naturally have a great deal to do with the professionalism of an aid agency. Do the Swiss aid agency and its local partner organisation have the necessary competence and experience? Does an assigned foreign expert – known in the technical jargon as an “expatriate” – possess the sensitivity for cultural aspects, institutional matters, the subsidiarity principle, etc. as well as the necessary specialist know-how? How are today’s highly developed working instruments for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of a project actually used? All this exercises a substantial influence on the quality of a project.

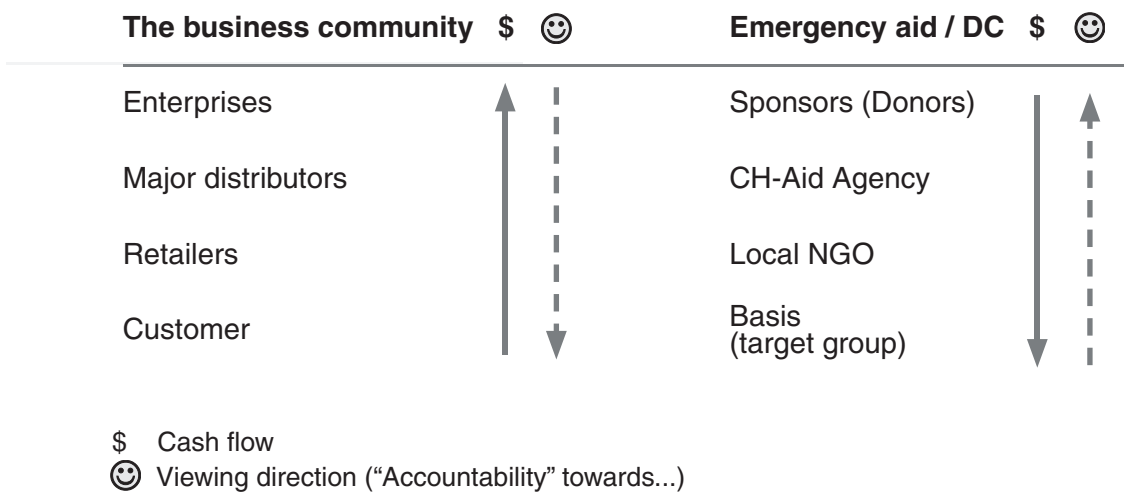
### „Accountability“

First and foremost, the aid agency has an obligation, at least morally, to the victims of the disaster. But just as much it has an obligation to those who fund it – whether these be individual donors, basic

groups, local communities, the federal government, Glückskette, etc.. The diagram “The cash flow and accountability”<sup>2</sup> shows that the one who pays is always the customer. He expects a quite definite service for his money. He expects a quite definite service for his money. For example, he expects the victims to be helped immediately. He does not realise how complex the task of the aid agency is. He wants quick results and insists on immediate, measurable services. The aid agency, therefore, has no choice but to turn first to donors and sponsors and to satisfy these in the first place. In order to hold its own at all in the competition on the highly contested and increasingly narrowing aid-money market, it is forced to produce immediate results under all circumstances, and fast too, or its will lose its customers (donors) the next time round. This can exercise enormous pressure on aid agencies: careful planned and a well-prepared aid packages are difficult to provide under pressure.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. „Invertir la mirada“, Tonino Zellweger, B. Bustamente, U. Stürzinger, published by Intercooperation

**Diagram 2: The cash flow and accountability**



***The donor, not the target group, is the customer***

Problems cannot always be solved as quickly as one would like, or, if they are, then only at the expense of quality. If, for example, a family has to vacate a rebuilt house later on because the question of land ownership was not clarified in advance, everyone loses – the donor, the aid agency, the beneficiaries. To work for a permanent solution takes a great deal of time and costs money, but it is indispensable even if in our fast-moving times the results of aid become visible and tangible later, at a time when most donors are no longer interested in the consequences of the disaster.

**Conflicts of interest**

It has thus become clear that conflicts of interest can arise between the cited three groups of factors.

Let us assume that generous donations were received immediately in the wake of the disaster. This permits a rapid response as required by the situation itself. At the same time as direct survival aid is being given, however, it is necessary to get started on the long-term tasks and responsibilities. At this time, however, the aid agency by no means has the certainty that it will be able to procure the funds for medium and long-term activities. Excessive pressure to use up all funds immediately thus clips the wings of any aid agency with quality-awareness. The business-minded enterprise,

on the other hand, whose primary aim is to collect as much money as possible and to build as many houses as it can without giving thought to the complex questions of quality, is little concerned by the possibility that the house may be taken from the beneficiaries two years later because they have no title deed to the land. It has already proved that it has achieved something by building the house, and has already rendered an account to the donor to the latter's full satisfaction since he knows nothing of the complexity of the situation. As hard as it may sound, would it not have been better for the house-owner in the above case for the family to have held out a few weeks longer in emergency accommodation, namely until the building site could have been legally put in their name?

**Environment**

Last but not least, the aid agency must operate in a difficult environment with numerous pressures on which it has little or no influence. Difficult political and economic environments, great distances, bad roads .... The task facing aid agencies is by no means simple!