Quality Assurance

Quality assurance (QA) is a procedure to ensure the quality of products or services by preventing mistakes and defects in manufactured products and avoiding problems when delivering products or services to beneficiaries. It is based in two principles:

- **Fit for purpose** - The product should be suitable for the intended purpose.
- **Right first time** - Mistakes should be eliminated before they happen.

QA focuses on improving a process and making it efficient and effective as per pre-defined quality standards. QA plays a role in the ability of an organisation to self-assess and ensure that internal processes are efficient and effective. It also ensures the existence of mechanisms and tools to ensure suppliers and products meet agencies needs.

For internal and external evaluation, the QA complete process has a defined cycle called P.D.C.A. The phases of this cycle are:

- **Plan** - Organisation should plan and determine the processes that are required to deliver a high-quality end product.
- **Do** - Development and testing of processes and also "do" changes in the processes.
- **Check** - Monitoring of processes, modify the processes, and check whether it meets the predetermined objectives.
- **Act** - Implement actions that are necessary to achieve improvements in the processes.

Sometimes organisations do not have the capacity to assess in these terms for each supplier, however there are audit companies and standard certification organisations that can. Agencies should seek these third-party agencies out and/or include those certifications as criteria for vendor selection.

Standard Certifications

There is a wide range of quality certifications, from seals applicable to an entire sector or to a specific product to, those that certify the quality of a process or those that focus on compliance with ethical and environmental standards. Some have great added value, others have more to do with marketing. They can have a national value or be internationally recognised. Although each stamp can be useful, International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) standards are the considered the recognised international best practice.

ISO is an independent, non-governmental Organisation created in 1946, and has been developing standards relating to manufacturing, managing processes, delivering services or supplying materials.

Some of the most useful in the humanitarian sector are the following “families” standards:

- **Quality management** standards to help work more efficiently and reduce product failures. (ISO 9000 Family)
- **Environmental management** standards to help reduce environmental impacts, reduce waste and be more sustainable. (ISO 14000 Family)
- **Health and safety** standards to help reduce accidents in the workplace. (ISO 45001 Family)
- **Energy management** standards to help cut energy consumption. (ISO 50001 Family)
- **Food safety** standards to help prevent food from being contaminated. (ISO 22000 Family)
- **IT security** standards to help keep sensitive information secure. (ISO 27001 Family)

Buying a product with an ISO certification and/or to a company that has been ISO certified is a guarantee that the product or company has followed a quality process. Not all suppliers have ISO or other kind of certifications, especially in low income, disaster or conflict settings. Without these standards in place, agencies may need to look for other sources of information to assure the quality before or during establishing a relation with a supplier.

Vendor Social/Financial Audit

A social/financial compliance audit, also known as an ethical audit, is an inspection of an external organisation that verifies whether the supplier operations complies with social and ethical responsibilities, health and safety regulations, and labour laws. These audits help to judge if a supplier meets the organisation code of conduct, assuring the ethical policies.

A Financial audit can be complemented with the country fiscal year declaration and/or with bank statements that will help to evaluate their solvency.

Due to the "snapshot" nature of audits, and the fact that they are not designed to identify the causes or solutions of problems, they are limited in what they can tell about the suppliers' working practice. For that reason, getting maximum benefit from audits involves being aware of these limitations, and adding the right questions to complement them.

Inspection and Quality Control

Agencies should schedule time and resources to perform inspection during the product evaluation, before the order, or during reception. Quality Control (QC) is a continuous, standard and permanent process until the distribution/delivery to the beneficiaries, therefore must to be performed periodically while a product is the warehouse or under the organisation responsibility. Sometimes, QC is confused with the QA. Quality control is used to examine the product or service itself. Quality assurance is to examine the processes and make changes to the processes which led to the end-product.

- **Visual Inspection** – If a vendor supplies prototype sample prior to final delivery, organisations or specialists may wish to visually inspect and test the product, either at the vendor premise or at another off-site location.
- **Laboratory Testing** – In addition to visual inspection, agencies may wish to employ third-party laboratory testing. Lab testing may include testing for chemical composition (for durable construction materials or for pharmaceuticals), may test against pre-defined ISO standards (such as flame retardancy of NFIs) or even the quality of food stuffs.
- **Third-Party Inspection** – Many agencies wish to employ third-party inspection companies to carry out quality assurance. Third-party inspection companies will generally conduct lab and visual product testing, but may also visit suppliers' warehouses and production facilities throughout the production process to ensure full compliance. Organisations that utilize third-party inspection services may want to include the obligation of suppliers to allow third-party inspection companies into production sites without advanced notice to enhance the randomness of the process.
- **Provision of Certification** – Simpler than conducting independent laboratory testing, suppliers may be asked to produce certificates indicating conformity or quality. Typically, this pushes the cost and complexity of laboratory testing onto the vendor, but may also lead to forgery or fraud as the inspection process is out of the hands of the procuring agency.

It is strongly advised that product inspection must also be conducted once the procuring agency takes possession. Not only should products be inspected the first time they are

delivered, they should be reviewed throughout the delivery process. For large orders that may have multiple or ongoing deliveries, product substitution can be and is a real problem. Some vendors may unscrupulously swap legitimate products for false, inappropriate or incorrect products later down the line. Without ongoing vigilance, even fully tested and certified products may not actually show up.