ISO 9001:2000 supports humanitarian aid NGO’s expansion in Asia

The QMS developed by the Cambodia Trust to support its humanitarian aid activities there is supporting the launch of new operations in Sri Lanka and East Timor. The benefits include sustainability, accountability, knowledge management, local capacity building and transfer of know-how. The conclusion: “ISO 9001:2000 is emerging as a tool for South-South cooperation in international development.”

The Cambodia Trust was one of the first nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to achieve ISO 9001:2000 certification (see “NGO specialized in aid to landmine victims finds benefits in ISO 9001:2000”, IMS March/April 2004).

Established in 1989 by a group from the United Kingdom, it now runs three rehabilitation centres in Cambodia for the victims of anti-personnel mines, as well as other amputees, providing artificial limbs, orthopaedic braces and mobility aids, as well as physiotherapy and community-based rehabilitation. It also operates an internationally recognized School of Prosthetics and Orthotics in Cambodia to train the next generation of local health professionals from across the region.

ISO 9001:2000 was adopted in part to ensure the sustainability of the organization once the running is transferred to the local Cambodian staff. This has allowed the parent organization to seed two new operations in Sri Lanka and East Timor this past year. Having adopted a formal quality management system (QMS) has helped in a number of ways in the setting up of the new centres.

Compatibility of administration

The parent organization in the United Kingdom is concerned mainly with project development, fund-raising and financial control. The financial reporting systems which evolved with the Cambodian organization have been formalized into work procedures as part of the ISO 9001:2000 implementation process. These systems are now being adopted, with some modifications, in the new centres in Sri Lanka and East Timor.
Lanka and East Timor, providing a uniform reporting system. In addition, the adoption of work procedures from Cambodia for device manufacture and staff training, as well as patient treatment and liaison, will help the new centres become operational quickly.

In the future, this will also facilitate the transfer of staff between the centres in different countries due to shared work practices. A process to share improvements to work practices between the organizations is to be developed.

Developing local capacity

While the Cambodian ISO 9001:2000 documentation provides a strong foundation for the new programmes in Sri Lanka and East Timor, it is by no means an out-of-the-box solution. Staff at the new centres still have to develop their own capacity in language and business skills. It is this process – which initially may appear as an additional cost – that is one of the real benefits of ISO 9001:2000 certification.

The local and foreign staff work together in developing and implementing the QMS. This enables the transfer of skills to local staff in terms of writing reports, setting objectives and stimulating a certain culture in the organization – in this case, of continual improvement.

It is these skills that will be of critical importance in the successful transfer of the organization to local staff, giving them the ability to report back to donors, and to interact with governments and international organizations.

Accountability

An NGO adopting ISO 9001:2000 is a statement to donors: “We invest in our management systems so as to make the optimal use of the funding you give us. We have designed and implemented procedures to communicate back to you what we are doing.” This is important in a climate where there are an increasing number of NGO’s competing for funding, but no standard way of identifying the best run and most effective organizations.

The standard specifies that the organization shall determine “…requirements not stated by the donor…” The organization shall determine “…requirements not stated by the donor…”

Repercussions of tsunami on Sri Lanka project

Sri Lanka was one of the countries hardest hit by the tsunami that devastated South East Asia on 26 December 2004 so ISO Management Systems asked the Cambodia Trust what effect this would have on its plans to expand its operations to Sri Lanka.

Carson Harte, International Director, replied: “Our organization is not getting into the emergency relief – it is simply not our mission – but the management of our project will take on board the changing conditions and will react accordingly.

For example, we will review the increased need for rehabilitation services and will build that into the project review, possibly bringing forward the establishment of our training clinic and so increasing the capacity of the country to deal with an expected increase in the number of new amputees as a result of the trauma.

Our ISO 9001:2000 management systems demand that we seek factual evidence on which to base our decisions, seek consensus with our partners and use our resources well. Having robust systems will help these processes.”

Carson Harte, International Director, Cambodia Trust.
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Disabled people in Timor are isolated by lack of rehabilitation services available, poor transport and discrimination based on cultural beliefs. (Photo: Susan Schulman.)

Many NGO’s find themselves tackling the same, or similar, problems in different locations. A quality manual can be a rich repository of the expert knowledge the personnel of each NGO build up.

Sustainability

Using ISO 9001:2000 as a capacity-building tool has helped the Cambodia Trust hand over its operations to the local Cambodian staff. It is also emerging as a useful tool for cloning the operations of the Trust in new locations.

The Trust hopes to be able to hand over the new operations in five to nine years. Three of the Cambodian staff have qualified as Lead Auditors and will be able to help in gaining certification for East Timor and Sri Lanka. It is heartening to see ISO 9001:2000 – often viewed as a very “Western” management system – emerging as a tool for South-South cooperation in international development.

Replicability

Development work is slow, hard and complex. When you find a model that works, as the Cambodia Trust seems to have done, it makes sense to replicate it where possible. ISO 9001:2000 is a tool that allows the careful documentation of a process and its iterative nature encourages describing processes as they really are – rather than as they should be – giving an accurate manual of operations.

The new project in Sri Lanka and the transfer of skills from Cambodia will have a marked impact on the lives of those who will require long-term rehabilitation in the wake of the recent tsunami.

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