

British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND)

Survey to BOND members on quality standards

By Keystone-AccountAbility

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Introduction

This survey aimed to understand BOND members' current practice, views, experience, and needs in the area of quality standards, as well as suggesting the roles that BOND could play in this area going forward.

The survey was conducted throughout April 2006, and is part of a research and consultation project that is being carried out by BOND together with Keystone and AccountAbility. The overall project seeks to determine the direction and approach that BOND can take to further support its members in their approach to enhancing the quality of their performance. It aims to do so both by learning about members' current practice as well as considering the wealth of experiences and the various voices within the issue.

The initiative is central to BOND's 2006-2011 strategy, which includes explicit commitments to helping its members respond effectively to demands for accountability and transparency, and identifying collective approaches to quality in the sector.

Total respondents to the survey:

69 members, approximately 30% of BOND membership

1. Responses to this survey per BOND categories are shown below.

	%	Responses
Category A: Less than 100,000	11.6%	8
Category B: 100,000 – 500,000	21.7%	15
Category C: 500,000 – 2 million	30.4%	21
Category D: 2 million - 5 million	11.6%	8
Category E: 5 million - 20 million	10.1%	7
Category F: 20 million - 40 million	7.2%	5
Category G: Over 40 million	7.2%	5

2. Who responded within the organization?

Directors	45.6%
Senior managers	10%
Managers	8.8%
Program managers and officers	5.9%
Fundraising and communications	4.4%
Learning and training personnel	1.5%

3. Members identified themselves with the following activities

Education and communication	58%
Advocacy and rights	56.5%
Community and personal development	55.1%
Governance and Institutional strengthening	50.7%
Health	46.4%
Economic Development	44.9%
Conflict Disasters and emergencies	42%
AIDS/HIV	42%
Water and Sanitation	31.9%
Natural Resources	24.6%
Aid effectiveness	17.4%
Technology	10.1%

Practices to Enhance Quality

4. In what areas do member organizations measure the quality of their work?

64% of organizations say they use some kind of quality system (e.g. standards, codes of conduct, organizational or project assessment tools, etc.) to analyze, measure, and improve the quality of their work; **26% does not** and **10% is not sure**.

The key areas where quality work is done are:

Projects/delivery/humanitarian assistance	77.6%
Financial management	63.3%
Human resources management	53.1%
Fundraising	46.9%
Governance	40.8%

Partnerships	36.7%
Advocacy and campaigning	30.6%
Overall organizational management	30.6%

5. What specific standards and methods are used?

A closer look at specific standards and methods that are being used in the different organizational areas reveals a balance between *formal* and *informal* standards and methods.

1. In the area of **Financial Management** the responses pointed both to cases where formal standards are used – mostly the ‘*Charities Commission Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP)*’ and guidance from such bodies as the ‘*Charity Finance Directors Group (CFDG)*’. And other cases where quality is approached through the use of informal standards. In this area, respondents mentioned quality practices as being “*external audits*”, “*use of comprehensive regular financial reports and auditing*”; “*quarterly cash-flow monitoring (all staff) and reporting to Board; and internal audit*”. From all areas, financial management is probably one of the most apt for the use of formal standards. However, the balance shown in responses by those using informal standards suggests that quality in organizations is not only driven by formal approaches.
2. The area of **projects/service delivery/humanitarian assistance**, which scores the highest area where organizations are using methods to address the quality of their work, also shows a balanced combination of formal standards and approaches such as “*Sphere*”, the “*International Red Cross Code of Conduct*”, “*Synergie Qualite*”, “*OPAL standards*”, “*HAP International*”, “*WHO standards*” and collaborative learning efforts such as the inter-agency “*Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) Project*”, and a wide variety of other approaches that deal with quality of programs from an ‘impact assessment’ point of view. In this regards, respondents say that in order to enhance the quality of their operations, the systems they use are “*Annual impact studies*”; “*most significant change methodology*”; “*a standard organisational assessment for proposed project partners; project proposal assessment procedure with input from independent advisors*”. Respondents included actions taken to include beneficiaries and stakeholders in the assessment of their activities as measures of quality, which are not formally standardized, and include: “*participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E)*”; “*Action Aid’s Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS)*”; “*beneficiary surveys and stakeholder consultations*” and “*Social exclusion analysis*”.

3. Within **human resources management** the systems used are equally distributed between ‘*People in Aid Code*’, ‘*Investors in People*’ and less formal approaches such as (iii) *Internal standards and performance appraisals*.

4. In the **governance** area, the systems used also vary across a spectrum of formal and informal standards and guidance: “*PQASSO derivative*”; “*Charity Commission governance policy guidance*”; “*self-assessment by Trustees*”; “*NCVO best practice*”; “*Synergie Qualite*”; A respondent offered their practice of “*annual board self-evaluation questionnaire*”. Other standards include “*involving members in the Annual General Meeting*”. These stakeholder-led approaches to quality were also echoed through “*Reviews of Board governance role using One World Trust Accountability Framework to help us self-assess our stakeholder accountability as an organisation*”; finally, another respondent cited an “*action-reflection-action*” cycle as quality assurance of their governance.

Main Challenges and Drivers

6. How challenging is it to implement quality standards?

When asked how challenging do BOND members find implementation of quality systems, the biggest challenges were found in:

Projects/delivery (e.g. better project management)	69%
Finances (e.g. better financial management)	61%
Partnerships (e.g. improved working relationships with partners)	57%
Accountability to beneficiaries (e.g. increased accountability to the poor)	55%
Governance (e.g. improved governance)	52%
Overall organisational performance	46%
Human Resources	44%
Fundraising	41%
Advocacy	32%

7. Do members find that quality standards that are applied in the UK are consistently applied in their overseas operations?

No	42%
Yes	34%
Not sure	24%

8. In general, how do members rate NGOs’ attempts to address the quality of their work?

Neither good nor bad	53%
Good	37%
Bad	6%
Very good	2%
Very bad	2%

9. When asked about the challenges associated with implementing quality systems and standards in their organizations, members said that:

Burden of time and resources is by far the “most important” (69%)

Following this, the challenges identified as “quite important” were:

Having organizational learning systems in place (56%)

Lack of know-how or technical expertise (54%)

Difficult to adapt to the different cultural contexts in which we work (51%)

Lack of evidence that quality is actually improved (45%)

Difficult to choose from wide range of standards on offer (45%)

Lack of flexibility to adapt to the size and purpose of the organisation (42%)

39% said that *having senior management buy-in and support* is “not important” while 20% said it is quite important.

10. What are the main drivers for working on quality issues in the NGO sector?

The overall trend shows the following results:

From donors (private and/or governments)	82%
Values of the org. to continuously improve	80%
Competition for Funds	68%
Accountability to beneficiaries	46%
Accountability to local partners	38%
From host governments	18%

However, a disaggregate view per BOND member-categories shows the following patterns (see question 1 above for description of categories):

1. While there is a general consensus of the **role of donors as driver**, larger organizations in **member-categories E-F-G** place more importance on it than do smaller organizations in A-B-C-D.
2. While this widespread recognition that **competition for funds** is an important driver, the biggest emphasis on this driver is given by relatively large organizations in **member-categories D-E**, while both smaller organizations (A-B-C) as well as ‘very large’ organizations (F-G) places less emphasis on it.
3. Again larger organizations in **member-categories E-F-G** assign more importance to **accountability to beneficiaries and partners** as drivers of engaging with work on quality than smaller organizations in categories A-B-C-D.

11. How well do quality systems reflect the perceptions of their intended beneficiaries?

59% of respondents answered that the systems only *reflect beneficiaries’ perceptions informally and occasionally*. On the other hand, a similar response rate was given at both ends of the spectrum, by those that claim that the systems used *don't really reflect actual beneficiaries' perceptions (20%)* and those that say that they *formally prioritize them (22%)*

Needs Identified and the Role of BOND

12. What kind of support would be useful to members for improving the quality of their work?

A majority of responses highlighted the need to *have more opportunities for sharing practices that have worked well (82%)* and mutual learning.

Knowledge on standards appeared high in the ranking both as *information about existing quality tools and standards (78%)* and more service-based need in *direct support services, such as training and advice (70%)*.

A common quality standard or approach for international development NGOs (40%) was identified as useful only if sufficiently flexible “we are very concerned about the increasing thrust for a ‘one size fits all’ approach to this”.

Interestingly, a disaggregate view per BOND member-categories shows that support for a common standard is mostly given by relatively large organizations in the **member-category D-E**, while smaller organizations in **member-categories A-B-C**, as well as the largest organizations in **member-categories F-G**, for probably different reasons, are less supportive of the idea.

Responses in the option *Other (17%)* included proposals such as *‘help with changing the culture of the organization’*; *‘willingness of individual and trust donors to fund project and programme impact assessment and organisational learning’*; *‘Funding to carry out more evidence gathering and capitalisation of existing approaches’*; *‘Organisational quality audit service - sharing practices that have not worked well’*; and *‘funding’*.

13. Do members feel BOND has an important role to play in supporting the quality of their work?

Yes	78%
No	8%
Not sure	14%

14. What kind of role should BOND play to support the quality of its members?

- **Knowledge sharing and service-based roles:** *‘Training and advice, acting as a consultancy service for the implementation of quality systems’*; *‘Training and sharing of experience’*; *‘Facilitate information sharing and lessons learned, provide learning opportunities and explore opportunities for financing of quality related exercises’*; and *‘Updating members on learning and new developments’*.
- **Promoting cross-sector awareness and advocate for donors’ role:** *‘...The key role BOND can play is in providing fora which are relevant to members and enable them to share experience of what works and what doesn’t. In order to do this, BOND needs to reach out to bigger constituencies within larger NGOs and ensure that the agenda remains relevant to a wide variety of NGOs. Supporting NGOs to advocate to donors for processes that are conducive to improving learning and quality. the development of a quality standard could be useful if [...] it is more of a check list for organisations to adapt and work to within existing processes. It should not become a stick for funders to use to impose approaches on NGOs.’*

As another respondent puts it: *‘Improvement in the quality of what we do is one of the most important issues facing the sector in the coming years, and BOND should be at the heart of driving this agenda. BOND should be promoting good practice, developing common standards, providing information about quality tools and standards, signposting and offering training, gathering evidence, encouraging members to improve quality and showing us how to do that - and then telling the wider world (DFID, funders, etc) that we as a sector are driving this ourselves.’*

- **Focusing on the issue of relationships and power:** *‘While the idea of focusing on beneficiary needs is laudable, in the real world it is funders - governments and foundations - which have the most powerful voice in defining policies and standards and everyone else (beneficiaries included) have to accommodate themselves to the shifting fashions in order to access resources. Any useful initiative in the arena of quality has to recognise the wider power relationships within which ‘quality’ gets defined. What a donor wants, what an organisation needs to know in order to improve its performance, and what beneficiaries regard as useful outcomes may be quite different things.’*
- **Emphasising the reality of smaller NGOs:** *Identifying how quality systems can be used by smaller NGOs and evaluating the effectiveness of different approaches.’* Another respondent echoed a similar point in terms of sensitivities: *‘It is of concern that BOND’s focus, [...] is about uniform, professionalized standards and mutual accountability (i.e. self-regulation) that will likely increase the gap between NGOs and Southern partners and communities. BOND is not objective or independent in this process as it will probably become the gatekeeper or policeman in enforcing codes of conduct.’*

As another respondent puts it: *‘Needs vary enormously depending on the size of an NGO. Small NGOs with limited resources generally operate with a lot of informal and tacit systems - they can do this because communication in a small team is much easier than a large organisation. I think this way of working needs more recognition as a legitimate way to manage. BOND could help by influencing opinions on what smaller NGOs can/should be expected to do realistically. Yet another quality system is the last thing we all need.’*

- **Do not impose a standard, but encourage quality:** *‘The network is not sufficiently close-knit to warrant BOND imposing quality standards on its membership, but there is certainly a role for BOND to encourage quality amongst its members by information sharing, making links, offering training and advice which members can take advantage of. Explicit and active support for quality will also help BOND in its advocacy work.’*

- **Don't attempt to generate a one size fits all approach:** *as membership is too diverse. Concentrate perhaps on accountability to beneficiaries as is common throughout. Development organisations' work on evaluation is ahead of other sectors e.g. human rights. Need to explain why concentration on quality and not evaluation - the difference/relationship is not clear to me.'*
- **Be critical of the idea of 'standards' as the only means to achieve quality:** *'Convene the discussion [...] of whether industry-wide standards are a good idea. -Bring together donors and NGOs in the debate - two way standards issue here. - Examine standards against all kinds of organisational accountability requirements - see e.g. Cavill S. and Sohail M. -Examine narrative approaches - see e.g. Tsoukas H. - Review range quality standards approaches and see if they can be matched to full range of NGO organisational requirements. Range of approaches from health sector relevant here e.g Vancouver single target model vs. NHS multi-imposed targets -Provide supporting evidence that quality standards do what they say - counter argument is that delivering best practice depends most on engendering a body of motivated, interacting, sharing, learning staff with good financial systems and support. Do standards deliver this?'*
- **Be selective on the intervention, focus on the gaps in current practice:** *'Take the lead on developing and setting appropriate sector-specific or organisational-specific quality and accountability standards where members agree that there are gaps that need to be plugged.'*
- **Helping to focus on critical link between quality and an organization's goals and strategies:** *'There is an urgent need to develop organisational approaches in the NGO sector that (a) on the one hand, encourage NGO field staff to engage with complex local situations and maintain respectful dialogue with beneficiaries, and (b) on the other hand, meet corporate responsibilities. BOND could play a leading role in developing and promulgating these approaches. An important starting point may be to generate (in dialogue with the sector) standard definitions and strategies for what NGOs are trying to achieve - at the moment, it is arguable that NGOs struggle to maintain quality because they are not always clear what their goals (or roles) are.'*

Other issues:

- **Consider the limitations of international organizations:** *'There are perceptual and conceptual difficulties for quality work with overseas staff. Application of set codes or scales may have limited validity. Systematic approaches need to be backed up with inspectorial interviews. The greater the distance from front-line*

staff and beneficiaries the greater sanitisation of the truth. Confidence to report weaknesses as well as strengths needs to be encouraged, with feedback.'

- **Consider the politics of the sector:** *'Who is driving this agenda? It appears to be about self-regulation and assumes that all NGOs are working to the same ends, a soft myth we collectively perpetuate. For example, conservation organisations (and BOND members) are systematically alienating people and communities from their lands. Will this code or standards sanction this activity?'*
- **Consider the bias of performance metrics:** *'...I think metrics are important but we need to recognise that they have limitations. Especially in the area of programme impact what constitutes impact is socially constructed - it's negotiated between a range of stakeholders, is often imprecise, is dynamic and usually contested. Even in areas that are easier to measure what works in one organisation may not fit the culture of another. We should avoid putting too much emphasis on 'normative' practices.'*
- **Consider past work, especially rights-based approaches to standards:** *'As a member of BOAG, we participated in a scoping study of potential quality standards approaches commissioned by BOAG directors and conducted by Hugo Slim around 1999/2000. This revealed a number of helpful options to consider, particularly those developed around rights-based approaches and those that could be adapted from business-sector approaches. Not all these options may be relevant or adaptable to all BOND members, especially smaller or medium sized NGOs.'*

Conclusions

The topic of 'quality improvement' is complex, multi-faceted, and quite contested in the organizational and political arena of civil society development. This survey provides important insights and preliminary conclusions for the research and consultation project that is being carried out for BOND. Each of these insights will be pursued further in the research project in order to translate them into concrete recommendations for BOND in offering ways forward.

First, the survey points out to the importance of differentiating between formal and informal standards; the latter being those various methods, from monitoring frameworks to self-developed guidelines, that organizations use to improve their practice.

Second, the results of the survey show that while there is a critical role assigned to *having organizational learning systems in place* for quality to be improved (56%), only 1.5% of the respondents to the survey were actually *learning and training staff*. This might reflect an underlying tension in organizations: that while effective organizational learning (e.g. a learning culture, learning capabilities, skills development, positive knowledge feedback loops for planning and implementation, etc) are essential for improving and maintaining the quality of work, the domains of ‘quality/performance’ and ‘learning’ within organizations are usually divided and taken up by different people in distinct, and often disconnected, areas.

While many respondents call for an awareness that “*one size does not fit all*”, it might well be true that an over-emphasis on *formal* standards inhibits real quality improvement to take place and be sustained over time, if this means deemphasising learning within organizations. Enabling the convergence of quality issues and learning approaches within organizations would seem to be a critical challenge ahead.

In terms of common approaches or standards to quality, we see that only relatively large organizations in member-categories D-E were the most open to support common standards or approaches to quality, while both smaller organizations in categories A-B-C (where the majority of BOND members are), as well as the largest NGOs in categories F-G, were not generally supportive of the idea.

Third, a critical aspect found throughout the results is the call for an awareness and risks associated with disregarding small and medium organizations in their limited capacity to comply with formal standards; it might well be that these organizations offer much to learn about the performance-learning interface, since sometimes, if not always, ‘quality’ and ‘learning’ roles do not offer a clear-cut area distinction as in bigger organizations.

Fourth, a key element emerging from the data is the role and influence of donors within the reality of organizations. Donors are identified as the main driver for adopting quality standards (82%). The most important challenge for adopting them is a *Burden of time and resources* (69%). Donors’ influence over organizations can be seen to play out in at least two obvious ways: (i) through the areas of ‘organizational development’ where they decide (or not) to invest funds and (ii) the reporting requirements they place upon their grantees. These two areas have profound implications for supporting quality improvement, either through the increased availability of funding for adopting quality approaches (as a respondent puts it: *‘willingness of individual and trust donors to fund project and programme impact assessment and organisational learning’*) or by aligning their reporting requirements in ways that alleviate the burden of time for organizations and are aligned with what really drives good quality of work.

However, it is important to bear in mind how the diversity of BOND members considers the issues of drivers and challenges. As it has been shown above, although there is

consistency across the membership on the importance of donors in the quality agenda, it is larger organizations in categories E-F-G that place the most importance on the issue, than other in the other categories. Similarly, in the recognition of *competition for funds* as a driver of work in quality, the strongest emphasis is given by relatively large organizations in member-categories D-E, while both smaller organizations (A-B-C) as well as ‘very large’ organizations (F-G) places less emphasis on it.

Fifth, the survey shows that a number of practices to enhance quality aim to do so by promoting the participation of stakeholders (especially beneficiaries) in the assessment of the organization’s activities and performance. Stakeholder-led approaches to quality point towards a key aspect of organizational quality. While *organizational learning* was pointed out several times as a key aspect of quality in the survey, the question of *who* an organization learns from and *how* it learns, both emerge as key complementary questions. The implications of these for the area of ‘NGO quality standards’ will be further explored in the course of the research.

In terms of the BOND membership, however, again larger organizations in member-categories E-F-G assign the most importance to accountability to beneficiaries and partners as drivers of working more with quality issues, as opposed to smaller organizations in categories A-B-C-D. This might well reflect the fact that it is the bigger NGOs, the ones that are at centre of the debate on accountability issues, while smaller NGOs may be less exposed to the accountability debate yet.