What will ‘signing on’ to the Code mean for NGOs?

1. Purpose of the Code

Through development of the *Code of Good Practice for NGOs responding to HIV/AIDS*, the project aims to:

- outline and building wider commitment to principles and practices, informed by evidence, that underscore successful NGO responses to HIV/AIDS
- assist ‘Supporting NGOs’ to improve the quality and cohesiveness of our work and our accountability to our partners and beneficiary communities
- foster greater collaboration between the variety of ‘Supporting NGOs’ now actively engaged in responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and
- renew the ‘voice’ of NGOs responding to HIV/AIDS by enabling us to commit to a shared vision of good practice in our programming and advocacy.

2. Who can sign on to the Code?

2.1 ‘Supporting NGOs’

Because of the scale and complexity of the global pandemic and the numbers and diversity of NGOs working in HIV/AIDS, the Code of Good Practice is written for and designed to assist those NGOs that provide one or more of the following:

- Technical support
- Financial support
- Capacity development
- Advocacy support

for NGOs that implement programmes in-country. Their focus may be national or international. This is the Code’s core target group, termed ‘Supporting NGOs’.

2.2 Any NGO that supports the Code’s aims

The Code of Good Practice can also be used to assist the work of any NGO undertaking HIV/AIDS work. It is also open to any other NGO working in HIV/AIDS response to become a signatory if it supports the Code’s aims. The *Code of Good Practice for NGOs Responding to HIV/AIDS* is voluntary.

3. Consultation on the Code and lessons from other initiatives

There are useful lessons on the implementation of inter-agency codes by other networks in the aid sector. Three existing models for sign-on, implementation and accountability were considered, based on:

- *The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*
• The Sphere's project’s *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Relief*

• The *People In Aid Code of Good Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel*

During consultation on the draft Code, the project also sought the views of NGOs on implementation and accountability. A concern expressed during consultations was the need for support to NGOs if they were to implement the Code effectively: ‘sign on’ alone would be insufficient to achieve the project purposes outlined above. The Code Project’s Steering Committee took these views into account in June 2004 when determining the approach to ‘sign on’ and implementation, reflected in this position paper.

Each of the three examples of inter-agency Codes had both strengths and weaknesses as a model for the *Code of Good Practice for NGOs Responding to HIV/AIDS (Code of Good Practice)*. No one model offered the project an opportunity to fulfil all the purposes outlined above. The model agreed is a hybrid of key features from each of the three. It provides a staged approach to sign on and implementation.

4. What will ‘signing on’ to the Code mean for NGOs?

4.1 How to sign on to the Code

- The final text of the Code and the pro forma letter is available on the website of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, to enable NGOs to consider whether they wish to sign on to the Code.¹
- By signing on to the Code, NGOs publicly signal their endorsement of the principles enshrined in the *Code of Good Practice*, a sectoral vision of good practice in NGOs role in the HIV/AIDS response and an initiative developed by and for NGOs.
- If NGOs wish to be listed as signatories in the printed edition, a letter in the form provided on the Federation’s website must be signed by the head of the organisation and received by the Code Project no later than **13:00 (Geneva) Friday 29 October 2004**.²
- All letters are to be faxed or sent marked:
  Attention: Julia Cabassi, NGO HIV/AIDS Code of Practice Project
  International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
  PO Box 372, CH-1211 Geneva 19
  Switzerland
  Fax: +41 22 733 03 95
- Please send an email to Julia.cabassi@ifrc.org to advise that the letter has been sent or faxed.
- When the second phase of this project – implementation of the Code – is established, NGOs wishing to sign on to the Code will still be able to do so. An update about this process will be provided on the website of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

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¹ www.ifrc.org/what/health/hivaids/code/
² The “head of organisation” means, for example, the Chief Executive, Executive Director, Secretary General or similar.
**Rationale**

The Code is a comprehensive document that reflects the diverse activities by NGOs responding to HIV/AIDS. It is not the project’s expectation or intent, however, that signatory NGOs commit themselves to implement and deliver the entire range of activity reflected in the Code.

Nevertheless, endorsement of all the principles it enshrines is essential to ensure that the Code represents an authoritative and credible statement from the NGO sector. Sign-on indicates endorsement of the Code in full. NGOs will not be able to sign on to only parts of the Code. Partial endorsement could undermine the work of other NGO signatories and weaken the collective voice that the Code aims to promote.

Similarly, the names of signatory NGOs will be placed in the public domain in order to demonstrate collective endorsement of the Code and its principles. This will help strengthen the Code’s use as an advocacy tool. Signatory NGO may use a strapline ‘We endorse the Code of Good Practice for NGOs Responding to HIV/AIDS’ in printed materials and on its website.

Individual signatory NGOs may wish to proceed immediately to implement the code. However, the Steering Committee recognises that many NGOs are members of federations or networks. By separating Code sign-on from the commitment to implement, we acknowledge the complex organisational relationships that exist within federated or network structures. The two-stage process facilitates Code endorsement at federation or network level yet enables individual members to schedule implementation themselves. Implementation is discussed at 4.2 below.

### 4.2 Implementation and accountability

- **Implementation:** a signatory NGO’s head of organisation makes a written commitment to implement the Code of Good Practice and nominates a Code “champion.”

- Implementation remains the responsibility of the NGO that signs on to the Code of Good Practice. Nevertheless, it is proposed that a project secretariat assist signatory NGOs to do so. The secretariat and its role are discussed at 4.3 below.

- Signatory NGOs are further encouraged to share costs and expertise by establishing joint training with and advocating use of the Code by other NGOs, UN, donors and government agencies.

- **Accountability:** is built in to implementation of the Code using a process based on social audit. Social audit enables signatory NGOs to build on monitoring, evaluation and accreditation systems already in place in their organisation. Training and support is provided to enable NGOs to use this process.

**Rationale**

*Express commitment*

The experience of People In Aid suggests that the most successful signatory NGOs in terms of implementation are likely to be those whose head of organisation has made a firm, written commitment to implementation and who have assigned responsibility for the task to a senior level Code “champion” (and team where possible).

*Scope*

The Code is aspirational. It sets out good practice principles, rather than minimum standards, which we can work towards implementing over time. When signing on to the
Code, NGOs endorse all the principles in the Code. However, not all the programming principles in Chapter 4 are applicable to all Supporting NGOs. For example, some will be relevant to development NGOs and others to NGOs working in HIV prevention or treatment, care and support. Signatory NGOs will work to implement the programming principles in the Code relevant to their own work.

Continuous improvement
The Code of Good Practice makes an explicit commitment to accountability. Social audit is used by not-for-profit organisations and ethical companies to measure and improve performance against social and ethical objectives. There is no pass or fail in a social audit: each organisation can move at its own speed to implement a continuous cycle of improvement. Social audit emphasises institutional learning, as well as training for individuals. It encourages organisations to start from “where we are”, reviewing and building on existing monitoring, evaluation and quality systems when they measure performance. These should be investigated, used and adapted before new ones are introduced. People In Aid offers useful experience in this context.

The Code, like other frameworks in HIV/AIDS, underlines the need for “downward” accountability to NGO partners and beneficiaries. For this reason, social audit, with its emphasis on accountability to all stakeholders, is considered particularly appropriate.

Many NGOs will have in place existing systems of monitoring, evaluation, quality assurance or accreditation. The secretariat will offer signatory NGOs assistance to use existing systems wherever possible to measure their own performance in implementing the Code, including improving accountability. (see 4.3 below)

The form that such assistance takes will depend on the findings of the mapping exercise described in section 4.3. People In Aid and Sphere offer useful examples of possible activities, including workshops, baseline studies, resource centres, pilot programmes, expert advice, etc. (see 6 below)

Implementation activities should involve government, donor and UN agencies where possible in order that links with national and international HIV/AIDS strategies, partnerships, frameworks and funding sources can be established and strengthened. Sphere offers useful experience in this context. As previously discussed, because many national NGOs are members of federated structures or networks, the decision about when to implement the Code will be made at national level.

Acknowledging commitment to implement the Code
The work of signatory NGOs in implementing the Code will be recognised through a second-stage strapline "We are implementing the Code of Good Practice for NGOs Responding to HIV/AIDS."

4.3 The role of the secretariat in assisting signatory NGOs to implement the code

- The secretariat promotes the Code of Good Practice, answers queries about it, and maps, develops and/or organises assistance to signatory NGOs. The secretariat assists signatory NGOs in implementing the Code and developing accountability to stakeholders.

Rationale
Subject to securing adequate resources, it is proposed that the project retain and expand its secretariat. Experience from the sector and the findings of consultation on the draft Code show that the secretariat’s support will be needed to promote the Code of
good practice and assist signatory NGOs to implement it effectively.

The work of the secretariat can proceed only if the project is successful in securing funding for a further 12 months. Without significant investment, the Code of Good Practice is likely to remain a work of reference rather than a catalyst for change. Initiatives such as Sphere and People In Aid have shown that investment in small teams of staff and consultants have affected thinking, practice and advocacy in the NGO sector and beyond.

The secretariat will play a key role in the “marketing” of the Code, design and maintain a website, respond to queries and begin to develop ways to assist signatory NGOs to implement the Code. In respect of implementation and accountability, it is envisaged that the secretariat will:

- Map existing mechanisms and support already available to signatory NGOs
- Identify unmet needs for assistance. These will vary according to type of signatory NGO, e.g. international NGO with in-country offices, member of network or federated structure, national NGO, etc.
- Explore options for collaboration in using the Code with in-country and regional partners.

Subject to the findings of this mapping exercise, a needs-led approach is likely to prioritise:

- Sufficient flexibility to address the different needs of signatory NGOs
- Opportunities for joint activities by signatory NGOs in the same country or region
- Collaboration with existing programmes and mechanisms that assist implementation or that enhance quality and accountability.

5. Summary: sign on, implementation & accountability

**Stage one: Sign on**

- Formal sign on by the head of organisation, reflecting endorsement of all the principles enshrined in the Code of Good Practice for NGOs Responding to HIV/AIDS.

**Stage two: Implementation**

- Formal, written commitment by the head of organisation in the signatory NGO to implement the Code of Good Practice; nomination of a Code "champion" within the NGO
- Implementation will incorporate accountability through a process based on social audit.

Stage Two is subject to the securing of funds to maintain an expanded secretariat for a further 12 months.

6. Further information

Further information on implementation and accountability and examples from the other initiatives that informed this approach is available in an options paper considered by the Steering Committee - Sign-on, Implementation and Accountability: Options and Recommendations. This document is available on the Federation’s website.