

THE CREATION OF A NATIONAL USAR ACCREDITATION SYSTEM



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I. Introduction:

The INSARAG board of the Americas and the General Secretary of INSARAG stressed the importance of analyzing and sharing experiences in the region of the Americas on the processes of accreditation / certification of national USAR, defining accreditation as *"a voluntary process by which an organization is able to measure the quality of their services or products, and performance against these standards, nationally or internationally. The accreditation process involves self-assessment of the organization as well as a detailed assessment by a team of external experts"*. Accordingly, this paper seeks to share these experiences and understand the principle to be achieved in the development of accreditation systems, optimized by different countries in recent years.

The representation of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru as participants in the first workshop on strengthening USAR national capacities "Accreditation National System of USAR teams for emergency response at the national level" held between May 23th and May 25th at the Chile's fireman Training Center allowed the team to formulate some recommendations to be shared with other countries in the Americas region interested in improving accreditation systems or standards of national USAR teams.

These recommendations and the present document pretend to be a base tool for the countries that are under the construction of initiatives related to the conformation of national USAR groups in accordance to INSARAG guides.

The compromise assumed by Chile's fire department in the name of national authorities for the implementation of a National Accreditation System is just a starting point for the analysis and discussion of the topic during the workshop, with the contribution of all the countries represented in the workshop providing their experiences and efforts in the creation of an accreditation process and the construction of enabling tools.

II. Background

Since 2003 have been discussed, analyzed and developed a set of initiatives focused on establishing a process that allows USAR groups from the different countries to reach some basic standards in order to be called USAR National Teams. This is due to the countless number of groups that emerge with very limited capabilities to provide humanitarian assistance after an earthquake, causing inconvenience both to national emergency systems and to affected countries that receives these resources or groups during an event and that have become a burden for the National Emergency System during a disaster.

In 2005, the first document referring to an accreditation process for USAR groups is presented and it is called "Accreditation mechanism for Urban Search and Rescue teams of the American Continent, from the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA). This document comes from an initial document about

accreditation of USAR teams, elaborated in 2003 by the presidency of the regional group at that time, USAID/OFDA. This document reflects a set of conditions that must be taken into consideration for the development and establishment of USAR groups.

In 2010, during its first worldwide meeting in Hyogo, Japan, INSARAG adopts the INSARAG Hyogo Declaration, which in its paragraph 5 “claim and strongly recommend that the strengthening of national, local and communitarian capabilities is the key to provide an effective response to earthquakes and emergencies with collapsed structures and other related emergency operations in a rapidly urbanizing world; It welcomes the work of the INSARAG network developing recommendations about operational and organizational guidelines for the strengthening of national USAR teams and encourages State members to support this efforts.” In recent years, the INSARAG dedicated a much greater emphasis to the development of national capabilities, which also can be translated into a specific manual that is being prepared on this subject and will be part of the new and revised INSARAG guidelines.

Based on the experience of the earthquake of February 27, 2014 and Chile’s active role in INSARAG since then, the Chilean authorities as well as other countries showed interest in developing a national accreditation process resulting in a Chilean National Accreditation System that was presented in several INSARAG meetings and which promotes the development of the workshop conducted between May 23rd and May 25th, 2014 at the Chile’s Fire National Academy.

In 2011, the “Guide for the development of USAR systems in Latin America and the Caribbean” was presented by the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA), which aims to capture that an accreditation system is not only a USAR group process but a national compromise with assistance of local technical authorities and politics for the creation of a National System that supports USAR National groups.

Many countries, through multiple discussions, have understood the aspect that the accreditation is a necessity to guarantee that National groups are in line with minimum parameters. This is why Argentina, Ecuador, among others are watching the process of accreditation as a mechanism to support a System. An example of the importance of this topic has been the experience of the Central American countries to incorporate the need for an accreditation system that allows every country in the region to have the same standards officially.

Therefore, the issue of accreditation becomes more interesting and looks forward for alternatives of knowledge for its implementation in a way that allows not only counting with tools but with endorsement of State authorities in charge of emergency response systems.

III. Methodology

This document takes up the recommendations made at the workshop by the representatives of the countries and seeks to integrate them to the accreditation documentation provided by the *Fire Department of Chile* and the available information in the region of the Americas. The first step is a document enabling countries to define the best accreditation system in accordance to the conditions, taking into account the lessons already learned from previous processes developed by the countries.

The structure and theme that was to have the document was part of the agreements given in the workshop, this is why the order and each theme presentation is based on the principle of achieving not only to understand what the accreditation process is, but how this is integrated to a national process under a system with the participation and support of the state's national authorities, this is why it reflects recommendations at all times focused on construction, monitoring and sustainability.

The following illustration reflects aspects of greater importance in construction and sustainability of the accreditation system:

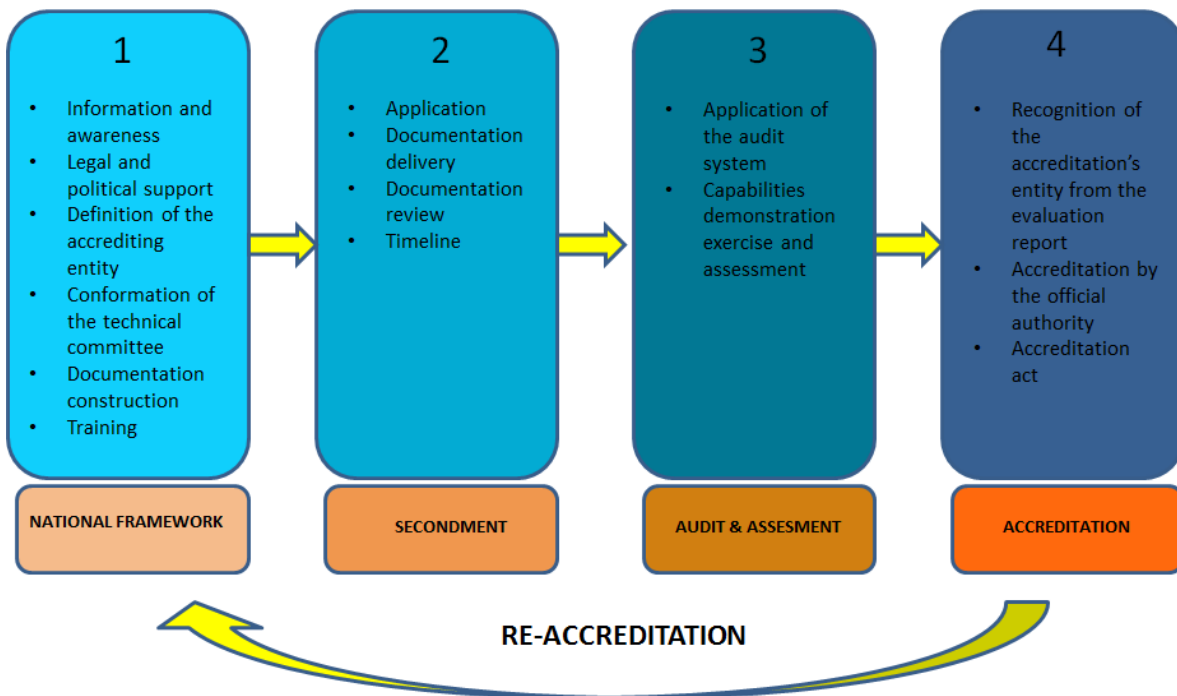


Illustration1: accreditation process and key aspects to take into account during different key moments

IV. Risk Management National Framework and USAR System Positioning

A start point should be that every process in construction must have technical and a high-level political support to ensure a sustainable and stable over time process since it must develop and strengthen itself through experiences reached with the involvement of all parties that are going to be part of the system within the National Framework of Risk Management and find political, financial and organizational support and positioning in accordance to the needs of the country.

The USAR program therefore should be incorporated into the national authorities' Integrated Management System as a PROCESS, in order to allow its complete development. The accreditation system should be included under the frame of this PROCESS as one of its components. Similarly, it is necessary to incorporate this PROCESS into the national strategies or response frames, so that resources or funding sources can be allocated to it.

The accreditation system should be part of the country's national regulations in order to allow itself, within state policy and integral risk management, to develop and consolidate. Many of the particular or institutional initiatives that have emerged, have even fainted due to political dynamics of the country, lack of interest of the new authorities, dismissal of the initiative's technical promoters, etc. but overall for having not reached the necessary sustenance.

The recommendations made during the workshop emphasize the following aspects that summarize better the information previously exposed:

- Give emphasis to the political aspect in order to incorporate it in the accreditation and official recognition process within the State policy and under a legal and regulatory framework.
- Instances and process must be identified by the State to develop the accreditation.
- Identification of the institution that can develop the processes of training, training methodology such as USAR national groups.
- There should be a single National Accreditation System
- Have the staff for the constitution and development of the accreditation system.
- Participation of all national actors involved with the accreditation system to validate and support the accreditation process.
- Transparency at all times, within the system and during the accreditation process.
- Participation of external actors (countries, NGO's, etc.) in order to accompany the formulation of the accreditation system and to validate it is helpful for a system that is being developed.

The positioning of the USAR accreditation system in the framework of Disaster Risk Management is an element that would allow continuity, but should not be a

decisive factor since it can, due to characteristics of the organization, turn into a factor that negatively affects the accreditation system if the instance is operational and counts with USAR groups.

V. Accreditation Process Entity

The accreditation process must be supported at all times, as established before, by a state's official instance or a competent authority that allows and facilitate the appliance of the accreditation process. This entity will give the required sustainability, legal framework supporting the management or it will have the necessary conditions to provide the legal framework in the mid-term that supports all efforts and actions of the accreditation system.

The entity must guarantee that those involved or responsible to develop and implement the accreditation system should follow a transparent and participative process by ensuring agreements and solutions in favor of all parts without neglecting the international established requirements that can be damaging for the group's future missions saving lives.

This entity must assume the challenge not only to create and give sustainability but to ensure a consistent development with each country's needs and to promote the development and professionalization of the USAR groups, taking advantage of the achieved experiences through the accreditation process.

For this reason, as part of the recommendations that can be presented in relation to the accreditation process entity, we identified:

- The establishment of a technical Committee on accreditation that has the backing of the law and the financial and technical conditions to develop.
- The involvement of national actors related to USAR to ensure that the system can be fully developed and lead to cover the needs in the short, mid and long term.

The document "Guide for the development of a USAR system in Latin America and the Caribbean", developed by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) refers to these aspects and could be a basis for analysis and discussion in the country to establish the best process for the creation of a platform of the accreditation process entity. See Annex 1.

VI. Other Accreditations

An accreditation process should not necessarily be a process only for National USAR Groups, being a system means that it can involve other disciplines in which we would like to achieve some standards (hazardous materials, rope work, rescue from heights, rough waters, etc.) both nationally and internationally. Start with a USAR group accreditation is a good start because of the existent advance level

and because of the experiences that other countries have had before. The commitment should be to achieve improvements in care.

VII. Official Accrediting Body

The establishment of the national or official authority responsible for accreditation should be framed, in first instance, in the creation document of the accreditation system by the need to be recognized by all the involved authors, counting with the ideal staff and above all count with the financial resources to support the accreditation process that normally takes a considerable time and a set of procedures, audit and control depending on preferences.

A neutral allocation with enough related knowledge would represent the best official accreditation instance but sometimes this is not possible and should rely on the advice of external experts to give the first steps and prepare staff and documentation containing the written procedures of verification to ensure that it will not be used for personal or subjective criteria for an accreditation decision.

The control mechanism of the accreditation process will be the best way to give faith to the official accreditation instance that the procedure has been transparent and acceptable technical conditions have been given.

VIII. Accreditation Process Control

At any time the National Accreditation System should be considered as a process seeking improvement and development for USAR groups, thus, different actors of the process must understand that the control tools should be hand written and in digital format approved officially in order to proceed to its implementation.

A national consensus would be convenient within the possibilities for setting up both, the accreditation control process and the methodological system process. The competent entity will guarantee that the technical level will apply control conditions in the same way for all the accreditation users.

Part of the accreditation process is the control mechanism, this is why at the moment of establishing clear and well formulated parameters it generates a reasonable understanding and avoids doubts about processes that should be presented and which must be accomplished.

IX. Assignment system to start the accreditation process

The beginning of the accreditation process starts with the nomination of a USAR National Group to be added to the National Fire Department or system allowing it to offer their services within standardized frameworks established by the country and which are supported by the National Accrediting Instance.

This nomination should allow the presentation, on behalf of National USAR teams, of a series of documentation that support the obligations determined for the accreditation system. Taking as an example Chile's work, we are going to reflect the established information as annexes of its obligations:

- Annex 1. Institutional Strategic Plan
- Annex 2. Investment Annual Plan
- Annex 3. Functions Flow Chart
- Annex 4. Human Resources Management
- Annex 5. Training Program
- Annex 6. Accident insurance procedure
- Annex 7. Agreements with equipment and logistics suppliers
- Annex 8. Physical Facilities
- Annex 9. Tools and STAFF lists
- Annex 10. Communications Standards
- Annex 11. Autonomy procedures
- Annex 12. Travel authorization
- Annex 13. Inventory administration
- Annex 14. Security and assessment procedures
- Annex 15. Operational Capabilities Protocol

These documents developed under pre-established formats and responsive to Chile's needs are an example of the way that it can be built in order to fulfill some service obligations and guarantees, which will be provided by USAR National Groups during their duty.

Some of these annexes respond to a previous stage which allows USAR groups preparation to assume compromises that want to be reached during the accreditation.

X. In-site and Documentation review process

The documentation review makes reference to analyze, confirm and verify the given documentation, presented and required under established schemes and formats by the responsible accreditation entity. The In-site visit accomplishing what was exposed in the documentation is part of the obligations of the responsible entity. As a result it has to approve or reject what is proposed.

A timeline offering deadlines for compliance is fundamental for monitoring the compromises and to achieve equal opportunities for the groups. These deadlines must be in accordance with the country's reality, cultural aspects, and reasonability on behalf of the USAR group Staff.

XI. Audit System

Audit system leads to a systematic, documented, periodic and objective verification to determine if an implemented system or standard is being applied. It is necessary to:

- Audit actions planning
- Definition of physical, human and economical resources
- Trained Staff

This is with the intention of achieving a transparent, executive and efficient process. Audit system must have plans and required tools designed for the performance of the audit. Many of these plans and tools can be monitored thanks to the support of Fire Department of Chile which has put them to the service of the countries and for the creation of an accreditation system.

XII. Skills Demonstration and Assessment Exercise

A fundamental accreditation process system is the practical demonstration of the scope and presented documentation, where not only certified capabilities but through an assessment it identifies weaknesses, allowing improvement for the system and USAR groups which participate in the demonstration exercise, recognizing solutions and developing capacities.

XIII. Accreditation Process Accompaniment

The permanent accompaniment of the accreditation process on behalf of external experts strengthens the system and gives inputs that allow the development and improvement of accreditation and USAR groups, allowing sharing experiences and methodologies.

Also, the importance should be framed on accompaniment of USAR groups on behalf of system accreditation representatives which guide them and clear doubts about documentation and the way to be presented and put into practice for the logical understanding of the requested actions and serve as an input to the development of individuals who constitute USAR groups.

XIV. Re accreditation

The re-accreditation is the process by which a group that has already been credited is required to complete again the accreditation process to ensure that, during the periods in which they were kept available, they remain active and practicing those skills that may be needed in case they were called. Thus, the re-accreditation can lead to a process of equal or less auditing and capabilities demonstration.

A USAR group, as a consequence of being available for an extended period of time, may cease to be operational by very specific organizational circumstances, as well as by the availability of human resources, among many other things.

Therefore, the re accreditation provides the national system and the states the assurance of not only knowing what they really have in case of an disaster, but also to ensure the inventoried resource of USAR available.

XV. The act of national accreditation

An official act by which the highest national authority recognize the effort of the USAR group to achieve accreditation must be considered an act of great importance, not only for the group but also for the country, since it implies the acknowledge of the country that it now counts with the capabilities required to address disasters. Thus, the delivery of equipment to improve capabilities is a good stimulus to join forces in order to achieve the complete development of others in the future.

XVI. Education and training for the accreditation process

The accreditation, as any other process of the human existence, requires training and education processes that lead to the improvement of staff skills. That is the reason why the accreditation should be developed not only under a training for accreditation framework, but also under an education framework that leads to the performance of specific actions of the organization and the individuals who have specific obligations within the USAR group. The preparation of the staff with the knowledge to understand the requirements asked should be a part of the accreditation process in order to visualize and applied in the best way, the requirements asked.

Education and training for the accreditation process will allow the achievement of the more specific objectives, since the trained staff is ready to meet the challenges of building and strengthening capacities.

These education or training processes should be part of the permanent curriculum of the education instances of the first response institutions, or in coordination with the academic institutions with the specific competition.