

Commonly Asked Questions about InterAction's PVO Standards

The following questions relate to the entire PVO Standards document.

How have the Standards benefited the community?

The Standards serve a critical internal and external role. Internally, the Standards link members in the common pursuit of a set of values and ethical code of conduct. Externally, the Standards certify to the public-at-large that members have committed themselves to certain ideals and ways of operating. In times when the public trust in the nonprofit community has been shaken, the Standards are a highly visible, professional statement that enhances credibility with donors, governments, other NGO consortia, and the public at large.

Some specific examples follow:

- InterAction supports disaster response fundraising of its members by informing the media that certain of the responding agencies are members of InterAction, a coalition that sets standards for its members. Similarly, individual member agencies are free to refer to their compliance with InterAction's high standards in fundraising and educational materials.
- The Standards have furthered InterAction's position as a leader among NGO coalitions around the world. Coalitions in Canada and Japan used InterAction's Standards as a model for their own standards, and many other coalitions have studied them. For example, we have translated them into Russian for use in the former Soviet republics. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law used a modified version of InterAction's Standards as the centerpiece for the self-regulation component of its work on regulating civil society in Eastern and Central Europe.
- Funding organizations increasingly are aware of InterAction's commitment to excellence through the Standards. The Independent Sector and the Committee on International Grantmaking of the Council of Foundations distributed the Standards to their members, and the European Foundation Center distributed copies at a major conference that they hosted.

Similarly, the charity watchdogs such as NCIB and the Philanthropic Advisory Service of the Better Business Bureau have shown an interest in the coalition's initiative to self-regulate.

The organizations Gifts-In-Kind now requires that their recipient organization comply with InterAction's Standards as a baseline of acceptability before receiving material.

The Standards provide the Membership Committee with a useful framework for considering prospective members and a foundation from which to resolve disputes among members.

What if members are reluctant to sign the Standards?

InterAction is a voluntary association, and the Standards set by and for its members have weight only to the extent that the membership supports them. Self-certification is a clear, simple method of confirming member support. If a member refuses to sign, the issue is referred to the PVO Standards Committee. The PVO Standards Committee will request an explanation from the member, determine whether the abstention is reasonable and forward a recommendation on to the Executive Committee for final review. Under InterAction's bylaws, the Executive Committee may, by majority vote, suspend or terminate the membership of an organization. Dismissal, however, will always be a last resort and follow efforts to resolve the issue through dialogue.

What is the legal status of the Standards as a whole document?

The Standards are best understood as statements of principles, and as such are not legal requirements. Laws generally define minimums, while principles embody the higher values that charitable organizations, by their very nature, recognize and share. The public affirmation of the principles embodied in the PVO Standards through the annual compliance review process does not, in and of itself, create legal issues or liabilities; however there could be legal consequences should agencies conduct themselves or their programs in ways that are at odds with established US, international or local law.

The principles contained in the PVO Standards are of two broad types: 1) Shared values, e.g. development programs should be participatory, employees should be treated fairly, boards should be independent, etc.; 2) Quality standards, i.e. members must consider the quality standards established by appropriate authorities, e.g. receipt and distribution of medical supplies should be guided by the regulations of WHO, financial management practices by the norms of AICPA and FASB, fundraising practices by the norms of the National Society of Fundraising Executives, etc.

Adherence to all relevant laws (or conscientious non-adherence) is ultimately the responsibility of the boards of directors and staffs of member agencies.

The following questions relate to the Standards on gender equity and diversity.

Is there increased legal liability for members who sign the Standards?

There is not *increased* legal liability for members who sign and strive to uphold the Standards. In fact, the Standards may be protective of members by demonstrating intent. However, as each member organization has its unique practices, legal history and counsel, you should consult your organization's legal counsel with questions that may affect liability.

Current law covers such areas as equal pay for equal work, and nondiscrimination for access to opportunities and resources. The Standards set forth by InterAction in these areas track current law and do not go beyond it to ask more of our members than is required by law.

The other areas covered by the gender equity and diversity guidelines, such as training, awareness and programming are not covered by any body of US law. Therefore, these are areas that are separate and independent from US law. Rather, these Standards state the values and reflect the expectations of the PVO community.

How can InterAction help members implement the gender equity and diversity amendments to the Standards?

To support member initiatives related to gender equity, the Commission on the Advancement of Women (CAW) will provide resources and learning opportunities, including: workshops, on-site consultations and materials, such as *Best Practices for Gender Integration in Organizations and Programs*. In addition, organizations such as Independent Sector and the National Center for Nonprofit Boards can provide literature and training. There are similar resources for diversity and inclusiveness. For both gender and diversity efforts, InterAction will help broker “mentor” relationships among InterAction members and provide recommendations for consultants and resource people.

Aren't the amendments awfully intrusive, prescriptive and very detailed?

The gender and diversity amendments are consistent in tone and approach with the rest of the Standards. They are neither more detailed nor specific than those relating to governance and finance. InterAction recognizes its members are independent, self-governing entities, and thus bear the ultimate responsibility for matters of equality and integrity in their own governance, management and programs. The PVO are not intended to supplant this fundamental responsibility of individual agencies, but rather complement it with a statement of the values and aspirations of our community.

Does “equal pay for equal work” mean that everybody in the same job must get paid the same amount and that my organization has to redo all our job descriptions and pay scales?

No. Equal pay for equal work is the legal standard for employees based in the United States, but it recognizes that any given job must accommodate a range of pay scales based on certain objective criteria such as a person’s experience and salary history. What it seeks to prevent is discrimination in pay based on gender, race, ethnic origin, age and disability. The expectation to uphold this standard extends to all organizations, regardless of size. In this respect, the standards do exceed the current law.