Impact of COVID-19

Background

Faced with the growing impact of the COVID-19 epidemic, performing audits in affected areas has become a high-risk task in particular parts of the world. In some cases, governments are advising their citizens not to travel. Therefore, CBs and ABs must jointly act to address this situation.

In the past, IAF did try to address such unlikely situations with the publication of an IAF Informative Document for Management of Extraordinary Events or Circumstances Affecting ABs, CABs and Certified Organizations (IAF ID 3: 2011 - Issue 1). At first view, this document offers suitable guidelines for handling events relating to the COVID-19 epidemic.

On examination of the scope statement of IAF ID 3, the current epidemic would appear to be largely covered by this scope. However, on more detailed examination, the paradigm underscoring the guidelines tends to be oriented to handling a single organization's certification (c.f. the information which should be collected to establish the situation for each individual organization, etc. [see ID3 Cl. 3]).

Given the volumes of certifications concerned, in some cases, it will not always be feasible to address the current situation for each individual organization and a wider approach (e.g. for a given country or industry sector) needs to be considered. In conclusion, not all the guidelines contained in IAF ID3 would be appropriate to be systematically applied in this particular case. The principles contained in this IAF ID 3 are still relevant, but a more focused set of agreed guidelines would be of greater benefit to the conformity assessment community as a whole and their customers. A proposal for such focussed guidelines to temporarily replace ID 3 is given below.

Further information is available in the following reference documents:

IAF Informative Document on the Management of Extraordinary Events or Circumstances Affecting ABs, CABs and Certified Organizations (IAF ID 3: 2011 - Issue 1)

IAF Mandatory Document for the Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Auditing/Assessment Purposes (IAF MD 4:2018 - Issue 2)

ISO/IEC 17021-1:2015 Conformity assessment - Requirements for bodies providing audit and certification of management systems - Part 1: Requirements

ISO 19011:2018 Guidelines for auditing management systems

Proposed guidelines to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 epidemic on certification and accreditation bodies (based on IAF ID3-2011)

Introduction

The guidelines contained hereafter are only intended to be used in designing and implementing an appropriate response to the current COVID-19 epidemic.

Main dispositions

1) The CB should assess the risks of continuing certification and establish a documented policy and process, outlining the steps it intends to take in the event that a certified organization is affected by the COVID-19 event. This can apply to an affected organization itself e.g. a manufacturing plant forced to curtail activities due to the risks to the workforce or to clients of such an organization, forced to adjust its supply chain dynamics. The justification should be documented and evaluated by the CB to ensure that the organization is sincerely affected due to this epidemic and to what extent this is the case. The current dispositions do not apply in any other case. The CB also needs to consider the risks related to cases where planning/conducting of the audit is not easy because reaching the organization's premises may be difficult or inadvisable for the auditor (e.g. health risks, flight cancellations, etc.)

2) Flexibility on imposing fixed audit dates (e.g. all audits for re-certification or 1st surveillance after initial certification) should be postponed when appropriate by the CB and AB concerned. It is recommended that both these fixed audit dates should be initially extended by a period of no more than six months, which should then be reviewed as the six-month period comes to a close, based on the current travel and medical advice. At renewal stage, the validity of the existing certificate can be extended to allow the CB and its client to complete the renewal process. No penalty is incurred on the customer organization or the CB.

3) CBs (and ABs) should investigate the use of remote audit techniques (see the current versions of ISO 19011 and IAF MD 4) to perform at least partial audits, where possible.

4) As recommended in IAF ID3 Clause 4, similar approaches may have to be implemented by ABs in the event of a CB office assessment or witness assessment being impractical or impossible

5) For any affected given country or region, the dispositions taken by the local AB should apply to all other interested ABs (with accredited CBs in that country or active in that country).

6) Any dispositions adopted by the organization, the CB or the AB may have to be revisited and updated depending the on-going evolution of the situation.

7) A CB/AB should inform its AB/CBs of any on-going developments and any changes to the policy or processes implemented. Both parties should confer to agree on aspects such as the end of validity of the present dispositions and any transition arrangements back to a normal mode of operations for certification and accreditation. All parties should act in good faith.

8) These dispositions are not intended to override requirements in specific sector schemes. It is recommended that scheme owners are consulted in order to approve an agreed way ahead.

9) As appropriate, the CB community should also promote appropriate interactions with IAF if the situation requires it.