

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence the humanitarian system



Humanitarian Reform: Basic Information Leaflet Series¹ NGOs, Clusters and Other Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms



Introduction

The 'cluster approach', which was introduced in 2005, is the most visible and possibly most ambitious aspect of the humanitarian reform agenda.² It aims to make humanitarian response more predictable by introducing a system for organising sectoral coordination among humanitarian actors. The objective is also to facilitate more predictable leadership, improved planning and prioritisation and enhanced accountability. Strengthened partnerships between humanitarian actors was subsequently added and has now become an integral part of the reform agenda.

The Cluster Approach

Clusters are made up of humanitarian organisations and stakeholders – including UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations, as well as government representatives in some cases. These stakeholders work together to address needs identified in a specific sector (e.g. camp coordination, health, protection etc.).

Clusters provide a framework for actors engaged in a sectoral response to: respond jointly to needs that have been commonly identified; develop appropriate strategic response plans with shared objectives; and coordinate effectively – both amongst themselves and with their relevant counterparts within the national authorities leading the response.

Clusters (at national and often sub-national level) aim to share information and where possible, to work with all parties in a conflict situation and to facilitate coordination of the activities of humanitarian actors within the sector.

The cluster approach is intended to strengthen the overall capacity, effectiveness and management of humanitarian response in four key ways:

- Ensuring more **predictable leadership and clearly defined responsibilities** by identifying cluster leads that are accountable for the coordination of the activities of their respective sector (including functioning as a provider of last resort, where necessary).³
- Ensuring **timely and effective responses**, including through the maintenance of global capacity, rosters of trained experts and stockpiles.
- Strengthening **partnership** between UN agencies, International Organization for Migration (IOM), NGOs

and other humanitarian actors,⁴ and also ensuring more coherent linkages with national authority counterparts.

- Improved **strategic field-level coordination** and prioritisation,⁵ leading to fewer gaps and duplication.

Establishing clusters at field level

There are 11 global clusters, each with clearly designated lead agencies (see table below) and specific Terms of Reference agreed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) that outline roles and responsibilities. The cluster approach is flexible and is not imposed at country level in a 'one size fits all' approach. Cluster coordination aims to be field- and needs-driven.

In any humanitarian response, the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC)⁶ (or the UN Resident Coordinator, if no HC has been appointed) – in consultation with the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) – agrees on the priority sectoral needs and related coordination structures (i.e. clusters) that are appropriate to the response. The HC and HCT also agree which humanitarian actors are best placed to take on a cluster leadership responsibility in the specific country context. The decision is based on organisational presence, capacity and willingness, and also takes guidance from the global cluster leads. Due to capacity and resources, a UN agency usually functions as cluster lead, but increasingly, NGOs also play a leadership or co-leadership role. The HC shares the agreement regarding country-level coordination and leadership mechanisms with the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). This must then be approved by the IASC at global level.

How to engage with clusters

Clusters are open to humanitarian actors willing to coordinate their actions and participate in complementary activities. Involvement in cluster coordination includes: participation in cluster meetings; sharing information on programmatic activities; contributing to the three Ws (Who does What, Where) database; and engagement in cluster functions such as needs assessments, planning, resource mobilisation, response delivery, monitoring implementation and strategic priority setting.

NGOs engage with clusters based on their perception of the relevance of cluster activities to meeting their humanitarian response objectives, their own operational presence and capacity, past performance record and accompanying technical expertise.

Clusters operate in 27 of the 28 countries with a Humanitarian Coordinator, as at May 2010. They are now systematically used as the standard coordination mechanism in all major new emergencies requiring a multi-sectoral response and support to national response capacity.⁷

¹ This leaflet is part of a series produced by the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project. The series aims to provide simple, user friendly material for field-level staff on the different aspects of humanitarian reform. For further details, see <http://www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org>

² Other elements of the reform include humanitarian financing and humanitarian leadership.

³ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) working group meeting of June 2008 endorsed a guidance note on the 'provider of last resort', which clarified certain operational issues and elaborated on the original concept. http://onerresponse.info/publicdocuments/OP_Guidance_provider_last_resort.doc. For further discussion of the challenges of applying the provider of last resort concept, see the Cluster Evaluation Phase 2 Synthesis Report: <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-products-common&tempid=99>

⁴ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has stated that its position on the cluster approach is the following: "Among the components of the Movement, the ICRC is not taking part in the cluster approach. Nevertheless, coordination between the ICRC and the UN will continue to the extent necessary to achieve efficient operational complementarity and a strengthened response for people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. At the global level, the ICRC participates as an observer in many of the cluster working group meetings." <http://www.onerresponse.info/Coordination/ClusterApproach/Pages/Cluster%20Approach.aspx>

⁵ IASC (2006). *Guidance note on using the cluster approach to strengthen humanitarian response*. Geneva: Inter-Agency Standing Committee. See www.humanitarianreform.org

⁶ For complex, chronic emergencies or large-scale, sudden-onset disaster response operations, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) appoints a Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) who is responsible for the coordination and leadership of the humanitarian response, in support of the overall leadership by the government of the affected country.

⁷ See <http://onerresponse.info/coordination/clusterapproach>

Clusters at the global level

Global Cluster Leads⁸

Sector or Area of Activity	IDPs or Disaster situations?	Global cluster lead
Agriculture		FAO
Camp Coordination/Management	IDPs from conflict Disaster situations	UNHCR IOM
Early Recovery		UNDP
Education		UNICEF, Save the Children
Emergency Shelter:	IDPs from conflict Disaster situations	UNHCR IFRC (Convener)
Emergency Telecommunications		OCHA/UNICEF/WFP
Health		WHO
Logistics		WFP
Nutrition		UNICEF
Protection	IDPs from conflict Disasters/civilians affected by conflict (other than IDPs) ⁹	UNHCR UNHCR
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene		UNICEF

When do clusters work well for NGOs?

Research carried out for the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project in 2009 found that NGOs were more likely to participate in clusters if they were strategically managed, action-oriented and inclusive of all participants' views.*

Clusters work well for NGOs:

- when they **share information** effectively
- when technical full-time **coordinators** are dedicated to and understand the purpose of coordination
- where coordination and **information tools** are utilised (e.g. sector guidelines, technical standards and minimum standards, 3Ws, meeting agendas, minutes)
- when **partnership** and needs of cluster members are understood
- where **NGOs** are effective in their co-chair role and help to inform common strategies

- where **linkages to national and sub-national government are strong** (where possible and appropriate) and local-level coordination assists capacity-building of local government
- where clusters are **flexible, facilitative** in structure and **adaptable** to local context (for example, taking disaster risk reduction approaches into account)
- where clusters are felt to be **accountable** to affected populations
- where clusters are seen to **improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian response**
- when clusters address **cross-cutting themes/issues**, e.g. including the environment, gender and HIV and AIDS.

* *Synthesis Report: Review of the engagement of NGOs with the humanitarian reform process*, see www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org

The global clusters are responsible for the development, consolidation and dissemination of standards, training and capacity-building for response throughout the system (global and local level). They are also responsible for establishing and maintaining surge capacity and material stockpiles. At an operational level in a particular crisis, the global cluster lead may play a support function to the respective clusters at country level in relation to strengthening emergency preparedness and resource mobilisation for sectoral response. It also ensures complementarity of efforts through enhanced partnerships between cluster members. Global clusters ensure complementarity of efforts through enhanced partnerships between cluster members and provide guidance on available tools and services.¹⁰

Cluster coordinators are accountable to their respective cluster lead agencies, which in turn are accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator for the effective coordination and leadership of their cluster.

Accountability to crisis-affected populations was missing from the original humanitarian reform agenda. With a growing realisation of the need to redress power imbalances between humanitarian organisations and the communities they serve,

there is now a greater commitment to prioritising the following: improved information sharing; increased participation of populations in such aspects as needs assessments, planning and monitoring; and the development of feedback and complaints mechanisms.

Inter-cluster coordination

While clusters aim to provide more coherence in the coordination of sectoral responses, inter-cluster coordination seeks to ensure greater coordination across a multi-sectoral response. At an operational level, inter-cluster coordination aims to ensure that there is a clearly-articulated cross-sectoral humanitarian response plan, that resources are appropriately prioritised across clusters, that cross-cutting issues (such as age, gender, HIV and the environment) and multi-sectoral thematic areas are appropriately and consistently addressed, and that gaps and duplications are avoided.

Effective inter-cluster coordination is critical in ensuring that cross-sectoral activities (such as needs assessments) are well coordinated, that resource mobilisation and advocacy strategies are consistent across all clusters, and that coherent

⁸ See <http://oneresponse.info/Coordination/ClusterApproach/Pages/Global%20Cluster%20Leads.aspx>. Global Food Security Cluster is likely to be created in 2010.

⁹ "UNHCR is the lead of the global Protection Cluster. However, at the country level in disaster situations or in complex emergencies without significant displacement, the three core protection-mandated agencies (*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* UNHCR, *UN Children's Fund* UNICEF and *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights* OHCHR) will consult closely and, under the overall leadership of the HC/RC, agree which of the three will assume the role of Lead for protection." *Ibid* see footnote 8

¹⁰ See the Synthesis Report of the Cluster Evaluation Phase 2 for discussion on current and recommended cluster responsibilities: <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-products-common&tempid=99>

and comprehensive transition and exit strategies for clusters are commonly agreed.

An operational level inter-cluster coordination forum is usually established, chaired by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Head of Office or his/her designate. It brings together the Cluster Coordinators as representatives of their clusters and focal points for cross-cutting issues. Membership criteria of this forum which includes the participation of NGOs in their capacity as cluster co-leads, should be agreed at country level. The forum takes guidance on strategic and policy issues from the HCT and feeds back broad operational priorities and concerns to the HCT. At all times, inter-cluster coordination should be guided by and should promote the Principles of Partnership and humanitarian principles.

Humanitarian Country Teams

Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) are described as 'the centre-piece of the new humanitarian coordination architecture established by humanitarian reform.'¹¹ They bring together organisations that undertake humanitarian action in-country and that commit to participate in coordination arrangements, including UN agencies, the IOM and NGO representatives at both national and international level.¹² Chaired and led by the HC, the objective of HCTs is to ensure principled, timely, effective and efficient humanitarian action that contributes to recovery. The responsibilities of HCTs include:

- Agreeing on common strategic issues, including developing common planning frameworks for the Common Humanitarian Action Plans (CHAPs) and activating resource mobilisation mechanisms such as the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP), Flash Appeal and Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) applications¹³

- Providing guidance to cluster lead agencies
- Agreeing common policies related to humanitarian action in-country
- Promoting adherence by humanitarian organisations to the Principles of Partnership, humanitarian principles and IASC guidelines.¹⁴

Guidance for HCTs endorsed by the IASC Working Group in November 2009 notes that HCTs are 'ultimately accountable to populations in need' and urges the design and implementation of mechanisms to achieve this accountability.¹⁵

Because the size of HCTs is limited to allow for effective decision-making, IASC guidance notes that the Humanitarian Coordinator is also responsible for convening a separate inclusive forum to ensure periodic interaction with the wider humanitarian community in-country.

Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP)

The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) was set up in July 2006, in response to the humanitarian reform, by 40 heads of UN agencies, IOM, the World Bank, NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement to bring humanitarian actors together on a more equal footing. The aim was to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action, and to deepen partnership working between the various actors, as partnership had not initially been part of the reform process.¹⁶ The GHP addresses issues of how humanitarian actors work together. The five **Principles of Partnership** (Equality, Transparency, Results-oriented approach, Responsibility and Complementarity), adopted by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007, should underpin humanitarian action and when applied in practice can enhance the effectiveness of coordination mechanisms.

Cluster Approach Implementation by Country¹⁷ (As of 31 March 2010)



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June 2010

Cover photo: Norwegian Refugee Council. Returning family in Eastern Afghanistan.

¹¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee: Guidance for Humanitarian Country Teams, endorsed by the 75th IASC Working Group, November 2009.

See <http://onerresponse.info/Coordination/ClusterApproach/publicdocuments/Forms/DispForm.aspx?ID=48>

¹² As per the IASC HCT Guidance Note (2010), HCTs should only include operationally relevant organisations (both UN and non-UN) and should *not* strive to be all-inclusive, as this would prevent the forum from engaging in effective, strategic decision-making. "While the ICRC is genuinely committed to developing efficient operational complementarity and to coordinating with other humanitarian organisations, both at the headquarters level and in the field, including with UNCT, on the basis of their resources and capacities to assist affected populations, it participates in coordination mechanisms at the country level (IASC in-country teams, Humanitarian Country Teams, etc.) as a Standing Invitee, in accordance with its status in inter-agency coordination mechanisms at the global level."

¹³ For further information, see *Basic Information Leaflet Series: Financing Mechanisms* – available at www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org

¹⁴ For further information, see *Basic Information Leaflet Series: Principles of Partnership* – available at www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org

¹⁵ See footnote 11 above.

¹⁶ For further information on the GHP, see www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org

¹⁷ Map sourced from <http://onerresponse.info/Coordination/ClusterApproach/Pages/Fieldlevelimplementation.aspx>