

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence the humanitarian system



PARTICIPATION OF NGOs IN CLUSTER CO-LEADERSHIP AT COUNTRY LEVEL: A BRIEFING NOTE FOR THE MONTREUX DONORS' RETREAT MARCH 2010

Introduction

This briefing note is based on a forthcoming review of the experiences of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in cluster co-leadership and coordination in the four focus countries of the *NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project*¹: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zimbabwe.

The participation of NGOs in country level clusters as co-coordinators² has evolved since the cluster approach was established in 2005. At that time, the only formal NGO role was co-leadership of the Education Cluster. The 2007 Phase 1 Cluster Evaluation found that NGO participation in the clusters had been weak, particularly from national NGOs. As a result, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Management Response Matrix proposed that NGOs should better define the parameters of their engagement, including whether they could take on co-leadership roles at either the global or country level.³

At a global level, several international NGOs (INGOs) have played a role in the coordination or leadership of global clusters. For example, Save the Children serves as co-lead of the Education Cluster, which also includes sharing the responsibility as Provider of Last Resort (POLR)⁴. Several other NGOs have seconded staff to assist in the establishment of global clusters or have offered general technical advice. Some INGOs have developed a rapid-response deployment capacity to support country and emergency-specific cluster performance .

At the country level, international NGOs are actively engaged in cluster leadership, management and coordination, acting as co-leads, co-chairs, co-coordinators, co-facilitators, and/or participating in the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) of a cluster, where such a group exists.⁵ Direct participation in the management of clusters at the country level has evolved differently according to the context. There are a number of factors that come into play, including: the commitment of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and individual cluster coordinators in-country that encourage NGOs to assume a co-coordination role; the capacity and willingness of NGOs to take on such a role; and the availability of funding for such a role.

¹ For more information on the *NGO and Humanitarian Reform Project* and the full review paper, please see www.icva.ch/ngosandhumanitarianreform.html.

² Throughout this paper we refer to NGOs as cluster co-coordinators. However, this term should be read to include other forms of involvement in cluster leadership and management (co-leadership, co-convening, co-chairing, co-facilitating, etc).

³ Stoddard et al. *Cluster Approach Evaluation*, 2007. Excerpt from the Management Response Matrix (Annex 1): "The NGO Consortia participating as standing invitees in the IASC to request their members to address the following recommendation: Set and clearly communicate parameters for the level of engagement (time and resources) that can be expected in various clusters, including willingness and ability to take on a leading role at the global or country level, and to second staff as cluster coordinators when called upon."

⁴ See IASC Operational Guidance on the Concept of "Provider of Last Resort" www.humanitarianreform.org

⁵ The SAGs are not a regular or widespread practice in cluster management.

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project undertook a review of the experiences of NGOs in cluster leadership and management. The review findings précised below indicate that, where it works, NGO co-ordination can bring a number of benefits, both in improving the functioning of the cluster and in broadening NGO engagement. However, the results have also been mixed, given the varying nature of both motives for, and enabling factors of, NGO co-ordination.

Benefits of NGO co-ordination

- NGOs have greater confidence that cluster strategic priorities and structures are better suited to NGO needs and capacities (DRC).
- NGO co-coordinators can contribute to improved lesson learning and responsive management, for example, improving on cluster procedures (DRC).
- Where a government participates in clusters, as in Ethiopia, the involvement of an NGO increases the human resources available to build the capacity of government counterparts to participate effectively.
- Where the UN cannot immediately assume its cluster responsibility, NGOs can ‘fill the gap’, particularly at the sub-national level (Zimbabwe).
- Only rarely have national NGOs been called upon to assist in cluster leadership and management, for example, the Food and Agriculture, Health and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Clusters in Afghanistan at the sub-national level. However, where national NGOs have been appointed as deputy leads or co-chairs it has often been with very good results.
- NGO co-leadership can lead to improved transparency and needs-based decision making in the allocation of pooled funding (CHF, CERF, etc) (DRC).

Enabling factors for NGO co-ordination

NGO co-ordination is more likely to happen and to be effective where:

- The role is prioritised by the HC, OCHA or the cluster lead agency (Afghanistan, DRC).
- Pooled funding mechanisms or donors explicitly allocate funding for NGO co-coordinators.
- The NGO takes the time to consider the implications of the responsibility sufficiently, informed by knowledge of the parameters of the role, sufficient training of staff and time to factor this training into internal planning processes.
- The NGO is able to designate a staff member to the role, and alleviates him/her of agency-specific responsibilities so that the work of neither the agency nor the cluster suffers (DRC, Zimbabwe).

Factors to consider in NGO cluster co-ordination

- Where national governments take a strong leadership role in sectoral task forces or clusters, there may be confusion as to the role of NGO co-coordinators. However, the UN can address this confusion by explaining the value added through the NGO’s role, and by facilitating greater collaboration and ultimately partnership between government, UN agencies and NGOs (Ethiopia).
- NGOs have to consider their own capacity carefully, as well as availability of funding or the risk of high staff turnover when assuming a co-ordination role.
- Although national NGO counterparts have various strengths, many national NGOs lack familiarity and/or experience with the cluster approach. Without awareness-raising or training, national NGOs have found it difficult to have a significant impact, particularly as co-chairs, on cluster performance (Afghanistan).
- Without funding or significant staff numbers (which is often linked to funding), only a large (usually) INGO can volunteer to co-ordinate (Zimbabwe).

- NGOs rarely have Terms of Reference (ToRs) defining their roles and responsibilities as co-coordinators (Afghanistan, Zimbabwe). This contributes to confusion and may hinder NGOs in assuming a more strategic co-coordination role (Afghanistan).
- In the absence of a ToR or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that delineates the period of time the role will last, and the extent of the role's responsibilities, NGOs may be reluctant to take on the role of cluster coordination.
- Many NGO co-coordinators, particularly local NGOs or smaller INGOs, are not ready or able to take on the responsibility of becoming POLR. Therefore, they will be unwilling to put themselves forward as co-coordinators.

Ways forward

Little systematic work has been done, either internally by INGOs that have undertaken the cluster co-ordination role or by the UN, to document the experiences and benefits of having NGO cluster co-coordinators. However, the nearly completed Cluster Evaluation Phase 2 should contribute to further understanding of the factors that are conducive for effective functioning of clusters and potentially the value added role of NGOs.

There is a need for further examination of lessons learned in the following areas:

- **ToRs/MoUs:** what are the basic elements that should be included in ToRs or MoUs for cluster co-coordinators? Can generic ToRs or MoUs be developed so that they can be adapted to various situations?
- **Assessing the costs and benefits of NGO involvement in leadership and management of clusters:** while there are some observable benefits when NGOs take on a role in leadership or management of clusters, more work needs to be done to ascertain how far cluster co-ordination can actually contribute to longer-term capacity for the country; to more effective engagement of NGOs in clusters (particularly national civil society); and to better results for affected communities. In addition, more work needs to be done on the actual costs (both in terms of human resources and financially) associated with such roles for NGOs and whether funding would be made available by donors. More systematic follow up needs to be done by both NGOs that have taken on cluster co-ordination roles, as well as by cluster leads, to ensure that the pros and cons of such roles is documented and lessons are learned.
- **Alternative roles for NGOs:** before moving towards a more widespread adoption of the NGO cluster co-ordination role, consideration should be given to alternative forms of support and oversight of clusters. For example, SAGs or cluster steering groups have been formed in some country level clusters.⁶ These typically consist of a small number of cluster participants, who meet on a regular basis to review and support the work of the cluster lead and identify how to fill any gaps in leadership functions as they arise. Such mechanisms, or alternative ones, might be more appropriate considering the limited resources of NGOs and might offer a more cost-effective means of using global funds for humanitarian action. A more systematic review of how these mechanisms work could provide valuable suggestions regarding ways forward.

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project will be looking at how to contribute to these suggested ways forward in the coming months.

⁶ These alternative mechanisms have not been detailed in the four-country review done by the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project.