



Collaboration is vital.
© Rikka Tupaz / IOM, South Sudan.

Divided we fall

Coordination and collaboration in humanitarian shelter and settlements response

Tom Bamforth

*Global Focal Point for Shelter Coordination,
International Federation of Red Cross and
Red Crescent Societies*

Miguel Urquia

*Senior Emergency Shelter Coordinator /
Deputy Coordinator, Global Shelter Cluster,
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*

Coordinated humanitarian action is essential for an effective and contextually relevant emergency response. It involves managing a daunting array of humanitarian needs, agencies, contexts and sectoral difficulties that are beyond any one response agency, government or donor. A coordinated response ensures a common humanitarian vision, guarantees appropriate technical standards, prioritizes people in need, and makes the most effective use of limited humanitarian resources. Although systems for international response coordination are relatively simple in theory, in practice they must accommodate diverse human experiences and coping strategies after disasters and conflicts, as well as a multiplicity of local and international agencies, with differing agendas, mandates and capacities.

In this context, forms of coordinated action can include communication (where agencies simply keep each other informed about

programmes), alignment (where agencies seek to ensure common standards and approaches, reduce gaps and avoid duplication) and collaboration (where agencies formalize ways to work together, with agreed objectives and common outcomes). In reality, humanitarian shelter coordination usually focuses on communication and alignment of agency approaches, strategy, technical guidance and monitoring.¹

Important coordination tasks in an emergency include defining an effective strategy and response plan; analyzing the context and vulnerabilities; developing humanitarian prioritization principles; identifying the different needs and contributions to humanitarian sheltering of women and men, boys and girls; and reinforcing a settlements approach to recovery (see Chapter 13) by ensuring access to water, sanitation, hygiene, livelihoods and markets.

While taking into consideration individual and household needs separately, emergency response in all contexts must occur at scale and with speed, and where possible underpin longer-term housing security.

In coordinating emergency response in the shelter and settlements sector, much is dependent on context. In both conflict and naturally triggered disasters, humanitarian coordination systems must adapt to the primary role of government, promoting principled humanitarian action alongside, and sometimes in spite of, the government and governance of countries in crisis. Emergency shelter and settlements interventions ideally help catalyze longer-term recovery for urban and rural populations. While coordinated action is the only way of meeting complex needs, its success is dependent on funding, agency capacity and participation, and access and influence at both community and policy-making levels.

Three main mechanisms are used to coordinate shelter and settlement responses: the cluster approach for major naturally triggered disasters and conflict responses related to internal displacement; the refugee coordination model for emergencies involving refugees or mixed situations with a majority of refugees;² and sectors or working groups, which are typically informal, country-level arrangements that support preparedness activities or coordinate response where the cluster system has not been formally activated. While the three coordination mechanisms share some characteristics and face similar obstacles, this chapter will focus on the cluster approach.

Origins of the shelter cluster

The current cluster approach is the product of a series of revisions of the international humanitarian system following the Sudan conflict (2004), Asian tsunami (2004), Pakistan floods (2010–12) and Haiti earthquake (2010). Perceived failures in humanitarian leadership and coordination following the Darfur crisis in

particular led to the 2005 Humanitarian Reform Agenda (followed by the 2010 Transformative Agenda), focusing on humanitarian financing, coordination of humanitarian response, and leadership to ensure ‘adequate capacity and predictable leadership in all sectors’.³ A major structural change to the humanitarian system was the introduction of ‘clusters’ as a formal mechanism to replace the previously ad hoc and voluntarist sectoral approach, which had proved deficient in managing larger-scale responses.

With clusters, each humanitarian response sector has a designated lead agency, which strengthens global preparedness for the sector and provides specialized, predictable and accountable leadership during an emergency response. Working with national authorities, the cluster lead agencies are responsible for setting humanitarian response policy and strategy in their sector, developing and disseminating technical standards, analyzing response needs and gaps, fundraising and advocacy.⁴

Globally, the shelter cluster is co-led by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR provides coordination leadership in conflict settings, and IFRC convenes the cluster in naturally triggered disasters. While country-level clusters are usually led by the global cluster leads, the recommendation on which clusters need to be activated and which organization is best placed to lead them is made in-country by the humanitarian country team (HCT). In theory this is an inclusive forum, comprising UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross Red Crescent movement, chaired by the humanitarian coordinator or the UN resident coordinator. In principle it supports local ownership and leadership and the relevance of the international humanitarian system. In practice, however, HCTs are often UN-centric and do not substantially include or represent the wider in-country humanitarian sector – or local leadership. The emergency relief coordinator, acting on the advice of the HCT and in consultation

with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee of the UN (IASC),⁵ makes the final decision about which clusters require activation and which organization will lead them in-country.

Under pressure: the shelter cluster in the wider humanitarian system

In principle, the cluster system can adapt to both small- and large-scale disasters. In practice, the levels of funding and participation constrain the role and scope of coordinated emergency response. Level 3 (L3) activation – a full activation of the three-tiered international humanitarian system in response to a major emergency – has brought additional resources to ‘forgotten emergencies’, such as the conflict in the Central African Republic, which lack visibility and publicity, or have otherwise fallen off the radar of global humanitarian agencies, governments and donors.⁶ However, smaller emergencies often struggle for funds, as donors give highest priority to system-wide L3 activation crises, such as in Syria or South Sudan. Further, concerns have been raised by national governments that the L3 response can itself be overwhelming and detract from the ability, and visibility, of national authorities to manage the response.

In response to changing perceptions, resources and government capacities, clusters are becoming more adaptable in identifying appropriate levels of support to governments, and in providing longer-term support. Nepal, Bangladesh and the Pacific region, for example, have clusters that operate during non-disaster periods to build capacity and prepare for crises. These standing clusters have emerged in countries and regions that have suffered repeated disasters, and are, in some cases, the continuation of clusters activated for a major response (such as the Nepal Shelter Cluster). Standing clusters have, inter alia, trained NGOs and government partners in emergency response coordination and management, prepared for cyclone and flooding seasons, and developed contingency

plans, which have increasingly focused on urban emergency response and management.

The World Humanitarian Summit 2016 identified localization as a vital reform necessary for the humanitarian system.⁷ This is an increasingly important component of effective coordination but is not straightforward. Some agencies – especially those able to raise their own revenue, such as church groups and the relief arms of political parties – may not see the importance of formal cooperation with humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Similarly, as the Nepal Private Sector Pilot Study showed, local private sector organizations are largely uncoordinated and, in some countries where there may be a perception of weak or corrupt government, are often reluctant to work too closely with national authorities or with formal coordination mechanisms that exist to support government line ministries.⁸ Finally, both local and international humanitarian response may reach only a minority of those in need. Further work needs to be done to understand and support self-recovery, especially in cities. In some estimates, self-recovery accounts for around 80 per cent of housing recovery, but in practice a focus on this by shelter agencies often clashes with demands from government for direct construction programmes.⁹

Coordination in the shelter and settlements sector is framed by the difficulties facing the wider humanitarian system, which is under strain owing to the scale of emergencies in the Middle East and Africa, and relative ‘donor fatigue’. Such difficulties are exacerbated in protracted conflicts such as those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the Central African Republic. In addition, the humanitarian system does not cooperate adequately with local organizations and new humanitarian donor nations (such as China, South Korea or the Gulf States), who are not yet fully integrated into a common international system for response coordination, funding and reconstruction.¹⁰ Furthermore, political problems that go well beyond the remit of the humanitarian system are at the root of most major

humanitarian crises. This is particularly true for conflicts, including the current L3 emergencies: Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Democratic Republic of the Congo. Finally, whatever its shortcomings, the humanitarian system bears enormous expectations; it must respond to conflict, naturally triggered disasters, weak governance and long-term development needs. These expectations are not matched by the tools, resources or mandates of humanitarian agencies themselves, who rarely have influence beyond the provision of immediate, life-saving needs. The humanitarian system is under strain and, like those who fund it, has demonstrated relatively little ability to adapt to a rapidly urbanizing world characterized by long-term complex crises, urbanization and climate change.

In this context, it may be misleading to speak of a 'humanitarian system' at all. Instead, as a recent study points out, on a 'spectrum of coordination' ranging from organizations that act with complete autonomy to those that work together so closely that they 'merge', most situate themselves in 'communication' and 'alignment'.¹¹ That is, organizations involved in response talk with each other periodically and share information where necessary, but remain otherwise independent. Rather than speaking of a humanitarian 'system' it may, in fact, be more accurate to refer to looser forms of association that are interconnected but not managed, such as 'network' or 'ecosystem', to understand the totality of response actors, including NGOs, the private sector, local civil society, governments, military, remittances, and the affected populations themselves. An emergent lesson here is that coordinators and coordination systems must build relationships that extend beyond traditional NGOs, in both preparedness and response phases. In this wider context, the importance and benefits of coordinated shelter response lie in targeting the most vulnerable people for assistance, advocating on shelter and settlements needs and gaps, and influencing the response and recovery policies of donors, governments and long-term

development institutions (such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Japan International Cooperation Agency). Opportunities for such collaboration are beginning to open up as some of these agencies become involved at earlier stages of the response, especially in naturally triggered disasters, and as processes such as the World Bank–managed post-disaster needs assessment (PDNA) often draw on information gathered by clusters during the emergency phase. This aspect of the humanitarian–development nexus, however, is ad hoc and personal, and could be supported and institutionalized through more active donor coordination systems or by the UN Resident Coordinator's Office.

Involving government, local civil society and the private sector

While coordination and collaboration in the shelter sector often focus on managing the demands of international response agencies, they could take greater account of the substantial resources and additional complexity that government, local civil society and private sector organizations often bring to response coordination.

Government

Whatever its capacity, the host government at both national and local levels remains the sovereign actor in a crisis-affected country and is responsible for the welfare of its citizens in an emergency. Shelter coordination consequently occurs alongside the appropriate government agency. In the absence of a 'Ministry of Shelter', however, the immediate task of any Cluster Shelter coordinator is to find which government ministry best represents the shelter sector. Unlike, for example, the Health Cluster (led by the World Health Organization), which usually works with a clear counterpart in the Ministry of Health, the absence of a stable, recognized and designated counterpart for the Shelter Cluster can fragment the disaster response. In most cases, shelter coordination by government is divided

between different departments: social welfare, urban development, local government, trade and finance, infrastructure and public works, and the environment.

While there are some advantages in this fragmentation – it may facilitate advocacy and strategic decision making across a range of departments – the absence of a coherent government lead can frustrate overall coordination efforts and undermine advocacy. Unique to the Shelter Cluster, the lack of a clear government partner also brings difficulties in handing over longer-term recovery planning and coordination roles once the international system moves on or runs out of funds. The transition of shelter coordination back to government at the end of an emergency is one of the most difficult coordination responsibilities. Identifying, working with and ultimately handing over to the best-placed government body is an essential task of the cluster, as shelter and settlements leadership is intended to join national and international response actors.

A growing trend, especially in rising middle-income countries in East Asia, is not to call for international assistance at all. Instead, countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia and Indonesia, which have all experienced major international aid interventions, increasingly rely on national authorities, regional bodies such as the Association for South East Asian Nations, and bilateral assistance.¹² This growing self-reliance and, in places, distrust of the international system mean a substantially different role for coordination: one that focuses on informal local coordination arrangements and that may not be able to mobilize international donors to the same degree without a formal request for international assistance.

Local NGOs, civil society and the private sector

In practice, in a large-scale emergency, local civil society organizations, unlike their international counterparts, will be largely unfamiliar with

international coordination mechanisms and funding appeals processes. There may be language and cultural barriers to participation, as the system favours highly specialized English speakers who are confident in their technical skills and ability to represent their organizations in public. International humanitarian actors who are trained to be quick and assertive frequently lack the ability to provide time, space and support to representatives from local organizations to make meaningful contributions, despite the fact that local organizations frequently have greater access to affected people, respond first, remain active in the long term, and have in-depth understanding of local culture, languages and politics. Equally, for all their local embeddedness, national organizations can often lack the institutional capacity to respond at scale.¹³ This systemic bias is reflected in global funding. Although no figures exist for the shelter and settlements sector specifically, more generally a mere 1.6 per cent of global humanitarian funding goes to local actors. Major donors favour international agencies, due to perceptions of accountability, value for money, impartiality and ability to operate at scale.¹⁴ An exception is where local organizations form partnerships with international ones, benefiting from greater resources and expertise than would otherwise be the case. An important role for shelter coordination, in light of the move towards localization, is to act as a broker to help local and international organizations collaborate.

Just as NGOs are extremely diverse in their size, capacity and areas of specialization, so are private sector actors. They range from high-profile corporate social philanthropists, to local chambers of commerce or shopkeepers providing relief items through market mechanisms. The reach and influence of private sector response can, however, be remarkable. In Nepal, more than 500 private sector organizations responded to the 2015 earthquake.¹⁵ Crucial questions for coordination and collaboration with private sector organizations concern the quality and consistency of relief items provided, and the interaction of the international

aid system with markets as humanitarian response increasingly comes to depend on cash-transfer programming. To ensure effective coordination and promote good humanitarian practice with private sector organizations, more work needs to be done on preparedness. The Nepal Shelter Cluster Private Sector Coordination Pilot Study found that private sector organizations needed to be part of contingency planning, that specific communications channels needed to be developed before a disaster, and that private sector organizations were often multi-sectoral in approach and did not necessarily follow sector-based coordination systems. The study found that the private sector has the scope, capacity and willingness to work with the humanitarian sector, but new means of communication will need to be developed, and greater emphasis on collaboration in preparedness will be needed by clusters and the wider humanitarian system.¹⁶

Clusters in transition

The duration of clusters – which were conceived as a short-term emergency coordination system – has increased significantly since they were introduced in 2005. Conflicts have become more protracted, while after naturally triggered disasters clusters now work well into the recovery phase. Recurrent disasters and growing awareness of climate change now mean that some countries have permanent stand-by clusters to prepare for disasters and develop capacity (as mentioned earlier). As the response phase ends, a major question for coordination is how to transfer the cluster coordination work from an international agency. Ideally, this transition occurs when government is able and willing to take on practical leadership of the cluster.

However, in the frequent absence of a designated housing counterpart in government, and with often complex recovery policy questions remaining, transition and exit of the Shelter Cluster are one of the most difficult coordination phases, and are dependent on context,

resourcing and the capacity of government and development agencies to take on longer-term coordination responsibilities. This distinguishes shelter coordination clearly from other sectors, where lead agencies return to pre-crisis levels of activity, in a specified government ministry.

Transition and exit options are highly dependent on context. In smaller emergencies, the cluster might exit once national authorities are in a position to manage continuing response and recovery efforts without assistance. In larger crises, however, recovery coordination might be handed over to another organization with a longer-term in-country presence and housing expertise. Alternatively, as in Nepal, a separate organization can be established to coordinate longer-term recovery. The Nepal Earthquake Housing Recovery and Reconstruction Platform lasted well beyond the emergency phase for which the Shelter Cluster had been activated.

Conclusion

Effective systems for coordination and collaboration underpin the shelter sector and its relations with governments. The Shelter Cluster and other coordination mechanisms provide ways to develop common strategies, approaches, analysis and advocacy platforms. Shelter coordination faces the same hurdles as the wider humanitarian system, which is itself at a point of transition. Both must cope with protracted crises, the effects of climate change, and accelerating urbanization, as well as explore opportunities such as the growing use of cash, localization and private-sector involvement. Coordination partners, and others striving to respond effectively to human emergencies, will need to adapt their systems, structures and agencies, so that the coordination of shelter and settlements can meet these new needs and help communities around the globe cope with crises and upheavals.

- 1 P Knox Clarke and L Campbell (2015) *Exploring Coordination in Humanitarian Clusters*. ALNAP Study. Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, London.
<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/study-coordination-humanitarian-clusters-alnap-2015.pdf>.
- 2 More information on the Refugee Coordination Model can be found at United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2018) *Coordinating Assistance*. www.unhcr.org/coordinating-assistance.html.
- 3 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2018) *IASC Transformative Agenda*.
<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-transformative-agenda>.
- 4 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2015) *Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level*. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reference_module_for_cluster_coordination_at_country_level_july_2015.pdf.
- 5 The Inter-Agency Standing Committee of the United Nations, established under the UN General Assembly (Resolution 46/182), is the peak body for coordinating humanitarian action. It consists of humanitarian UN agencies, the International Red Cross Red Crescent movement, and global NGO coordination bodies.
- 6 Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (2015) *The State of the Humanitarian System: 2015 Edition*. ALNAP Study. ALNAP, and Overseas Development Institute, London, p. 75.
www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/alnap-sohs-2015-web.pdf.
- 7 World Humanitarian Summit (2018) *Agenda for Humanity*. www.agendaforhumanity.org.
- 8 Shelter Cluster Nepal (2015) *Private Sector Coordination Pilot Study*.
www.sheltercluster.org/sites/default/files/docs/sc_nepal_private_sector_coordination_pilot_study_report_final.pdf.
- 9 B Flinn (2013) *Changing Approaches to Post-Disaster Shelter*. Humanitarian Practice Network.
<https://odihpn.org/magazine/changing-approaches-to-post-disaster-shelter/>.
- 10 M Hirono (2018) *Exploring the Links Between Chinese Foreign Policy and Humanitarian Action*. Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper. Overseas Development Institute, London.
www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12015.pdf.
- 11 Knox Clarke and Campbell (2015), pp. 16–18.
- 12 R Barber (2016) 'Humanitarian assistance following the 2011 floods in Thailand and Cambodia: The importance of formal invitations and informal relationships'. In PT Daly and RM Feener (eds) *Rebuilding Asia Following Natural Disasters: Approaches to Reconstruction in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, p. 315.
- 13 E Benson and C Jaquet (2014) 'Faith-based humanitarianism in Northern Myanmar'. *Forced Migration Review*, pp. 48–50.
www.fmreview.org/faith/benson-jaquet.html.
- 14 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2015). 'Follow the money: Are funding patterns keeping pace with trends and evidence?' In *World Disasters Report: Focus on Local Actors, the Key to Humanitarian Effectiveness*. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva. Chapter 4.
<http://ifrc-media.org/interactive/1248>.
- 15 Shelter Cluster Nepal (2015), p. 26.
- 16 Ibid, p. 2.