Cluster Approach Evaluation 2
Synthesis Report

Julia Steets, François Grünewald, Andrea Binder, Véronique de Geoffroy,
Domitille Kauffmann, Susanna Krüger, Claudia Meier and Bonaventure Sokpoh

GROUPE
u.r.d.
urgence
réhabilitation
développement

GPPi
global public policy institute

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Acknowledgments

The evaluation team would like to thank all those who have provided their support and input to this evaluation. We are particularly grateful for the excellent and constructive guidance and support from the evaluation management team of Claude Hilfiker and Andreas Schütz, the constructive inputs and feedback from the evaluation steering group, the wisdom and advice of the members of our advisory group, the great support from OCHA country offices, and the willingness of all those many individuals in the six case study countries and at the global level to provide their time and insights through interviews, their participation in the survey or group discussions and their feedback on earlier versions of the synthesis and country reports. Our thoughts are particularly with those who supported our evaluation mission to Haiti, many of whom were deeply affected by the earthquake of January 12, 2010.

Illustration 1
Places visited for the evaluation
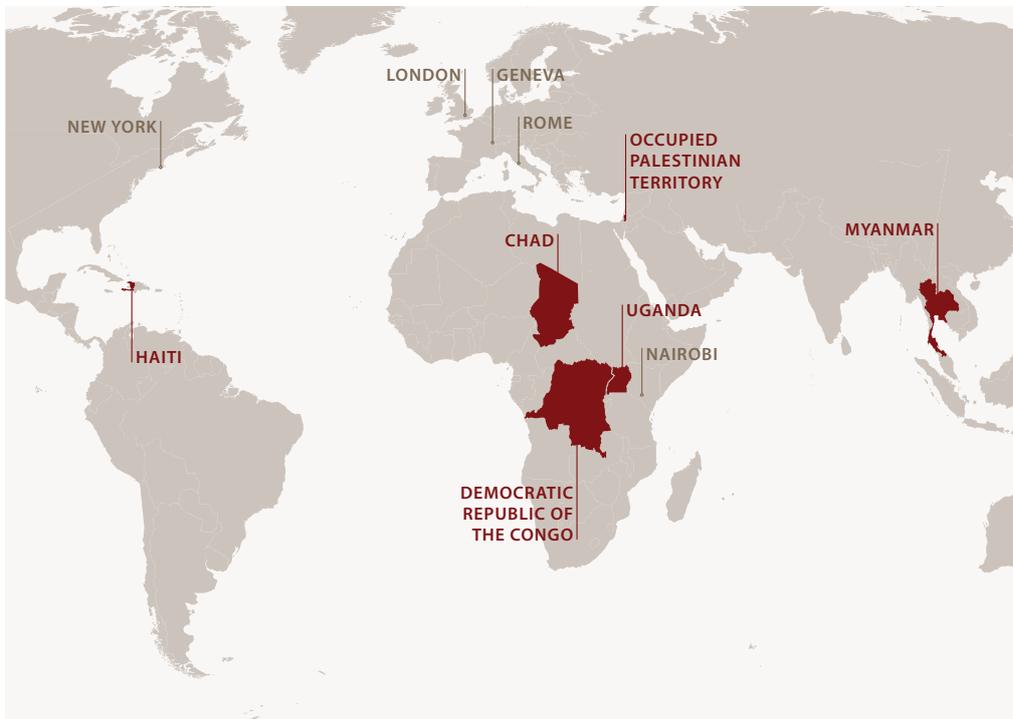
Executive Summary

The cluster approach was introduced as part of humanitarian reform in 2005. It seeks to make humanitarian assistance more effective by introducing a system of sectoral coordination with designated lead organizations. Since 2005, much energy, time and money have been invested in the implementation of the cluster approach at global and country levels. The shape and functioning of the cluster approach on the ground has continuously evolved in this time as humanitarian actors have adapted the initial design to their needs and constraints.

This evaluation assesses the operational effectiveness and main outcomes of the cluster approach to date and aims to develop recommendations on how it can be further improved. It draws most strongly on six country studies,[1] but also on global and regional interviews, a survey among humanitarian actors, as well as literature and document analysis.

Developing and implementing the cluster approach has required a significant financial investment. Over $ 57 million has been raised through global appeals, global cluster lead organizations have contributed from their own budgets and annual coordination costs in each country with active clusters are several million dollars. This corresponds to less than 1% of total humanitarian aid.[2] The country studies revealed that the cluster approach to date has contributed to the following main *improvements and benefits* in the context of humanitarian reform:[3]

- *Coverage* of humanitarian needs has improved in some thematic areas. Depending on the country context, this includes gender-based violence, child protection, disability, water and sanitation and nutrition.

- *Gaps* in humanitarian assistance are better identified and *duplications* are reduced. As a result, humanitarian actors can better target their assistance and resources are used more efficiently.

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1 Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Myanmar, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and Uganda

2 The global appeals covered the period between April 2006 and March 2008. They focused on capacity building at the global level, especially the training of staff, the creation of stockpiles and the development of standards, guidelines, systems and tools. The global appeals, as well as funds raised for coordination at country level, amount to less than 1% of total aid (an average of 0.74% for the global appeals and around 0.6% for example in the cases of the oPt and DRC).

3 The cluster approach was not only designed to improve coordination, but also to strengthen global preparedness. Since the question of preparedness was covered in phase 1 of the evaluation, it was explicitly not part of the terms of reference for this evaluation. As a result, the service clusters of logistic and emergency telecommunications, which focus strongly on global preparedness and were often no longer active in the case study countries, received less attention in this evaluation than the response clusters.

- The ability of humanitarian actors to *learn* is increased through peer review mechanisms and enhanced technical and sometimes normative discussions.

- Organizations assuming coordination tasks exert more *predictable leadership*. There is greater clarity concerning leadership roles and more, better trained staff is dedicated to coordination. As a result, almost all humanitarian actors agree that coordination has improved through the introduction of the cluster approach. National and local actors, as well as newly arriving international actors, thus have a clearer point of contact.

- *Partnership* between UN agencies and other international humanitarian actors has become stronger, especially as NGOs increasingly assume co-lead or co-facilitator roles. This improves information sharing, strengthens humanitarian advocacy power and enhances coherence, as cluster members adopt common positions concerning specific operational questions and support the development and dissemination of local standards.

- The introduction of the cluster approach strengthens the *humanitarian identity* of cluster members, thus mobilizing actors and resources for humanitarian assistance.

- Clusters improve the planning and quality of proposals for major *funding appeals*, such as the Common Appeals Process (CAP) or Flash Appeals.

The cluster approach is also faced with important challenges. In its current state of implementation, it has the following main shortcomings and faces the following main challenges:

- In their current implementation, clusters largely exclude national and local actors and often fail to link with, build on, or support existing coordination and response mechanisms. Among other reasons, this is due to insufficient analysis of local structures and capacities before cluster implementation, as well as a lack of clear transition and exit criteria and strategies. As a result, the introduction of clusters has in several cases weakened *national and local ownership and capacities*. Furthermore, most response clusters do not use or promote *participatory approaches*.

- The cluster approach can threaten *humanitarian principles*. This is possible in situations where cluster members are financially dependent on clusters or their lead organizations and where cluster lead organizations are part of or maintain close relationships to integrated missions, peacekeeping forces or actors involved in conflicts.

- Poor cluster *management and facilitation* in many cases prevents clusters from reaching their full potential. Thus, clusters are often process- rather than action oriented. Many coordinators are not trained well enough in facilitation techniques, lack a common, basic handbook or toolkit and, especially at the sub-national level, often do not have sufficient time dedicated to coordination.

- Inter-cluster coordination is ineffective in most cases and there is little integration of cross-cutting issues. *Multidimensional and cross-cutting issues* are neglected in most assessments and are not sufficiently taken into account in the humanitarian response in the case study countries.

The introduction of the cluster approach is an organizational change process that requires up-front investments and generates benefits over time. Five years into that process and based on largely qualitative evidence collected in six countries, the evaluation team concludes that these investments are beginning to pay off as the benefits generated by the cluster approach to date already slightly outweigh its costs and shortcomings. It is also important to note that the direct financial costs of coordination are borne by donors and agencies, whereas the costs resulting from the absence of coordination would be imposed on affected countries and populations. Moreover, there is hardly any fundamental or principled opposition to the cluster approach among humanitarian actors anymore. Provided that improvements are made, the approach has significant potential for further improving humanitarian response and thereby enhancing the well-being of affected populations. This potential justifies further efforts and investments to improve and strengthen the implementation of the cluster approach.

The following table outlines six main recommendations that are critical for enabling the cluster approach to unfold its potential by building on its strengths and mitigating and addressing shortcomings, challenges and potential risks. The table also shows which findings gave rise to those recommendations.

Table 1
Overview of findings and recommendations

Findings related to recommendations

Coordination and links between the cluster approach and existing coordination and response mechanisms is weak.

§§ 44, 45, 48

This can weaken capacity, duplicate structures, undermine the sustainability of achievements and weaken ownership.

§§ 44, 45, 106, 107

The cluster approach can facilitate links between international humanitarian actors and national and local authorities and civil society. Yet, in the examined case studies, the international focus of the cluster approach has undermined national ownership.

§ 107

Recommendations

Recommendation 1
Identify existing preparedness, response and coordination mechanisms and capacities and link with/support/complement them where appropriate

1 Conduct an analysis of the context, as well as existing coordination and response mechanisms and capacities before implementing clusters and ensure appropriate links with rapid response mechanisms.

2 Identify appropriate partners in national and local authorities.

3 Strengthen cooperation and coordination between clusters, national actors and development actors at every stage from preparedness to response and the transition to development.

Leadership responsibilities have not been sufficiently mainstreamed in cluster lead organizations.

§ 24

OCHA plays a critical role for making clusters work at country level by providing the framework and infrastructure for coordination.

§§ 36, 37, 38

Interactions with and accountability to Humanitarian Coordinators remain minimal in most cases.

§§ 51, 65

Only in DRC were the roles and responsibilities of different coordination mechanisms clearly defined .

§ 42

Co-lead arrangements with NGOs have positive effects on partnership.

§ 61

Clusters often lack exit strategies or develop them too late.

§ 108

Many clusters are not managed effectively enough and cluster coordinators often have not enough time, insufficient coordination skills or are too junior.

§§ 23, 33

There is no general basic and practical guidance for cluster coordinators and critical general elements of guidance are missing.

§§ 27, 31

Information sharing and management have improved, but are still problematic.

§§ 71, 72

**Recommendation 2
Strengthen cluster management and implementation modalities**

1 Continue to strengthen the "mainstreaming" of cluster lead responsibilities.

2 Clarify, recognize and strengthen the role of OCHA.

3 Strengthen the role of Humanitarian Coordinators in the cluster approach.

4 Define clear roles and responsibilities for different meetings and fora and ensure that clusters are adequately represented at the strategic level, at both the global and the country levels.

5 Reinforce the role of international NGOs in clusters.

6 Clarify the criteria, processes and terminology for cluster implementation, transition and exit.

7 Provide cluster coordinators with a standard, basic cluster management handbook or tool kit.

8 Ensure that cluster coordinators, especially at sub-national level, have sufficient time and adequate skills to fulfill their responsibilities.

9 Improve information sharing and management.

Currently, clusters often remain too abstract and not relevant enough to activities on the ground.

§ 33

Clusters rarely use or promote participatory approaches.

§§ 101, 102

The participation of national and local NGOs in clusters remains marginal.

§§ 110, 111

In several cases, clusters were involved in adapting global standards to local circumstances or in developing local standards.

§§ 84, 85

Clusters facilitate the sharing of assessment results, but do not use their potential to improve assessment methods through learning.

§§ 74, 75, 76, 77

The integration of cross-cutting issues is minimal.

§§ 96, 97

Inter-cluster coordination is in most cases weak.

§§ 39, 40

Clusters enhance the ability of the humanitarian system to learn and have the potential to further increase this effect.

§§ 68, 122, 123

Recommendation 3
Enhance the focus on strengthening the quality of humanitarian response in cluster operations and activities

1 Ensure that clusters have a clear operational focus.

2 As a contribution to creating more accountability to affected populations, strengthen the role of clusters in using and promoting participatory approaches.

3 Facilitate the participation of national and local NGOs and strengthen their capacities.

4 Further strengthen the role of clusters in defining, adapting, using and promoting relevant standards.

5 Engage clusters in coordinating and improving needs assessments.

6 Ensure integration of cross-cutting issues in assessments, policies, tools, training, guidance, strategic planning and operations.

7 Improve mechanisms to deal with multidisciplinary issues and inter-cluster gaps.

8 Further strengthen learning.

Many resources were invested into the cluster approach at global level, but global cluster support at country level is perceived as low.

§§ 128 (table), 29

The use of short-term global coordinators creates turn-over problems and often a lack of relevant knowledge about the local context.

§§ 30, 31

Many clusters have dedicated coordinators at national, but not at sub-national level, where the main coordination tasks arise.

§ 23

Centralized decision-making can slow the pace of response.

§ 116

Recommendation 4
Increase the focus of resources for the cluster approach on the local level

1 Strengthen training on facilitation, coordination and cross-cutting issues on the national and sub-national levels, minimize turnover of coordinators and improve handover processes.

2 Provide dedicated part-time or full-time coordination capacities for sub-national clusters.

3 Create reporting links between global and national clusters and ensure that national clusters support sub-national ones.

4 Define decision-making procedures between national and sub-national clusters so that operational decisions can be decentralized.

The relationship between clusters and funding mechanisms is highly ambivalent.

§§ 53, 54, 55

Important benefits can arise from the involvement of clusters in planning processes, including invigorated clusters, their greater ability to implement strategies, better quality of funding proposals through peer review, better situation analysis, better prioritization of projects and fewer duplications.

§§ 52, 53, 54, 55, 56

The involvement can be counterproductive when clusters are involved in allocation decisions because that can create conflicts between cluster members, lead to "horse-trading" in proposal selection and create conflicts of interest for cluster lead organizations.

§ 53

Cluster leads rarely act as real "providers of last resort", yet this role would be important enable clusters to fill gaps.

§§ 94, 133

Recommendation 5
Provide sufficient funding and define adequate ways for linking clusters and financing mechanisms

1 Provide adequate funding for coordination activities.

2 Ensure adequate funding for cluster strategies and activities "sponsored" by clusters, by:

• Strengthening the link between clusters and pooled funds.

• Creating strategic links between clusters and bilateral donors.

• Strengthening links to and the inclusion of non-traditional donors.

3 Improve the governance of funding mechanisms to limit conflicts of interest and ensure direct access of international and local NGOs to funding and enhance the transparency of financial transactions linked to clusters.

4 Further define and clarify what "provider of last resort" entails and strengthen this role.

When cluster members are financially dependent on cluster lead organizations and clusters maintain close relationships to integrated missions, peacekeeping forces or actors involved in a conflict, clusters can threaten the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality. This can contribute to an erosion of humanitarian space and make strictly humanitarian actors reluctant to engage in clusters.

§ 120

Clusters as coordination(+) platforms are not in a position to address deeply rooted political and institutional questions.

§§ 83, 134, 137

Yet, these questions present an obstacle to the effective functioning of clusters, for example in the case of conflicts between status-based and needs-based approaches to providing assistance to IDPs and other affected groups, or governance and institutional issues in the Emergency Telecommunications and Food Security/Food/Agriculture Clusters.

§§ 83, 135, 136

The prioritization of the cluster function of Early Recovery has led to a neglect of efforts to mainstream early recovery and cluster activities have raised mandate questions.

§§ 99, 134

Food Security Clusters at country level showed positive results.

§ 135

Humanitarian actors are concerned about the name of the 'oneresponse' website.

§ 121

Recommendation 6
Resolve outstanding policy issues at the global level:
i) links to peacekeeping and political missions and humanitarian space,
ii) institutional issues

1 Develop concrete, context-sensitive guidelines on the linkages between clusters and peacekeeping and political missions.

2 Strengthen decisions of Humanitarian Country Teams relating to humanitarian space through an increased involvement of NGOs.

3 Focus the activities of global clusters on identifying and addressing conflicts and systemic incoherence.

4 Ensure that the Early Recovery Cluster at country and sub-national level focuses on and enhances its advisory function.

5 Finalize discussions and create a global Food Security Cluster.

6 Resolve conflicts relating to the governance of the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster.

7 Rename the 'oneresponse' website.

To ensure adequate follow-up to these recommendations, the newly created IASC Task Team on Coordination should take the following steps:

- Identify a coordinator for each of the six thematic recommendations.

- Develop a management response plan for all six recommendations, drawing on special input from the six thematic coordinators. The management response plan should indicate which of the recommendations are accepted, amended or rejected and assign responsibilities and timeframes for implementation.

- Make the thematic coordinators responsible for following up with different addressees of 'their' recommendation to track progress in implementation and, if necessary, adapt the management response plan. Jointly plan activities and communication with individual agencies among the coordinators.

- Through the thematic coordinators, develop learning formats, allowing agencies to benefit from each other's implementation experiences.