

OCHA on Message: The Cluster Approach

What is the Cluster Approach?

The foundations of the current international humanitarian coordination system were set by General Assembly resolution 46/182 in December 1991. Almost 15 years later, in 2005, a major reform of humanitarian coordination, known as the Humanitarian Reform Agenda, introduced a number of new elements to enhance predictability, accountability and partnership. The Cluster Approach was one of these new elements.

Clusters are groups of humanitarian organizations, both UN and non-UN, in each of the main sectors of humanitarian action, e.g. water, health and logistics. They are designated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and have clear responsibilities for coordination. The Resident Coordinator and/or Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) manage a humanitarian response through the clusters.

All clusters have focal points, known as Cluster

Lead Agencies, which operate at the global and country level. Globally, Cluster Leads are responsible for strengthening system-wide preparedness and coordinating technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies in their respective sector. In specific countries, Cluster Leads serve as the main contact for a government and the RC/HC. They ensure that humanitarian activities are coordinated and make a difference to people in need. They also act as a provider of last resort¹ in their respective sector.

The decisions on how many clusters are required in-country and which organization is best placed to lead each of them are based on the specific needs identified in the response plan. The goal is to clarify the division of labour among all organizations, better defining the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian organizations within the sectors.

What is OCHA's role?

At the global level, OCHA works closely with Cluster Lead Agencies and NGOs to develop policies, coordinate inter-cluster issues, disseminate operational

guidance and organize field support.

At the country level, OCHA provides direct support to the HC and HCT, and facilitates inter-cluster

Implementing the Cluster Approach

The Cluster Approach was applied for the first time following the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. Nine clusters were established within 24 hours of the earthquake. Independent reports found that the cluster system gave the Government of Pakistan a clearer and more predictable interface with the humanitarian community. Clusters also provided their respective members with an opportunity for information sharing and coordination.

Since 2005, the Cluster Approach has made significant progress. It is now used in more than 30 countries to deliver humanitarian assistance. Two IASC-sanctioned evaluations have taken place. The first, finalized in 2007, focused on implementation. The second, conducted in 2010, focused on the outcome of the cluster approach in improving humanitarian assistance. On balance, the cluster approach has brought tangible results, such as better coverage of gaps and reduction in duplication. However, key recommendations from the evaluations include the need to support and build sustainable in-country coordination systems and to focus on collective results.

¹. The 'provider of last resort' represents a commitment of cluster leads to do their utmost to ensure an adequate and appropriate response. It is contingent on local context, namely access, security, and availability of funding. Where there are critical gaps in humanitarian response, it is the responsibility of cluster leads to call on all relevant humanitarian partners to address these. If this fails, then the cluster lead as 'provider of last resort' may need to commit itself to filling the gap. Cluster leads are responsible for ensuring that wherever there are significant gaps in the humanitarian response they continue advocacy efforts and explain the constraints to stakeholders.

“The cluster system of coordination has become an essential aspect of international humanitarian coordination...”

- Mark Bartolini,
Director USAID/OFDA
Donor and IASC
Directors meeting,
Montreux,
27 September 2011

coordination, ensuring that the humanitarian system functions efficiently. It is responsible for advising the HC and HCT on activating the cluster approach and on the appropriate coordination structures.

OCHA also has a key role in ensuring coordination between clusters at all phases of the response, including needs assessment, joint planning, implementation, coordinating resource mobilization, and monitoring

and evaluation. It is responsible for establishing senior-level inter-cluster coordination forums to discuss and endorse strategic and operational decisions related to the humanitarian response.

What does OCHA say?

1. Strengthened partnerships are key to an effective response.

2. Humanitarian coordination aims to ensure a coherent and complementary approach among responders, identifying ways to work better together

3. Coordination structures should, in all cases, be determined by the local context, and agreed by the HC and the HCT. Cluster membership criteria should be based on operational relevance.

4. Clusters provide a clear point of contact and accountability for providing humanitarian assistance and partnerships between international humanitarian actors, national and local authorities, and civil society.

5. Inter-cluster coordination happens at multiple levels, and at all phases of the planning cycle. It includes strategic coordination by heads of agencies, and operational coordination among programme managers.

To find out more

All key policy and guidance documents are available at: <http://humanitarianresponse.info/>

- IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response (Nov 2006), includes Generic Terms of Reference for Sector/Cluster Leads at the Country Level
- IASC Operational Guidance: Generic Terms of Reference for Cluster Coordinators at the Country Level (Sept 2010)
- IASC Guidance for Humanitarian Country Teams (Nov 2009)
- Joint Letter from Cluster Lead Agencies to their Directors/Representatives at Country Level (Nov 2009)
- Handbook for RCs and HCs on Emergency Preparedness and Response (IASC 2010)
- Cluster Approach Evaluations (2007) and (2010)

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