

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE  
64<sup>TH</sup> WORKING GROUP MEETING

**Questions and Answers on the Cluster Approach  
Implementation Issues<sup>1</sup>**

**(Reference Document)**

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Hosted by FAO

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## **I What is a Cluster?**

A cluster is a group comprising organizations and other stakeholders, with a designated lead, working in an area of humanitarian response in which gaps in response have been identified. These areas include some traditional relief and assistance sectors (water and sanitation, nutrition, health, emergency shelter); service provision (emergency telecommunications, logistics) and cross-cutting issues (camp coordination, early recovery and protection). Clusters are organised at both field and global level.

## **II What is the Cluster Approach?**

It is a renewed effort to fill identified gaps in humanitarian response, to ensure accountability with strengthened leadership and clearly defined roles and responsibilities and, to bolster coordination and synergy of efforts. As an approach it is intended to improve the predictability, efficiency and effectiveness of emergency preparedness and humanitarian response capacity. Although it goes much wider than internal displacement, the cluster approach has the additional benefit of addressing repeated General Assembly requests for more effective, accountable and predictable inter-agency response to the protection and assistance needs of the internally displaced. In other words, the approach represents a substantial strengthening of the 'collaborative response' with the benefit of predictable and accountable leads in 'gap' sectors/areas.

The cluster approach is being developed at two levels. At the **global level**, the aim is to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies by designating Global Cluster Leads who are responsible for ensuring predictable and effective inter-agency responses within the particular sectors or areas of activity concerned. The added value of the approach at the global level includes:

- Better surge capacity and standby rosters (e.g. PROCAP)
- Consistent access to appropriately trained technical expertise

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<sup>1</sup> This background document prepared by OCHA provides answers to 15 of the major questions received in most part from donors

- Enhanced material stockpiles
- Increased engagement of all relevant humanitarian partners.

At the **country level**, the aim is to strengthen the coordination framework and response capacity by mobilizing clusters of agencies, Non-UN organizations and NGOs to respond in particular sectors or areas of activity, each cluster having a clearly designated lead, as agreed by the Humanitarian Coordinator and the Country Team. It is also intended to ensure that the involvement of national and local institutions is strengthened; available resources are fully utilized and, humanitarian action is **well coordinated and does no harm**. The added value of the approach at the field level includes:

- Predictable leadership in key gap sectors/areas of response
- Enhanced partnerships between UN-RC-NGOs on the ground
- Improved strategic field-level coordination and prioritisation
- Measurable accountability from the operational partners to the HCs for different aspects of the humanitarian response.

### III What are the functions of the Cluster Leads?

At the **global level**, cluster leads are responsible for: a) up-to-date assessments of the overall needs for human, financial, and institutional capacity; b) reviews of currently available capacities and means for their utilization; c) links with other clusters, including preparedness measures and long-term planning, standards, best practice, advocacy, and resource mobilization; d) taking action to ensure that required capacities and mechanisms exist, including rosters for surge capacity; and e) training and system development at the local, national, regional, and international levels.

Cluster leads at the **country level** are responsible for: a) predictable action within the cluster for analysis of needs, addressing priorities, and identifying gaps in the cluster area; b) securing and following-up on commitments from the cluster to contribute to responding to needs and filling the gaps; c) ensure that activities within a cluster are carried out and act as the provider of last resort; d) sustaining mechanisms through which the cluster as a whole assesses its performance.

At all levels, cluster leads have mutual obligations to interact with each other, and are accountable to the Emergency Relief Coordinator globally and to Humanitarian Coordinators at the country level (ref. Paragraph 16, 12 September Outcome statement of IASC Principals).

### IV What is meant by the concept of “provider of last resort”?

The IASC Principals on 12 September 2005 meeting decided “the cluster lead will be accountable for ensuring preparedness and response that is both adequate and predictable. It will work with relevant actors and agencies with expertise and capacities in that area. At the field level, the clusters provide support to the Humanitarian Coordinators who are able to call upon cluster leads for support as required. The cluster lead will not carry out all of the activities itself, but will be responsible for ensuring that these activities are carried out and will act as the **provider of last resort.**”

The 63<sup>rd</sup> IASC Working Group required clarification on the financial implications for cluster leads being expected to be the “provider of last resort” and further agreed that a lead agency is in principle expected to be the “provider of last resort”. Nevertheless, the IASC WG reiterated that this concept would require further examination for cross-cutting clusters such as early recovery and camp management, which cover complex and cross-sectoral processes as opposed to a single sector of humanitarian action.

Furthermore, similar concern was raised by one of the Principals on 12 December noting that given the complex and cross-cutting nature of Protection cluster, it was difficult to identify the agency that was responsible as “provider of last resort”. The suggestion was made that in case there was no consensus among agencies on the appropriate arrangement for “provider of last resort”, the arrangement should be determined by the HC and eventually by the ERC, which was similar to the procedure of the collaborative approach.

## V Will the cluster approach be applied to all sectors?

No. The IASC Principals in September 2005 agreed to establish **cluster leads** at the global level in the nine areas of humanitarian activity where there is a need to reinforce the current response capacity, as follows:

Clusters	Cluster Lead
<p><b>Service provision:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Logistics:</li> <li>▪ Emergency Telecommunications:</li> </ul>	<p>WFP</p> <p>OCHA (Process Owner), UNICEF (Common Data Services) WFP (Common Security Telecommunications Services)</p>
<p><b>Relief and assistance to beneficiaries:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Camp Coordination and Camp Management</li> <li>▪ Emergency Shelter:</li> </ul>	<p>UNHCR (for conflict-generated IDPs), IOM (for natural disaster)</p> <p>UNHCR (for conflict-generated IDPs), IFRC (Convener for Emergency Shelter Cluster in natural disasters)<sup>2</sup>UNICEF</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Health:</li> <li>▪ Nutrition:</li> <li>▪ Water, Sanitation and Hygiene:</li> </ul>	<p>WHO</p> <p>UNICEF</p> <p>UNICEF</p>
<p><b>Cross cutting issues:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Early Recovery:</li> <li>▪ Protection:</li> </ul>	<p>UNDP</p> <p>UNHCR (for conflict-generated IDPs),</p> <p>UNHCR, UNICEF and OHCHR (for natural disasters)<sup>3</sup></p>

<sup>2</sup> Taking into account the IFRC’s obligations and independence, IFRC will act as convener.

Sectors and areas of activity where no significant gaps had been noted are not included among the nine clusters at global level. These are: food, led by WFP, refugees, led by UNHCR, education, led by UNICEF, and agriculture, led by FAO.

At the country level, the need for flexibility is apparent. What has clearly emerged from the Pakistan experience and from other inter-agency missions to DRC, Uganda and Liberia is that in addition to gap filling, country teams view the cluster approach as important towards strengthening coordination by clarifying lines of accountability to the HC and defining how sector groups should work with partners. In DRC, the Country Team decided that all sectors would be managed using the cluster approach.

In principle, the cluster leadership approach could be applied to all areas, but this will need to be tailored to specific country circumstances. Country level clusters may not necessarily replicate the global cluster arrangements. In all instances, the key principle is ensuring that country-level clusters address all identified key gaps in humanitarian response and that critical gaps are not neglected simply because they are not part of any global cluster.

## **VI Where will the Cluster approach be implemented?**

The IASC Principals agreed that at the country level the cluster approach will initially be implemented in the **DRC, Liberia and Uganda**, based on the recommendations and feedback from the inter-agency missions to those countries. Additional existing emergencies might be considered at the next meeting of the IASC Principals in April 2006.

As agreed by the IASC Principals in December 2005, the cluster approach will also be applied to all **new major disasters with a phased and flexible implementation**. An evaluation of the impact of the cluster approach in Pakistan is being undertaken to identify how to address the application of this approach in sudden onset disasters.

The ERC has stated that contingency plans for potential emergencies in 2006 should also be done according to the cluster approach. For ongoing emergencies (such as Sudan, Somalia etc.), the IASC has agreed that if current arrangements are working well, then there is no need to change, however the IASC Country Teams on the ground may choose to implement the cluster leadership approach where they feel it will add value to the humanitarian response. In addition, where arrangements are not considered to be working well, and critical response gaps remain, country teams may also decide to phase-in the cluster approach. Eventually the approach should be rolled out across all existing emergencies.

## **VII What is the relationship in terms of roles and accountability between Cluster leads (chairs) at global and country level?**

- What is the global cluster's responsibility when inadequate action is taken at country level?
- Does global cluster lead have an oversight role or simply advisory function?

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<sup>3</sup> At the country level, UNHCR, UNICEF and OHCHR have agreed, under the overall leadership of the HC/RC, assisted by OCHA, to consult closely and agree which of the three would assume the role of Cluster Lead for protection in natural disasters, either on the basis of existing arrangements or after conducting a common assessment to determine the required operational capacity. This option would enable the HC/RC to rely on one protection agency to lead the response for the cluster.

- How should the global Clusters communicate with the field (e.g. on offers of support for specific aspects of implementation of cluster approach in the three first phase countries): via the HC or via the Representative of the cluster lead in the field?

The Outcome Statement of IASC Principals (September 2005) identified that the cluster leads have mutual obligations, and are accountable to humanitarian co-ordinators (at country level), and globally to the ERC - in his or her capacity as chair of the IASC (paragraph 16, 12 September Outcome Statement of IASC Principals).

The global cluster leads remain accountable for ensuring, in consultation with the HC, that adequate field-based cluster arrangements are in place. However, it will depend on the clusters and the situation in the context where the clusters will be applied.

It would be important to ensure a good communication flow between global and field clusters, to make sure that all involved parties (cluster, cluster lead representative, HC) are aware of the decisions and coordination systems.

Cluster lead accountabilities can be summarised as follows:

- Globally, cluster leads are accountable to the ERC for ensuring predictable capacity is established and maintained.
- At the field level, cluster leads – in addition to normal agency responsibilities – are accountable to HCs for ensuring effective assessments and responses in their respective clusters, and for acting as providers of last resort.
- HCs – with the support of OCHA – are responsible for ensuring effectiveness of humanitarian response and are accountable to the ERC.

## **VIII Who can participate in the cluster working groups?**

The Outcome Statement from the 12 September 2005 IASC Principals' meeting stated that the decision to apply the cluster approach should "enable more effective participation of all actors, while respecting their individual mandates and programme priorities," and that "The cluster lead will work with relevant actors and agencies with expertise in that area." The importance of strengthening the outreach and inclusion of partners, in particular NGOs, was again reiterated at the 63<sup>rd</sup> IASC Working Group meeting, although the need to develop criteria was also expressed. It was agreed that the focus should remain on operational capacity on the ground.

The role that governments of affected countries should play in the implementation of CWGs at the field level has also been highlighted, since this area has received little attention so far. At the 25 October 2005 IASC inter-cluster meeting, the ERC "underlined the importance of engaging host governments, with due consideration being given to identifying appropriate strategies as per the type of emergency".

The Principals at the December 12 meeting agreed that host governments could be included in the cluster arrangements at the field level at the discretion of the Humanitarian Coordinators and the Country Teams. In addition, they agreed that bilateral organizations could be invited to participate in specific discussions at the global level, should this be deemed appropriate by the respective clusters Chair.

## **IX What are the criteria for activation of the cluster approach?**

The Activation process for clusters has been defined in broad terms, by the IASC Principals. As stated in the Conclusions of the 12 September IASC Principals meeting, the Principals “agreed that **priority implementation would be in countries and situations where the present humanitarian response capacity is insufficient.**”

There are three possible elements that could activate the cluster approach:

- (a) In response to dramatic events or disasters;
- (b) To fill major gaps in humanitarian needs, identified by the agencies and by the hosting Government; and
- (c) By initiative and guidance of the concerned Humanitarian Coordinators/Resident Coordinators (HC/RCs) in consultation with the Country Team members.

In principle, the cluster approach can be activated at the request of any IASC agency (UN as well as non UN) in the field or in the HQs.<sup>4</sup>

## **X What are the strategies and criteria for exit from the cluster approach?**

The exit strategies in humanitarian response would generally apply, though, this new approach calls for some detailed **inter-cluster discussions and joint planning at the start of the emergency phase.** At the end of the emergency phase, some clusters (e.g. emergency telecommunications), would need to be terminated. Other clusters (e.g. emergency shelter, nutrition, camp coordination, protection) would need to transit to the Early Recovery Phase, while others (e.g. health, education and WATSAN), would be phased into the recovery, reconstruction and longer-term development phases. The Early Recovery working group (ERWG) report recommends the establishment of links between the Early Recovery Hub including the ERWG and broader transition forum, such as International Recovery Platform and Conflict Platform.

As a matter of policy, strategies and procedures for phasing out and terminating different activities should be included into the work of all clusters. In all instances, there should be benchmarks with measurable indicators.

## **XI Who is going to monitor the progress made by the clusters?**

At the country level the Humanitarian Coordinator assisted by OCHA monitors progress in implementation of the overall humanitarian response ensuring predictable, efficient, complementary and effective action by all clusters. Progress in implementing the work of individual clusters remains a responsibility of the cluster leads that are accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator. The HCs are in turn, accountable to the ERC.

At the global level, the IASC working Group Chair monitors progress of the clusters and reports to the ERC who has oversight responsibility for the broader humanitarian response including the cluster approach. The IASC Principals will review progress in the phased implementation of the cluster approach after 2 years, as recommended in the outcome document.

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<sup>4</sup> From the IASC Cluster Working Group Meeting, 24 October 2005

The outcome statement recommended a review of the cluster working groups approach after two years. The issue of clusters could be put on the agenda of the IASC WG, at the request of agencies or upon request of the IASC WG.

## **XII Are there dedicated resources for setting up the global cluster system? Who is responsible for mobilizing resources for the global clusters?**

The 12 September 2005 Outcome Statement of IASC Principals (particularly, paragraph 11) clearly defines that one of the functions of the cluster lead at global level includes resource mobilisation. However, the intention is to ensure that there is a coherent fundraising strategy encompassing all clusters. OCHA is responsible for developing this resource mobilization strategy.

## **XIII How frequently and for how long should the Cluster Working Groups (at the global level) continue to meet?**

It is important to rationalize the number of meetings and information processes in the management of the cluster approach. It has been agreed at the IASC Principals meeting in December 2005 that effort should be made to reduce the number of meetings and streamline information processes. The effective use of cluster portal is being explored by the IASC Secretariat to reduce traffic of emails. Cluster Chairs are encouraged to maintain an optimum level of meetings. However, it is left to the discretion of the Cluster chairs in consultation with the cluster working group members to determine the frequency, types and duration of the cluster meetings.

## **XIV What is OCHA's role in supporting the cluster approach?**

Implementation of the cluster approach along with the other elements of the humanitarian reform process will require more sophisticated coordination among a wider range of partners. The demands for common systems and services, such as information management tools, advocacy and resource mobilisation will be greater. Thus, the reform provides OCHA with the opportunity to focus on its core competencies: coordination, information, advocacy and resource mobilisation, and policy development.

The reform reaffirms OCHA's role in the field as a Secretariat body in support of the Humanitarian Coordinator. The Humanitarian Coordinator has overall responsibility for coordinating the cluster approach at the country level. OCHA supports the Humanitarian Coordinator to ensure the broadest possible access to populations in need, provide a strategic basis for ensuring an effective response through identification of needs and gaps in the provision of assistance, and ensure the provision of core common services that reduce duplication and facilitate an effective response.

Additional OCHA tasks in support of the HC include, fostering the development of an inclusive IASC Country Team; fostering cross-cluster linkages and synergy; and ensuring cross-cutting issues such as protection, human rights, HIV/AIDS, gender are mainstreamed in the work of all clusters.

## **XV Relationship between cluster WGs and IASC Subsidiary Bodies**

The IASC Working Group recognizes and has repeatedly stressed the importance of synergies between the work of the IASC Subsidiary Bodies and of the Cluster Working Groups. Currently, there are 7 Subsidiary Bodies: (a) CAP (b) Preparedness and Contingency Planning, (c) Emergency Telecommunications, (d) Human Rights in Humanitarian Action, (e) Gender and Humanitarian Assistance, (e) Good Humanitarian Donorship (Contact Group), and (f) Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support in Emergency Settings. At the IASC Meeting of all chairpersons of IASC Subsidiary Bodies and Cluster Working Groups, it was agreed that the chairs of respective subsidiary bodies and cluster working groups would work closely to harmonize existing tools and component actions (early warning, contingency planning, needs assessment, training etc).

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