INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
PRINCIPALS MEETING

Background document n. 2

Initial OCHA Observations on Implementation of the Cluster Approach in the DRC, Liberia and Uganda

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I Impact of the Cluster Approach

In each of the countries reviewed, there was measurable progress in implementing the cluster leadership approach including increased clarity on agency roles and some new deployments of humanitarian staff in previously identified "gap" areas. In particular, the deployment of additional protection staff in all three countries (with support from PROCAP in two cases) has strengthened capacities of relevant agencies in places where previously there was little or no protection presence. Even though the number of newly deployed staff is still relatively small, this is a positive step.

Cluster leads in these countries however still face an enormous challenge to boost the overall humanitarian response capacity to meet needs. The recent donor missions to Liberia and Uganda were useful in raising awareness amongst both donors and agencies on the ground of how implementation of the cluster leadership approach can contribute to more effectively meeting these needs. In both countries, donors and agencies view the revision of the CAP as an opportunity to highlight how targeted financial support for cluster implementation can contribute to system-wide improvements in the response. In the DRC, all costs related to implementation of the cluster approach are already included in the 2006 Action Plan. It was emphasised by UN agencies and NGOs that cluster implementation cannot go forward without immediate financial support.

Below are some of the issues that have arisen to date in cluster implementation:

II Ensuring a Coherent Humanitarian Response

At the field level, it is clearly important to ensure an overall coherent approach under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator. In the three countries, there was some confusion over the distinction between "clusters" and "sectors", and whether the cluster approach is to be applied to all sectors that are represented in the Common Humanitarian Action Plan. The confusion stems largely from the fact that food, education, agriculture, and refugee responses are not considered "clusters" at the global level, since there are already clearly established capacities, policies and expertise for these.

For clarity, it was proposed that a 'sector' is a specific area of humanitarian activity, while a 'cluster' is a group of organisations and other stakeholders working together to address needs in one of these specific areas.

At the country level, the cluster leadership approach is intended to address gaps in areas where there was previously inadequate response, by strengthening existing sectoral coordination mechanisms and increasing capacity. In other words, it is intended to strengthen, rather than to replace, sectoral coordination.

In line with previous recommendations, the generic TORs for Cluster Leads should be finalized and rapidly disseminated and the main elements of the generic ToRs for Cluster Leads should be applicable to all agencies assuming a sectoral leadership role.

To ensure greater coherence, in each of the three countries, the implementation of the cluster approach has required some rationalization of existing inter-agency coordination mechanisms. It was underscored that the establishment of clusters should strengthen, rather than undermine, such mechanisms, and that government officials should participate in the clusters as appropriate. The Humanitarian Coordinator, with OCHA support, has a significant role to play in putting an effective mechanism in place—at both national and district level—ensuring that it is not overly cumbersome and bureaucratic.

III   The Cross-Cutting Clusters: Protection, Camp Coordination and Early Recovery

Protection, camp coordination and early recovery are cross-cutting and multi-sectoral areas of work. While at the global level the Protection, Camp Coordination and Early Recovery Cluster Working Groups have proven to be useful fora for discussing general policy issues, at the country level Cluster Leads are still considering how best to practically define the programmatic scope of work for these clusters.

At the country level, particularly in situations of transition from humanitarian emergencies to development, the linkages between the protection cluster and early recovery cluster are critical, especially in regards to rule of law, justice and property issues. In Uganda, concrete steps have been taken to ensure linkages between the two, such as shared offices and agreed strategies and methodologies. The Early Recovery Cluster needs to play a role in supporting the Humanitarian Coordinator in planning, preparing, and managing a phased transition of coordination arrangements from emergency to longer-term recovery and development. Strategies and procedures for phasing out or handing over activities should be included in the work of all clusters.

IV   Ensuring a More Inclusive Process

There is a persistent impression amongst some NGOs that recent IASC-endorsed humanitarian reform initiatives result from a largely UN-driven process which involved them peripherally, but which does not represent significant reform for all members of the humanitarian community. While there is a shared recognition that reform is needed, some NGOs at the field level do not yet understand what is new about the cluster approach and do not yet appear to feel a shared stake in the success of the humanitarian reform agenda.

The establishment of viable and substantive IASC Country Teams is considered key to more predictable NGO engagement on strategic and policy matters at the country level. More

consistent guidance is needed to define NGO membership on the IASC CT, and clarify the accountability of both UN and non-UN members to agreed IASC CT decisions.

Some of the planned NGO surveys provide a good opportunity to constructively examine how NGOs could participate in IASC Country Teams and coordination mechanisms in a more predictable and systematic manner. There is also a need for a joint (IASC) communications strategy to clarify the need for inclusiveness in the humanitarian reform process. The July 2006 planned consultation with NGOs and the preparatory sessions leading up to it are important opportunities to address these concerns.

V   Clarifying the Concept of "Provider of Last Resort"

The 'provider of last resort' concept is critical to the cluster leadership approach, and without it, the elements of predictability and accountability for an effective humanitarian response are lost. It should not, therefore, be negotiable. However, it is circumscribed by some basic constraints that affect any humanitarian action, such as funding, security and access. It will also need to be applied in somewhat different ways, depending on the type of cluster.

Regarding the funding constraint: if the Cluster Lead has been unable to mobilise partners to respond, has subsequently committed itself to address the gap, and funding is still not forthcoming, then the Cluster Lead can no longer be expected to act as the provider of last resort. However, the Cluster Lead should continue its advocacy efforts and should continue to work with the Humanitarian Coordinator and donors to mobilise the necessary resources.

Regarding access and security constraints: where the efforts of the Humanitarian Coordinator, the Country Team as a whole, and the Cluster Lead are unsuccessful in gaining access to a particular location, or where security constraints limit the action of all participants in the cluster, then the provider of last resort will not be expected to respond, but will be expected to continue advocacy efforts and to explain the constraints to stakeholders.

For cross-cutting, multi-sectoral issues such as Protection, Early Recovery and Camp Coordination, the concept of 'provider of last resort' needs to be applied in an appropriate and realistic manner. Clearly, one agency as Cluster Lead may not be held accountable for all aspects of the response in these areas.

VI   The Cluster Approach and Integrated Missions

In both DRC and Liberia there are large UN peacekeeping missions. Experience in these countries has shown that more consideration needs to be given to the linkages between Cluster Leads and particularly the various civilian departments in UN peacekeeping missions. In introducing the cluster approach in these countries, care needs to be taken to avoid duplicating or replacing existing mechanisms, but rather to focus on filling gaps and ensuring complementarity. It was felt that cluster accountability should not be lost through the integrated mission approach.

VII The Need for Continued Guidance

To ensure that the cluster approach is implemented in a well-managed, systematic and coherent manner it is important that we learn lessons from the experience of the initial roll-out in DRC, Liberia and Uganda as well as the Pakistan experience. Clear operational guidance for implementation at the country level needs to be provided by the IASC.

VIII Proposed Action by the IASC Principals

1. Take note of OCHA's observations and commit to continued support and guidance to country teams in further implementation of the cluster approach.

Prepared by: OCHA, March 2006