INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
PRINCIPALS MEETING

Background document n. 4

**Real-Time Evaluation of the
Application of the Cluster Approach in the South Asia Earthquake,
10th – 20th February 2006
(Executive Summary of the Final Draft)**

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I   Executive Summary

In the midst of active implementation of the response to the South Asia earthquake, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) real-time evaluation of the Cluster Approach offers a unique opportunity to derive immediate lessons, review overall effectiveness, and propose improvements for ongoing and future implementation of one of the most important reforms of the humanitarian system in the past thirty years.

It must be noted that regardless of any novel or traditional framework for the delivery of emergency relief, the massive seismic event that occurred on October 8 2006 created an exceptional humanitarian challenge.

Although the early performance of the Cluster Approach in Pakistan was uneven and sometimes problematic, the comments of the Country Team were generally positive and recognized its potential for an improved response. The Cluster Approach successfully provided a single and recognizable framework for coordination, collaboration, decision-making, and practical solutions in a chaotic operational environment.

There were, however, many challenges. One prominent finding of this evaluation was that there was insufficient guidance from agency headquarters about the approach and Terms of Reference and other relevant documentation were not initially available in the field. As a result, there was an inconsistent understanding of the Cluster Approach by the Pakistan Country Team.

Roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined and the majority of people interviewed were not fully aware of implications of the Cluster Approach, why it was developed, and how it affected accountability, predictability, and reliability. Few respondents could elaborate on the critical notion of "provider of last resort." For many practitioners in the field, the distinction between the Cluster Approach and the traditional sector-lead was elusive.

Several cluster staff agonized over the strain of separating cluster responsibilities from their agency mandated functions. It was felt that some clusters were driven as much by agency priorities as by cluster responsibilities. An identity shift away from "agency centricity" will be required for clusters to function properly.

Among the diverse community of institutions involved in the earthquake relief effort, participation by organizations in the cluster operation was inconsistent and ad hoc. It is clear that increased effort must be exerted to enlist NGOs, International Financial Institutions, other government offices, and donors to broaden the Cluster Approach beyond merely a UN exercise.

In the context of Pakistan, the government played a vital role in the Cluster Approach and readily adapted its relief structure to the framework. Those clusters that had designated government counterparts were considered to have performed well while the others struggled until a suitable government partner was identified. The overall success of the relief effort to the earthquake turned on the competence and adept performance of the Government of Pakistan and its Military institutions.

In general the clusters with a technical emphasis performed well and drew their competence from a wealth of institutionalised best practices and experience in emergency response. Other clusters, such as those covering the broad range of cross-cutting issues, had a formidable task of growth and evolution ahead of them. Gender, human rights and environmental issues appear to have "fallen between the cracks" in the cluster application in Pakistan; or at best have not gained prominence as they are mainstreamed in the application of organizations' assistance strategies.

Planning, information management, and gap identification were considered to be weak. Inter-cluster coordination was deficient as was the lack of a nexus between the field hubs and Islamabad. This fact diminished the potential of the Cluster Approach in this emergency.

The Cluster Approach offers the possibility of greater coherence in planning and cost estimation leading to reliable funding appeals. A potential conflict of interest was identified when the cluster leads were attracting resources on behalf of the cluster while simultaneously raising money for their own agency. Clusters leaders have to and should be free to do both.

Many respondents felt that an early start of recovery efforts was assigned low priority in the overall humanitarian response. Faced with the overwhelming demands to focus on life-saving interventions, development-sensitive programming and rehabilitation interventions were often treated as subordinate, delaying the start of recovery program interventions.

When conceiving the transition to recovery, many respondents assumed that the clusters will continue beyond the emergency phase in some yet-to-be-determined form. A strategy for the clusters in a post-emergency government-led structure was just beginning to develop.

As is true in every major relief effort, the personal attributes and dynamism of individual leaders are as significant as any structural enhancement that a new methodology can offer. Some staff lacked personal authority, leadership experience, and basic group facilitation skills required to manage clusters. This proved a significant hindrance to effective implementation of the cluster system.

It was made clear by respondents that in order for the Cluster Approach to succeed, the Country Team will need to facilitate an "enabling environment" with greater guidance and support by the IASC and the Headquarters of its member agencies.

It is too early to evaluate the impact of the application of the Cluster Approach which should be kept under review after about two years of experience in various countries.

Key Action 1: The IASC Working Group must incorporate the Cluster Approach in all IASC member's operations manuals, training materials, and partnership frameworks and ensure briefing and training is provided to their staff.

Key Action 2: The IASC Working Group must disseminate the recently defined roles and responsibilities among Cluster Leaders and Members, Heads of Agencies and Organizations, Country Teams, and Humanitarian Coordinators. The roles of the UN Common Services and their responsibilities for provision of services to cluster members should be specified. Furthermore, consideration should be given to reviewing country level coordination arrangements with a view to mitigate duplication and overlaps between existing coordination structures and coordination activities generated by the Cluster Approach.

Key Action 3: The IASC Working Group, along with Global Cluster Lead Agencies and OCHA, should develop Cluster Toolkits for policy guidance, joint assessment and planning formats, minimum standards and benchmarks, and other relevant tools and documentation to be made accessible through a common information system in support of the field-level application of the new approach. Practical guidelines on inter-cluster linkages and reporting mechanisms for government and national NGOs should be included.

Key Action 4: OCHA and the IASC Working Group should examine how to further develop OCHA's role to fully support the cluster system and refine a cross-cluster coordination framework that ensures representation by all IASC members.

Key Action 5: OCHA must re-define the role of the Humanitarian Information Center in relation to the cluster system and include strategies for standard-setting, information management, and data analysis to support strategic decision-making.

Key Action 6: The IASC Working Group must facilitate greater involvement by the international NGO representative organizations and enlist their participation in order to increase the predictability of the core cluster membership.

Key Action 7: The IASC Principals, along with the UN Development Group, must reinvigorate high-level efforts to coordinate and partner with International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and galvanize their support to the Cluster Approach.

Key Action 8: OCHA, in consultation with relevant IASC agencies, should explore the potential for the new CERF to support early deployment of dedicated Cluster Leads, Information Officers, administrative support, and provide cluster specific seed funding to ensure a capacitated response.

II   Additional Recommendations Addressed to the IASC Principals as per the Annex 4 of the Evaluation Report

1. The IASC Principals, together with the UN Development Group, must revitalize high-level efforts to coordinate with International Financial Institutions (IFIs), especially the World Bank and define the respective roles and responsibilities during the recovery period.

2. The IASC Principals should initiate a review of coordination arrangements at country level - taking into account existing management and coordination structures (e.g. IASC Country Team, Disaster Management Team) - aimed at reducing layers and avoiding duplication and overlapping of meetings, and thus increasing effectiveness of the Cluster Approach.