

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE  
63<sup>RD</sup> WORKING GROUP MEETING

**Emerging Issues Based on Experience of  
Implementing the Cluster Approach after the Recent  
Earthquake in South Asia**

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## **I Introduction**

Following the South Asia Earthquake of 8 October 2005 the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team (UNDAC), together with the Humanitarian Coordinator and the UN Country Team, decided to implement the heart of the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) recommendations – dividing coordination and response into clusters - as the framework for coordinating the emergency response in Pakistan.

Within the first 24 hours of the response a set of nine Clusters, modelled on the HRR recommendations were established in Islamabad. It became quite apparent within the first few hours that a tenth ‘education cluster’ was needed. As the emergency operation unfolded field cluster sites were established in each of the main UN field presences and dubbed ‘Humanitarian Hubs.’

Each Humanitarian Hub has since become the focus of operational coordination between the agencies and NGOs, as well as the government and the military. The clusters are now used as the key decision making tool by most participating agencies and organizations.

## **II The Results**

The cluster approach in Pakistan provided both a guide for the government to structure its own operations, and a clear and unambiguous single framework for coordination between the government/military and international actors. With this approach, coordination, information sharing and planning were enhanced with interaction with the military and government being greater than normally seen in an operation of this type.

The Pakistan Federal Relief Commission (FRC - the government agency charged with relief operations for the disaster) structured itself with mirror clusters ensuring and

eventual seamless framework for exchange of ideas, analysis and planning. Clearer information flow, joint analysis and decision making lead to smoother operations.

➤ **Concrete outcomes include:**

- a) Joint Strategic Planning Cell: A joint strategic planning cell made up of the key generals, the Humanitarian Coordinator or his representative, the cluster coordinator, key bilateral partners and experts, was established.
- b) Joint Logistics Cell: A joint logistics cell was formed to combine all logistics assets under a single tasking framework.
- c) Operation ‘Winter Race’: Operation ‘Winter Race’ was expanded from an ‘international organisations’ only operation, to include Pakistan military battalions, providing over 120 rebuild teams for the relief work.
- d) Joint Training: The training of military Rapid Response teams to deal with spontaneous camp settlements by UNHCR and UNICEF greatly increased the outreach capacity.
- e) Cluster Heads Mechanism: This mechanism allowed for strategic decision-making, such as prioritisation of relief items on cargo assets, greatly increasing the speed of delivery of aid.
- f) Rapid Response Teams: A joint military/WHO/MinHealth/Cluster member rapid response team was established to deal with the outbreaks of diseases.

### **III Challenges and Analysis**

#### ***3.1 Meeting Facilitation***

Although one may assume that a global lead agency may have the technical capacity, such as WFP in logistics, the field manifestation of the ‘lead agency’ concept requires that the person responsible for cluster functioning have coordination and meeting facilitation skills of a high standard. Without adequate skills in this area, the entire approach could fail.

In the initial 10 days a number of cluster focal points were either removed, or requested themselves to be removed from the focal point role as their skill level in meeting facilitation and coordination was insufficient, although technical expertise in their chosen area (e.g. logistics, health, watsan) was clearly high.

Furthermore as an emergency unfolds additional facilitators may be required. At the time of writing the emergency response in Pakistan had one headquarters element and five field locations - separated by vast distance – hence there are 60 cluster meetings taking place on a regular basis (10 clusters times six locations).

#### ***3.2 Sub/Field Clusters***

It was not initially anticipated that the cluster meetings held in Islamabad would need to be replicated in the field, although it became rapidly apparent this was required. Field

clusters were quickly established, enabling the Islamabad Clusters to become more strategic, whilst Field Clusters became more tactical.

Communications between clusters in the field and Islamabad has however been problematic. This is partly due to the lack of secretariat support and dedicated time spent on communications flow. This issue is still being addressed.

### ***3.3 Support Staff and Secretariat Services***

As the emergency unfolded in Pakistan the need for communication between field clusters became more and more important. This placed additional strain on operational staff taking on board the role of cluster coordination. In keeping with the HRR process it has been decided that agency cluster leads provide the necessary secretariat services to assist with their work. OCHA provides HAOs to facilitate and support the overall coordination structure.

### ***3.4 Decision-making and Accountability***

All activity is channelled through clusters, using them and the heads of cluster forum as decision making mechanisms for everything from cargo prioritisation to field office locations. The Flash Appeal was compiled by the clusters and cluster heads, for final approval by the UNCT. Cluster lead agencies are held accountable for the coordination and performance of the entire cluster.

### ***3.5 Humanitarian Hubs***

The creation of UN offices in the field as 'Humanitarian Hubs' rather than UN field offices increased the perception of humanitarian delivery. The co-location of UN Joint Services, from joint meeting spaces to field office locations for all agencies and NGOs greatly increased efficiency of the international system.

### ***3.6 Agency Profile and Fundraising***

Public information and reporting via the clusters reduces the profiles of individual agencies. Headquarters took some time in understanding this necessary reduction at the start of the emergency, and the corresponding lower profile in situation reports. While this could perhaps impact on individual agency fundraising, collective fundraising may however be enhanced.

### ***3.7 Cross-Cluster***

Heads of Agency with cluster responsibilities have had to report on cluster achievements and not just agency achievements, hence requiring agency heads as well as cluster focal points to have a clear 'cross cluster' view on the level of needs and delivery of assistance.

## **IV Lessons Learned**

1. In order for the clusters to be up and running quickly, global cluster leads should deploy dedicated meeting facilitators, perhaps as part of the UNDAC team, to ensure strong implementation at the outset of the emergency. As an emergency unfolds additional facilitators may be required as 'hub' cluster coordination takes place.
2. Field based replication of clusters is essential even though this multiplies the resource support required from agency leads.
3. The provision of suitable personnel to support the information gathering, dissemination and reporting role of the clusters (including minute taking and communication between clusters in multiple field locations) is essential.
4. A new cluster should be considered just for collecting and collating assessments as the cluster approach did not stop duplication of assessments, nor provide a suitable assessment analysis or gap recognition.
5. Agencies should determine at the global level which clusters they should be part of – not just the ones they lead – hence saving time in the field in determining who should be in which cluster.
6. Cluster leads / agency leads must be able to maintain a cross cluster view and report by cluster rather than by agency. Cross cluster relations must be strengthened in order to provide clear overview and identification of gaps.
7. Donors, government and any interested party should be permitted to join clusters. The private sector participated in selected clusters in Pakistan – particularly logistics – leading to several private sector secondments into agencies to augment staff capacity.
8. It is critical to get donor buy-in to the process and have them channel donations only to projects approved through the cluster process. Donors provide a key role in encouraging participation through conditionality in funding grants, and have also seen the value in funding support to secretariat services by lead agencies
9. Clear Terms of Reference for Clusters and Cluster leads are required. These should be widely disseminated so all players recognize responsibilities.

## **V Conclusion**

Although the cluster coordination role takes time and effort, it has unambiguously resulted in efficiency gains in the delivery of emergency relief aid to those in need in Pakistan. Given what is perhaps a unique level of good will with the host government, and a solid coordination framework provided by the clusters themselves, the level of cooperation between government, military and the humanitarian world has reached the level of not just information sharing, but joint analysis and strategic decision making – with all players involved.