

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA REFERENCE DOCUMENT

4. Cluster Coordination Reference Module

This series of reference documents has been produced by the IASC Working Group and serves as guidance on implementing the Transformative Agenda in Level 3 emergencies

13 April 2012

This Cluster Coordination Reference Module is about the basics of coordination in non-refugee situations,¹ as outlined in the Guidance Note on the Cluster Approach produced in 2006.² It is compiled, in response to a request by the IASC, as a reference guide for practitioners to facilitate the work through which humanitarian outcomes can be improved. It outlines key concepts and draws attention to existing guidance, wherever relevant.³

Coordination is a means to an end – the ultimate aim of the humanitarian community is to serve vulnerable populations effectively.⁴ Accordingly, the scale of international coordination arrangements should be tailored to the operational context and based on existing capacity in order to direct as many resources as possible towards delivering humanitarian assistance in a timely, predictable manner.

The IASC Principals' Transformative Agenda seeks to make coordination less prescriptive and more empowering for Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs), Resident Coordinators (RCs) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) so whilst this reference module focuses on the cluster approach as the principal tool available to the international community for coordinating and accounting for their response, it falls to the leadership of the humanitarian team at the country level to devise the most appropriate 'coordination solutions' taking into account the local operational situation. The cluster approach does not need to be activated if, for example, existing national coordination mechanisms are functioning effectively.

This module concentrates on Level 3 Response.⁵ It seeks to underline the changes in the cluster approach resulting from the Transformative Agenda and highlights how the key aspects of accountability and preparedness support an improved collective response.

¹ UNHCR has a mandated responsibility to coordinate multi-sectoral response to refugee needs and clusters are not established in this context

² Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response, 2006

³ The following topics will be added by June 2012: Cluster de-activation (building on cluster transition/adaptation guidance); Sub-National Coordination Models; NGO Shared Leadership and Performance Monitoring

⁴ During 2011, the IASC Principals, as part of the Transformative Agenda, confirmed the fundamental importance attached to accountability to affected populations. They agreed to integrate accountability to affected populations into their individual agencies' policies and operational guidelines. An Operational Framework developed by the Sub-Working Group on Accountability to Affected Populations was endorsed. This framework provides guidance for improved participation, information provision, feedback and complaints handling with affected populations.

⁵ A 'Level 3' is a major sudden-onset humanitarian crisis triggered by natural disaster or conflict which requires system-wide mobilization and response, as determined collectively by the IASC Principals under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator.

I Cluster Activation

The IASC Principals agreed that the activation of clusters must be **more strategic, less automatic and time limited**. HCs and HCTs should only recommend the activation of clusters when there is an identified gap in the enabling environment warranting their activation and when justified around an identified need. Support of pre-existing or the development of new national mechanisms for sectoral coordination should always be a priority.

It is important to ensure clusters are active in the affected areas in addition to the capital. Co-leadership arrangements can also reinforce sub-national coordination

In principle, all 11 clusters should prepare to be activated in a Level 3 response, but the country-specific decision on which clusters to activate will be taken within a few days of the disaster onset by the RC/HC based on the advice of the HCT applying the following criteria:

- (a) Trigger event in the form of a new large-scale emergency or sharp deterioration and/or significant change in an existing humanitarian situation.
- (b) Evaluation of national response and coordination capacity and/or national response to appropriately meet needs.
- (c) Where humanitarian needs justify a multi-sectoral approach that the existing coordination and response mechanisms can no longer adequately address.
- (d) The size of the operational presence (the number of actors and complexity of response) requires a sector- specific coordination mechanism if this does not already exist.

The RC/HC and the HCT will review the need for specific clusters based on a reassessment of the four criteria above and the contribution being made by each cluster in supporting the humanitarian response strategy. This review will be part of the systematic deactivation review 3 months after the beginning of the response,⁶ but may also take place earlier if required.

Cluster activation procedures are as follows:

- The RC or HC agrees with the HCT which clusters should be activated, based on contingency planning and a clear rationale in each case.
- The RC/HC selects Cluster Lead Agencies in consultation with the HCT based on the agencies' coordination and response capacity, as well as the location and extent of its operational presence and/or ability to increase this. The selection of Cluster Lead Agency may, but does not invariably, mirror global-level arrangements.
- Global Clusters are alerted in advance of the proposed HCT meeting to discuss activation so that they can ensure appropriate and informed representation at country level in this discussion.
- Upon agreement within the HCT, the RC/HC sends a letter to the ERC outlining the which clusters are to be activated, designated Cluster Lead Agencies, and the rationale for the clusters selected for activation. If other coordination solutions outside of the cluster have been agreed these should also be outlined in the letter.
- The ERC transmits the proposal to IASC Principals and Global Cluster Lead and Co-Lead Agencies for approval within 24 hours.
- Once approved, the RC or HC informs relevant partners of agreed mechanisms.

⁶ please see the IASC paper on Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation

Decisions on the activation of clusters should always take into account the protection needs of the affected population. Context-appropriate coordination in the pertinent Areas of Responsibility (Child Protection; Gender-Based Violence; Land Mines; Housing, Land and Property; and Rule of Law) should also be discussed. Coordination systems may already be in place for some cross-cutting issues, but in some cases humanitarian-specific gender working groups may need to be established. GenCap Advisors⁷ should be requested if local capacity for mainstreaming gender is not available. Each cluster is also responsible for integrating early recovery activities. Early recovery focal points from each cluster carry out this integration through the Early Recovery Network. Where key early recovery areas are not covered by existing clusters or alternative mechanisms, a cluster addressing those specific areas may, very exceptionally, be established in addition to the network to fill this gap.

Cluster activation and deployment should benefit from inclusion in humanitarian contingency planning prior to the emergency. Planning will include reinforcing coordination mechanisms with the Government and non-humanitarian actors, the anticipation of clusters for identified threats, determining which organizations will lead, coordinate and participate in each cluster, the need for inter-cluster coordination mechanisms and cluster roles and responsibilities in each phase of the humanitarian programme cycle. This will help the HCT to identify possible gaps in national and international coordination capacity, the need for sector-specific and sub-national coordination arrangements and agree national cluster leadership, where required, based on coordination capacity, operational presence and mandate.

II Cluster Functions

IASC Principals “agreed that there is a need to restate and return to the original purpose of clusters, refocusing them on strategic and operational gaps analysis, planning, assessment and results.”

The aim of the cluster approach, as agreed in 2006, is to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies, ensuring predictable leadership and accountability in the main areas of humanitarian response. At the country level, the aim is to strengthen response through predictability, accountability, and partnership through better prioritization, defining roles and responsibilities or humanitarian organizations.

Consequently, the core functions of a cluster at the country-level remain:

- **Supporting service delivery**
 - Provide a platform to ensure that service delivery is driven by the agreed strategic priorities
 - Develop mechanisms to eliminate duplication of service delivery
- **Informing strategic decision-making of the HC/HCT for the humanitarian response**
 - Needs assessment and gap analysis (across other sectors and within the sector)
 - Analysis to identify and address (emerging) gaps, obstacles, duplication, and cross-cutting issues.
 - Prioritization, grounded in response analysis

⁷ A GenCap Advisor is an inter-agency resource to support the HC. For procedures to request a GenCap see <http://onerresponse.info/crosscutting/GenCap/Pages/GenCap.aspx>

- **Planning and strategy development**
 - Develop sectoral plans, objectives and indicators directly support realization of the HC/HCT strategic priorities
 - Application and adherence to existing standards and guidelines
 - Clarify funding requirements, prioritization, and cluster contributions to HC's overall humanitarian funding considerations (Flash Appeal, CAP, ERF/CHF, CERF)
- **Advocacy**
 - Identify advocacy concerns to contribute to HC and HCT messaging and action
 - Undertaking advocacy activities on behalf of cluster participants and the affected population
- **Monitoring and reporting** the implementation of the cluster strategy and results; recommending corrective action where necessary
- **Contingency planning/preparedness** for recurrent disasters whenever feasible and relevant

III Cluster Management Arrangements

The IASC Principals “agreed that participation in clusters should be better defined and managed to enhance the ability of clusters to provide strategic direction, including through the creation of small (the number to be context-dependent) ‘steering committees’ or ‘strategic advisory groups’ of key operational partners, complemented by separate forums or mechanisms to ensure broader information exchange for all cluster/sector partners”.⁸

The IASC has also agreed⁹ that all cluster partners have common responsibilities to each other to reach the objective of effective and timely humanitarian response and past cluster experiences have shown that sharing out the cluster's tasks within different groups enables better coordination and participation.

The efficient management of a cluster depends on accountability by the cluster lead agencies for their responsibilities within the cluster as much as those within their respective agencies. However, the efficient management of clusters is the joint responsibility of the cluster lead agency, the cluster coordinator and all cluster participants **at the national and sub-national level**.

The criteria for contributing to cluster management are:

- Technical expertise
- Operational relevance in the emergency
- Demonstrated capacity to contribute strategically and provide practical support
- Commitment to contribute consistently

⁸ Final Summary and Action Points, IASC Principals meeting, 13 December 2011, action point no. 29.

⁹ See next module, *Minimum Commitments for Country-level Participation in Cluster*.

Efficient cluster management should encompass the following characteristics:

- Performance of the six core cluster functions with regard to the fundamentals of developing sectoral programmes which clearly contribute to the implementation of agreed, measurable, evidence based strategic objectives; based on the identification of good field practices and agreed international benchmarks and standards
- Establishment and maintenance of an appropriate humanitarian coordination mechanism
 - Strengthening pre-existing sectoral coordination through increased predictability and accountability
 - Building complementarity of partner actions : avoiding duplication and gaps
 - Ensuring adequate resources are mobilized and are equitably allocated for the effective functioning of the cluster and its response
- Maintaining flexibility within the cluster to respond to changes in the operating environment, evolving requirements, capacities and participation
- The effective use and transfer of information to, from and between cluster members and other stakeholders
- Interaction with other clusters, humanitarian actors, government counterparts, and relevant authorities for operational planning, engagement and active contribution of operational partners
- Accountability to the affected population through effective consultative and feedback mechanisms

There is no 'one-size fits all' approach to cluster management. Due to the varying size, scope and complexity of disasters and cluster response, the choice of a management approach must be adapted to need. However, country-level cluster experience to date offers effective examples intended to serve as light and flexible means to manage participation and streamline decision-making, determining the absolute minimum set of participants for effective cluster management and options for additional support that may be needed.

Strategic Advisory Group (SAG): Chaired by the Cluster Coordinator, the SAG is responsible for developing and adjusting as necessary the strategic framework, priorities and work-plan for the cluster. SAG membership should be representative of the overall cluster. Apart from operational UN, IOM and NGO representatives, the SAG may invite government representatives/focal points; donors; national NGO forum representatives; representatives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; early recovery cluster and/or other cluster representatives as necessary; and where appropriate military liaison officers to relevant discussions (see table below).¹⁰ However, to be efficient and effective and avoid the challenges arising from a large number of cluster partners, SAG membership should also be limited (up to a maximum of 15 partners). To avoid feelings of exclusion by other cluster partners, the SAG through the cluster coordinator must interact with the larger cluster membership to ensure the regular flow of information.

¹⁰ Note that while the SAG may include key stakeholders such as donors and government representatives, Cluster membership should be restricted to operational responders.

Possible SAG Members	
National Level	Sub-National Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cluster Coordinator (supported by an information management specialist and cluster administrative support officer) ▪ NGO technical experts ▪ UN technical experts ▪ Government representatives 	<p>The need for sub-national management should be determined by the national level SAG on a context specific basis.</p> <p>Membership does not need to directly mirror national level and often has greater representation of local authorities and NGO partners in both leadership and/or technical roles.</p>
Potential Invitees to the SAG (as appropriate)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sub-national cluster focal points ▪ Donor representatives ▪ OCHA ▪ International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement representatives ▪ Regional focal points, in instances where agencies may have technical expertise based at a regional level ▪ Military representatives and other authorities, as appropriate 	

Technical Working Groups (TWiGs): TWiGs are task-oriented and time limited. Created at the request of the SAG to, for instance, agree minimum standards and formulate appropriate technical practices, or to find solutions to local issues and advise the SAG accordingly. TWiGs are coordinated by a Focal Point or Technical Advisor nominated by the SAG and consists of the necessary technical experts, usually not more than 15 people involved.

To facilitate communication with specific groups within the broader membership or outside of the cluster, such as experts in particular technical areas (including cross cutting issues), military actors, government counterparts, and UN senior leadership, the SAG might also designate cluster partners to serve as a liaison with these groups

IV Minimum Commitments for Participation in Clusters

Minimum commitments by cluster participants are needed because strong coordination by humanitarian agencies on global, national and local levels results in a more efficient use of resources, more accountability and transparency and, finally, a more effective response. Without a degree of constant commitment by cluster participants predictable coordination will not be achieved.

These minimum commitments for participation in country-level clusters provide a common basis of understanding of what organizations – whether local, national, or international – commit to bring to clusters at the country level through their participation. The commitments are not intended as a means to exclude organizations from participating in clusters nor should they preclude actively seeking the participation of national authorities within cluster coordination, as appropriate.

Balanced with these commitments from cluster partners, cluster lead agencies have a reciprocal responsibility¹¹ to ensure that they lead clusters in a manner that goes beyond simply sharing information and that they provide effective coordination with their sub-national counterparts. CLAs, together with the cluster coordinators, are responsible for providing a forum for strategic response that meets the needs of affected populations.

All cluster partners, including the CLA in its potential role as implementer alongside other agencies, have common mutual responsibilities to reach the objective of effective and timely humanitarian response for affected populations. *Cluster partner is hereby defined as an organization actively involved in a relevant sector response within a country where clusters have been activated.*

The minimum commitments are not prescriptive and should be adapted to actual needs and context as cluster-based responses vary greatly in size, scope and complexity. These commitments are a starting point and should be considered as an absolute minimum on which organizations may build. Country-level clusters should use this document as a basis when developing or updating their terms of reference and their own commitments.

Applying the minimum commitments can assist cluster lead agencies and cluster partners predict their level of scale up during a Level 3 response

The minimum commitments are:

- A common commitment to humanitarian principles, the *Principles of Partnership*¹² through example, cluster-specific guidance and internationally recognized programme standards, including the Secretary-General's *Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*.
- Readiness to participate in actions that specifically improve accountability to affected populations as per the IASC *Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations and the related Operational Framework*.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the duties and responsibilities within the cluster, as defined through the IASC Terms of References and Guidance Notes¹³ and any guidance specific to the cluster itself, as well as country cluster terms of reference, where available.
- Active participation within the cluster and commitment to consistently engage in the cluster's collective work.
- Capacity and willingness to contribute to the cluster's strategic response plan and activities, which must include inter-cluster coordination and cross-cutting themes.
- Commitment from a relevant senior staff member to engage consistently in the cluster towards the fulfillment of its mission.

¹¹ The terms of Cluster Coordinator, cluster lead agency and Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) are used as per the IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response (November 2006); the Joint letter from Cluster Lead Agencies to their Directors/Representatives at Country Level (October 2009), IASC Guidance for Humanitarian Country Teams (2009).

¹² Equality, Transparency, Results-oriented approach, Responsibility, and Complementarity as defined in the statement of commitment available at www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org

¹³ This includes, but is not limited to, the *Draft Operational Guidance Generic TOR for Cluster Coordinators at the Country-level* and the IASC guidance on particular cross-cutting issues and information management.

- Commitment to work cooperatively with other cluster partners to ensure an optimal and strategic use of available resources, including sharing information on organizational resources.
- Willingness to take on leadership responsibilities of sub-national and/or working groups, as need, capacity, and mandates allow.
- Contribute to developing and disseminating advocacy and messaging targeted at various actors, including, but not limited to, affected communities, the host government, donors, Humanitarian Country Team, CLA, and the media.
- Ensure interpretation and effective communication (i.e. appropriate language) in order to support diverse participation within the cluster, notably from local organizations (and national and local authorities where appropriate).

V Inter-Cluster Coordination

Whatever the coordination mechanism may be, where clusters are active it is clear that effective inter-cluster coordination is necessary to support the HC/HCT in ensuring that multidisciplinary and cross-cutting issues that cannot be tackled by individual clusters alone or that call for a concerted action are addressed appropriately and that inter-cluster duplications and gaps are eliminated. (Cluster Approach Evaluation 2, April 2010)

Inter-cluster coordination is the collaboration and dialogue among clusters and between clusters and the HC/HCT with the objective of a more effective response. Inter-cluster coordination is led at the strategic level by the HC and HCT, and at an operational level by cluster coordinators to address specific priorities, maximize joint analysis and planning across clusters, and support the HC/HCT strategic priorities by providing coherent, relevant information and analysis to the HCT to support the ongoing adaptation of the humanitarian strategy to the changing operational environment and, ultimately, the phase out of humanitarian operations.

It is essential that Inter Cluster coordination is an iterative (repeated) process between the HCT and Clusters: by providing coherent, relevant information and analysis to the HCT to support the ongoing adaptation of the humanitarian strategy to the changing operational environment on one hand and, by providing strategic direction and priorities to the clusters on the other; the ultimate objective being the phase out of humanitarian operations. The process of strategic and operational prioritization should be led by the HC and facilitated by OCHA.

Inter cluster coordination focuses on two key areas:

1. Inter-cluster coordination should provide information and allow discussion to ensure strategic and operational decision-making to address specific priorities, maximize joint analysis and planning across clusters, and support the HC/HCT strategic priorities.
2. Inter Cluster Coordination can also simply be an operational exercise between two or more clusters to avoid overlap and to strengthen integrated and coherent planning and programming. This process can be led, depending on the situation, by either cluster coordinators or OCHA.

The HC/HCT should determine the most appropriate arrangements for inter-cluster coordination based on the complexity of the coordination challenges, number of clusters activated, or other

criteria that the HC/HCT may wish to consider. Whenever possible, inter-cluster coordination would support and eventually be superseded by national inter-sectoral groups.¹⁴

In consultation with the HCT, the HC may establish groups of operationally-relevant clusters principally to support implementation the strategic objective included in the HCT's strategic plan and to ensure complementarity and coherence in the planning and implementation of operations.¹⁵ Each cluster would establish and maintain a sector plan including performance indicators covering its contribution to achieving the strategic objective(s) to uphold accountability at the operational level.

This critical role of inter-cluster coordination is not limited to the central level, but is also undertaken at the locus of operations (sub-national), to ensure coherent cluster planning and implementation at all levels of an operational response.

Additionally, the HC/HCT may also request OCHA to convene inter-cluster coordination meetings involving all cluster coordinators to link the operational level inter-cluster groups and the strategic level planning by the HCT, to promote and coordinate cross-cutting issues including early recovery and protection as an important part of the response and to relay concerns and input emanating from this forum to the HCT. The establishment of an inter-cluster forum may provide a practical means to build consensus amongst cluster coordinators and develop guidance and information as requested by the HCT. It is not a forum for directing or managing the operational function of clusters.

In several countries¹⁶ formal inter-cluster fora have been facilitated by OCHA as a means to address particularly challenging coordination situations; in other countries, this has been done through less formal means. It is the responsibility of the HC and the HCT to ensure that appropriate modalities are established at the country and sub-national level to facilitate these contributions and coherent action by the humanitarian community.

The core functions of inter-cluster coordination are essentially consolidating the clusters' outputs through cross-referencing, identifying synergies and gaps, prioritizing to inform strategic decision-making of the HC/HCT, planning and strategy development, advocacy, monitoring and reporting and contingency planning/preparedness.

Providing support to the clusters and the HC/HCT in the following areas:

- Establishing strategic and operational objectives and priorities across clusters and ensuring cluster strategies are in line with the overall operational and strategic direction of the response
- Harmonizing planning figures and scenarios based upon multi-cluster assessments;

¹⁴ The coordination structures or systems should be first thought and tailored in term of key functions to be performed (HC, HCT, ICC, Clusters). Thus, it would help 1) adopt the appropriate degree of inclusion with national systems, 2) visualize the inter-linkages within the strategic system, and 3) trace the ultimate accountability to affected people.

¹⁵ Response planning instruments need to be strategically re-organized e.g. in a transformative way, the Strategic Plan (and related iterations of the Flash Appeals) would simply need to be structured by strategic objectives (and not by sectors/clusters), fed by coordinated and integrated inter-cluster response plans and programming for which coordination solutions are to be determined by the HCT.

¹⁶ (currently Chad, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, DRC, Haiti, Nepal, Niger, oPt, Pakistan, Philippines, Somalia, Sudan)

- Reviewing sectoral strategies and work plans agreed by the HC/HCT to ensure coherence and complementarity of objectives and indicators and here necessary avoid or address duplications and gaps;
- Supporting performance monitoring by identifying measurable and agreed outcome-level indicators, assuring synergy between relevant clusters;
- Identify core advocacy concerns, such as humanitarian access and contribute to common key messages; supporting inclusivity within the coordination structures new actors in the humanitarian system and NGOs;
- Facilitating the design and implementation of common approaches to information management;¹⁷
- Ensuring cluster strategies collectively address cross-cutting issues (gender, HIV and AIDS, age, environment, disabilities) or risks (mines, natural disaster hazards) according to specific needs identified locally;
- Identifying resourcing gaps and providing recommendations for resource mobilization, including in the preparation of CAPs/Flash Appeals, CERF requests and allocation of common funds;
- Updating contingency plans and preparedness activities and ensuring complementary roles and responsibilities between the cluster and, where appropriate, developing a coordinated approach to building capacity of national counterparts.

Annex 1: Further Reference

- Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response, 2006
- Operational Guidance on Designating Sector/Cluster Leads in Major New Emergencies, May 2007
- Operational Guidance on Designating Sector/Cluster Leads in On-Going Emergencies, May 2007
- IASC *Draft* Guidance on the Adaptation of Clusters in Transition, March 2011
- Framework on Cluster Coordination Costs at the Country Level, May 2011
- IASC Operational Guidance on Responsibilities of Cluster/Sector Leads an OCHA in Information Management
- Cluster Lead Agencies Joint Letter on Dual Responsibility, November 2009
- IASC Generic Terms of Reference for Cluster Leads at Country Level
- IASC Handbook for RCs and HCs on Emergency Preparedness and Response
- WASH in Somalia case study
- Emergency Shelter Cluster review in Myanmar
- WASH Cluster Coordination Handbook, January 2009
- WHO Health Cluster Guide, 2009

Prepared by: IASC SWG on the Cluster Approach

¹⁷ Promoting functional purposes of information tools in a simple, logical and streamlined way (the so-called “Russian dolls” approach). The amount of time spent by HCT members and associated actors (global, regional, country levels) to use and comply with these tools should be minimal and help maximize the planning, analysis and response capacities on the ground.