Cluster Approach

Introduction

Introduced in 2005 as part of the broad Humanitarian Reform and further elaborated under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Transformative Agenda, the Cluster Approach aims to make humanitarian response more predictable through better sectoral coordination amongst humanitarian actors. The objective is to facilitate more predictable leadership and cooperation, strengthen partnerships, improve planning and prioritisation, and enhance accountability.

Overview of The Cluster Approach

As defined by the IASC Guidance Note, Clusters are made up of humanitarian organisations – including UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and other civil society organisations – as well as, in some cases, other stakeholders – including government representatives. These organisations work together to address needs identified in a specific sector (*e.g.* logistics, camp coordination, health, protection). Clusters provide a framework for actors engaged in a sectoral response to: Respond jointly to needs that have been commonly identified; Develop appropriate strategic response plans with shared objectives; and Coordinate effectively – both amongst themselves and with the national authorities leading the response.

The Cluster Approach is intended to strengthen the overall capacity, effectiveness, and management of humanitarian response in four key ways:

- Ensuring more predictable leadership and clearly defined responsibilities by identifying Cluster Leads that are accountable for the coordination of the activities of their respective sector.
- Ensuring timely and effective responses, including through the maintenance of global capacity, rosters of trained experts, and stockpiles.
- Strengthening partnership between all humanitarian actors and ensuring more coherent linkages with national authorities.
- Improving strategic field-level coordination and prioritisation, leading to fewer gaps and duplication.

There are **11 global clusters**, each with clearly designated lead agencies and specific Terms of Reference agreed by the IASC that outline roles and responsibilities. The Cluster Approach is flexible and is not imposed at country-level in a "one size fits all" as its coordination aims to be field and needs-driven.

The 11 Global Clusters and Their Lead Agencies

In any humanitarian response, the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) – or the UN Resident Coordinator (RC), if no HC has been appointed – in consultation with the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), agrees on the priority sectoral needs and related coordination structures (*i.e.* Clusters) that are appropriate to the response. The HC/RC and HCT also agree on which humanitarian actors are best placed to take on a Cluster leadership responsibility in the specific country context. The decision is based on organisational presence, capacity and willingness, and the global cluster leads structure agreed by the IASC. Due to capacity and resources, a UN agency usually functions as Cluster Lead but, increasingly, civil society organisations play a leadership or co-leadership role. Subsequently, the HC shares the agreement regarding country-level coordination and leadership mechanisms with the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). This must then be approved by the IASC at global level.

Whilst Clusters aim to provide more coherence in the coordination of sectoral responses, inter-cluster coordination seeks to ensure greater coordination across a multi-sectoral response. At an operational level, inter-cluster coordination strives to ensure a clearly-articulated cross-sectoral humanitarian response plan, that resources are appropriately prioritised across clusters, that cross-cutting issues (such as gender and the environment) and multi-sectoral thematic areas are appropriately and consistently addressed, and that gaps and duplications are avoided.

Furthermore, effective inter-cluster coordination is critical in ensuring that cross-sectoral activities (such as needs assessments) are well coordinated, that resource mobilisation and advocacy strategies are consistent across all clusters, and that coherent and comprehensive transition as well as exit strategies for Clusters are commonly agreed.

An operational level inter-cluster coordination forum is usually established, chaired by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Head of Office or his/her designate. It brings together the Cluster Coordinators as representatives of their respective Clusters and focal points for cross-cutting issues. The forum takes guidance on strategic and policy issues from the HCT and feeds back broad operational priorities and concerns to the HCT. At all times, inter-cluster coordination should be guided by and should promote the humanitarian and partnership principles.

Global Cluster Leads

A Cluster Lead is the organisation that has been given the mandate by the IASC to take the lead in the Cluster approach implementation with regard to a humanitarian action specific dimension (*e.g.* Health, Shelter, Logistics). It is accountable globally to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and in-country to the HC. Furthermore, for any IASC-defined Cluster, the designated Cluster Lead is the **provider of last resort**. This means that, where necessary – and depending on access, security, and availability of funding – the Cluster Lead must be ready to ensure the provision of services required to fulfil crucial gaps identified by the Cluster and reflected in the Humanitarian Response Plan. It represents a commitment of Cluster Leads to do their utmost to ensure an adequate and appropriate response.

The Cluster Approach operates 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 and ensuring that there is predictable leadership and accountability in all the main sectors or areas of activity. **At the country level**, the aim is to ensure a more coherent and effective response by mobilising groups of agencies, organisations, and NGOs to respond in a strategic manner across all key sectors or areas of activity, each sector having a clearly designated lead, as agreed by the HC and the HCT. The HC – with the support of OCHA – retains responsibility for ensuring the adequacy, coherence, and effectiveness of the overall humanitarian response and is accountable to the ERC.

Cluster Leads in-country are accountable to the HC for facilitating a process at the sectoral level aimed at ensuring the following:

- Inclusion of key humanitarian partners.
- Establishment and maintenance of appropriate humanitarian coordination mechanisms.
- Coordination with national/local authorities, State institutions, local civil society and other relevant actors.
- Participatory and community-based approaches.
- Attention to priority cross-cutting issues.
- Needs assessment and analysis.
- Emergency preparedness.
- Planning and strategy development.
- Application of standards.
- Monitoring and reporting.
- Advocacy and resource mobilisation.
- Training and capacity building.
- Provision of assistance or services as a last resort.

Cluster Activation

Under the Transformative Agenda, IASC Principals agreed that activation of Clusters must be more strategic, less automatic, and time limited than what was previously observed. HCs should only recommend their activation when there is an identified gap in the enabling environment warranting their activation. It should be noted that 1) formal activation of Clusters may be difficult in circumstances where the government capacity is constrained; 2) to ensure that clusters continue to operate only whilst they are strictly needed, plans to deactivate and transition Clusters should be prepared as soon as possible after activation; building the capacity of local partners and government should be an objective from the outset.

The criteria for cluster activation are met when:

- Response and coordination gaps exist due to a sharp deterioration or significant change in the humanitarian situation.
- Existing national response or coordination capacity is unable to meet needs in a manner that respects humanitarian principles due to the scale of need, the number of actors involved, the need for a more complex multi-sectoral approach, or other constraints on the ability to respond or apply humanitarian principles.

The procedure for activating a Cluster or Clusters is as follows:

1. The RC/HC and Cluster Leads Agencies (CLAs), supported by OCHA, consult national authorities to establish what humanitarian coordination mechanisms exist, and their respective capacities.
2. Global CLAs are alerted by their country representatives and OCHA, prior to the UN Country Team (UNCT)/HCT meeting to discuss activation, to ensure they are represented at the meeting.
3. The RC/HC, in consultation with the UNCT/HCT, determines which Clusters should be recommended for activation, assisted by analysis of the situation and preparedness planning. In each case, the decision should be based on the criteria above-mentioned.
4. The RC/HC, in consultation with the UNCT/HCT, selects CLAs based on agencies' coordination and response capacity, operational presence, and ability to scale-up. The selection of CLAs ideally mirrors global arrangements; but this is not always possible and sometimes other organizations are in a better position to lead. Under the IASC Transformative Agenda, CLAs were encouraged to consider developing a clearly defined, agreed, and supported sharing of Cluster leadership with NGOs wherever feasible.
5. The RC/HC writes to the ERC, following consultation with the HCT, outlining the recommended Cluster arrangements, suggesting CLAs, and explaining why particular Clusters need to be activated. Where non-Cluster coordination solutions have been agreed upon as well, these are also described.
6. The ERC transmits the proposal to the IASC Principals for approval within 24 hours and informs the RC/HC accordingly. The Principals may ask the IASC Emergency Directors Group to discuss in more detail, if necessary.
7. The ERC writes to the RC/HC to confirm the endorsement of activation of the suggested Clusters and/or provide feedback from the IASC Principals.
8. The RC/HC informs relevant partners when decisions on Clusters and CLAs are approved.

The IASC Transformative Agenda states that Clusters will be professionally managed by dedicated, trained, and experienced Cluster Coordinators, that information management will be prioritised, and that resources will be pooled in order to enhance the collection and analysis of data on the progress and impact of Cluster activities.

Cluster Functions

1. **To support service delivery by:**
   - Providing a platform that ensures service delivery is driven by the Humanitarian Response Plan and strategic priorities.
   - Developing mechanisms to eliminate duplication of service delivery.

2. **To inform the HC/HCT's strategic decision-making by:**
   - Preparing needs assessments and analysis of gaps (across and within Clusters, using information management tools as needed) to inform the setting of priorities.
   - Identifying and finding solutions for (emerging) gaps, obstacles, duplication, and cross-cutting issues.
   - Formulating priorities on the basis of analysis.
3. **To plan and implement Cluster strategies by:**
   - Developing sectoral plans, objectives and indicators that directly support realisation of the overall response's strategic objectives.
   - Applying and adhering to common standards and guidelines.
   - Clarifying funding requirements, helping to set priorities, and agreeing Cluster contributions to the HC's overall humanitarian funding proposals.
4. **To monitor and evaluate performance by:**
   - Monitoring and reporting on activities and needs.
   - Measuring progress against the Cluster strategy and agreed results.
   - Recommending corrective action where necessary.
5. **To build national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning.**
6. **To support robust advocacy by:**
   - Identifying concerns and contributing key information and messages to HC and HCT messaging and action.
   - Undertaking advocacy on behalf of the Cluster, its members, and affected people.

The Cluster Lead, in addition to its responsibilities as provider of last resort, supports the Cluster six core functions.

Sites and Resources

- IASC Transformative Agenda
- IASC – Guidance note on using the cluster approach to strengthen humanitarian response (2006)
- IASC – Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level (2015)
- The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project (2010)