UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

Cluster Approach

20 November 2023

Key points

- The cluster approach is activated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) at the request of the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, and with the endorsement of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals, including the High Commissioner, as coordination architecture for non-refugee humanitarian emergencies. In refugee situations, coordination is guided by the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM); clusters are not activated in refugee situations
- All clusters have lead organisations, known as Cluster Lead Agencies, which operate at the global and country levels. UNHCR leads the Global Protection Cluster; co-leads with IFRC the Global Shelter Cluster and with IOM the Global CCCM Cluster (UNHCR comes in when conflict causes displacement; IFRC and IOM when disaster causes displacement). Global Cluster Lead Agencies act as a "provider of last resort" in their respective cluster
- At country level, inter-agency cluster-based responses are led by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) through the Cluster Lead Agencies. Cluster coordinators provide sector-specific strategic directions and operational coordination. UNHCR also leads the protection cluster when disasters induce displacement, provided it has a presence, is requested to do so by the government, and there is inter-agency agreement
- The UNHCR Representative actively participates in the HCT, representing both the agency and the cluster(s) UNHCR leads. Through the UNCT or HCT, UNHCR participates in deliberations on country cluster activation

1. Overview

This entry needs to be read in conjunction with the entries on the Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and Flash Appeals (FAs), the Humanitarian Programme Cycle and the International Coordination Architecture; please also refer to the entries on pool funding and CERF.

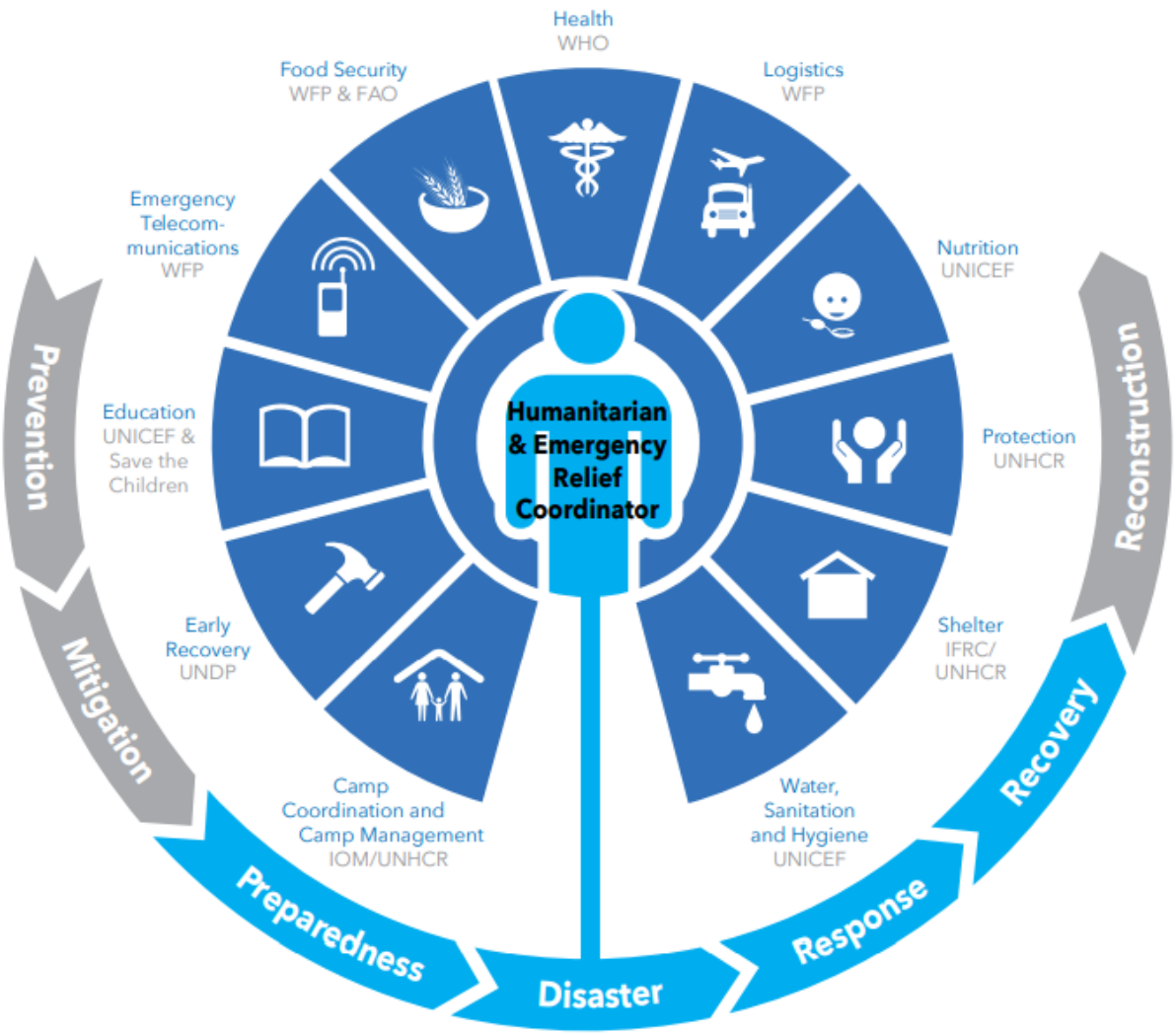
The Cluster Approach is used for coordinating in non-refugee humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarian organisations have agreed to lead certain clusters at global level, and have defined a cluster structure for non-refugee humanitarian responses at country level, where cluster leadership should ideally mirror global arrangements. Clusters are often co-led with government and/or co-chaired with NGO partners.

The cluster system spreads accountability for the delivery of services (health, shelter, etc.) across different cluster lead agencies, so that no single agency is accountable for the entire response. In each country situation, overall accountability for coordination and delivery rests with the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC).

Clusters are groups of humanitarian UN and non-UN organizations in each of the main sectors of humanitarian action (water, health, shelter, logistics, etc.). They are designated by the IASC and have clear responsibilities for coordination ; they are time-bound bodies that are meant to fill a temporary gap. Their aim is to build the capacity of the national systems to respond to humanitarian situations with a protection and accountability lens and progressively hand over coordination to national and local entities.

Note. Protection and assistance to refugees is coordinated and delivered through the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM). Clusters are not activated for responses to refugee situations. In mixed situations with refugee and internally displaced populations, the Joint UNHCR- OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice should be used for guidance.

Global Cluster Lead Agencies, IASC



2. Main guidance

Large non-refugee humanitarian crises are those:

- in which the needs of affected and/or displaced people exceed a government's capacity to address these;
- characterized by scale and complexity that warrants a multi-sectoral response with the engagement of a wide range of humanitarian actors.

In such situations, a cluster response is activated under the overall leadership of the designated Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). Each cluster is accountable to the HC through its Cluster Lead Agency (CLA), as well as to national authorities and to people affected by the crisis.

A cluster approach may be used in humanitarian emergencies caused by conflicts or caused by

natural disasters.

The approach aims to strengthen system-wide preparedness, make sure that critical materials and expertise are immediately available, and focus technical capacity by:

- Increasing transparency and accountability. Its mechanisms improve transparency in resource allocation, establish leadership, and focus on operational performance, leading to stronger accountability.
- Enhancing predictability. Sector and thematic responsibilities are clarified; formal mechanisms at national and international level bring clarity to areas that are not otherwise covered.
- Engaging with national and local authorities. Government authorities are the primary duty-bearers. Humanitarian actors should actively engage with and support them to lead or progressively take over operational delivery, coordination, and monitoring of protection, assistance, and solutions for IDPs.
- Including affected communities. Humanitarian actors are required to make themselves accountable to affected populations. At minimum, they must consult and engage with the populations they assist. Affected communities help to determine the best responses to the problems they face.
- Advocating more effectively. When clusters, singly or collectively, speak with one voice on issues of common concern, and do so in association with affected groups who are not normally heard, advocacy has more weight.
- Joint strategic and operational planning. Formal processes of coordination within and between clusters enhance efficiency and improve effectiveness.

Centrality of Protection
The 2013 IASC Principals statement on the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action is considered to be a core commitment of HCs, Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), and clusters, affirming that, while governments are primarily responsible for protecting people in humanitarian emergencies, humanitarian actors must protect people, and respect and promote their human rights in accordance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL), as well as other internationally recognized protection standards. HCTs must develop a specific protection strategy covering preparedness, all aspects of the humanitarian response, and solutions. The protection cluster is expected to provide analysis and support the HCT in preparing this strategy.

Cluster activation. Clusters can only be activated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), with the endorsement of IASC Principals. In 2018, the 'system-wide scale-up' replaced the previous emergency activation procedure referred to as 'Level 3'. An IASC Scale-Up is a system-wide mobilization in response to a sudden-onset and/or rapidly deteriorating situation in a given country or region and is declared when national or regional capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance does not match the scale, complexity, and urgency of the crisis. Five criteria are used to determine whether an emergency should be scaled up to a system-wide emergency: scale, urgency, complexity, capacity, and risk of failure to effectively deliver to affected populations.

Key steps include:

1. Consultation with the IASC Principals.
2. Mobilization of cluster lead agency response capacities.
3. Immediate deployment of cluster coordination teams that possess information management expertise and capacity to scale up.
4. Activation of clusters, including designated leads.
5. Empowerment of an HC.

The HC:

- Leads the HCT in a multi-sector initial rapid assessment (MIRA), leading to a strategic statement and response plan.
- Leads requests for allocations from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).
- Seeks consensus in the HCT for key decisions, but has authority to finalize proposals.
- Raises any cluster lead performance problems with the ERC, who may bring them to the IASC Principals for discussion.
- Oversees effective coordination and delivery, monitoring, and reporting.

UNHCR's participation and involvement in initial discussions on cluster activation at country level are crucial. In this period, UNHCR should express its readiness and commitment to lead particular clusters and activate internal mechanisms for rapid deployment of relevant staff.

Coordination structure
A cluster-based response is led by the HC, in support of the host government. At senior level (usually in the HCT), clusters are represented by the country head of the cluster lead agency. For example, the UNHCR Representative will represent the protection, the shelter and the camp coordination and camp management (CCCM) clusters where UNHCR is leading these. OCHA supports the HC's coordination role, and typically convenes inter-cluster coordination meetings with cluster coordinators at country level.

Core functions of a cluster:
At country level, a cluster has six core functions**:**
1. Support service delivery by providing a space/platform to: (i) agree on approaches in line with the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and strategic priorities; (ii) develop mechanisms to eliminate duplication.

2. Inform strategic decision-making of the HC/HCT by: (i) coordinating needs assessment, (ii) identifying gaps and obstacles within and across sectors, including cross-cutting issues, as well as ways to address these; (iii) formulating priorities on the basis of this analysis.

3. Plan and develop (i) strategies, including cluster plans with objectives and indicators within the overall response strategy; (ii) arrangements for adhering to standards; and (iii) means to meet funding needs.

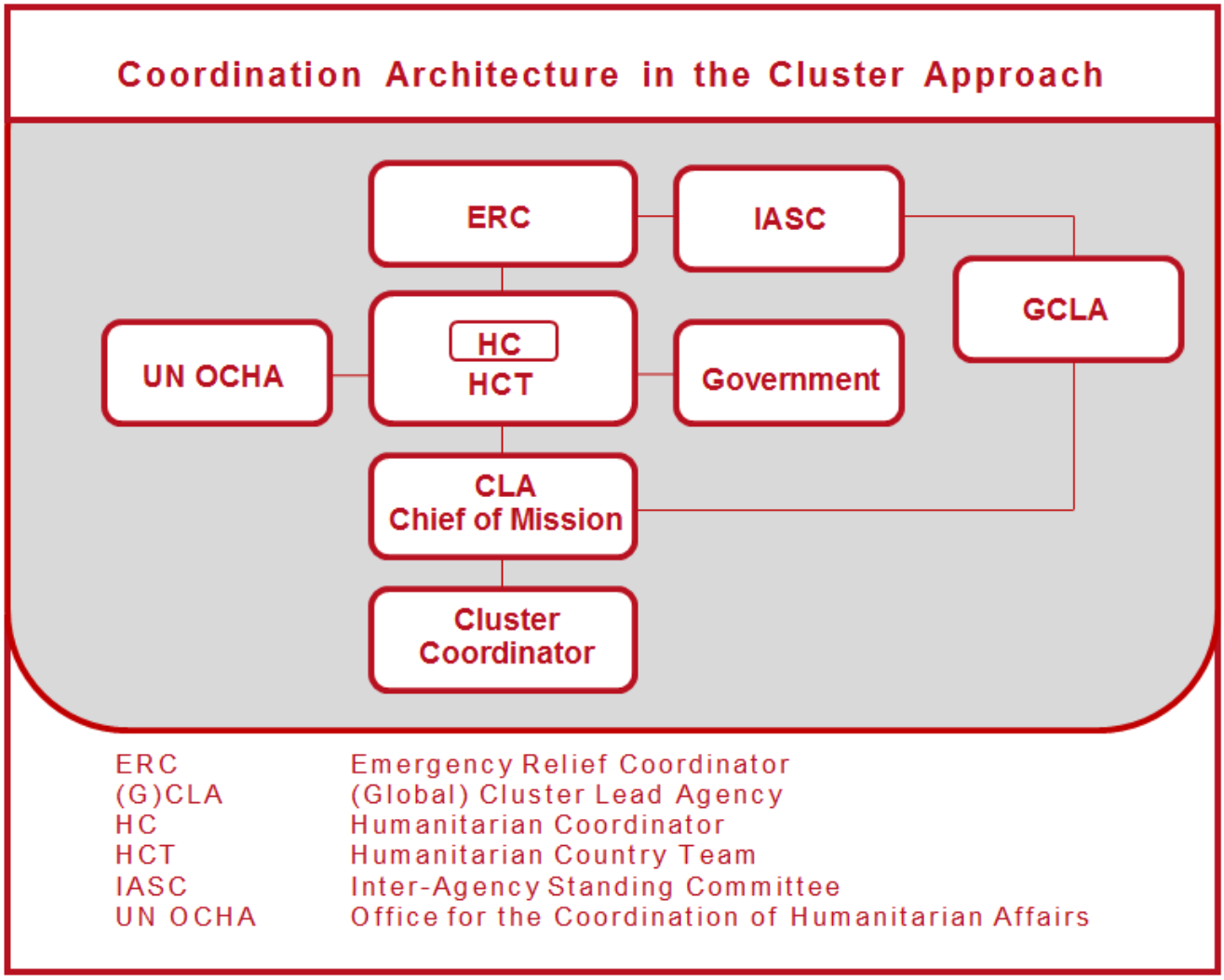
4. Advocate on behalf of cluster participants and affected people by identifying their concerns, which informs the HC and HCT messaging and action.

5. Monitor and report on the cluster strategy, needs, activities and its results, and recommend corrective action where necessary

6. Undertake contingency planning and preparedness actions and build capacity where the cluster has resources to do so.

From the outset of a humanitarian response, each cluster is also responsible for **mainstreaming protection** and maintaining a **solutions-oriented approach.**

Information management (IM) is critical to coordination and to the cluster approach. Cluster lead agencies are expected to provide or identify dedicated IM support for their cluster. There is IASC Operational Guidance on responsibilities of cluster leads & OCHA in IM. This guidance explains that cluster leads are responsible for coordinating information *within* their cluster, and OCHA is responsible for coordinating information *across* all clusters.



Role of stakeholders involved

Government and national actors. Under UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (19 December 1991), the affected State, including the government and its official institutions, is primarily responsible for initiating, organizing, coordinating, and implementing humanitarian assistance in its territory.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The IASC is an inter-agency forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making that includes the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners. Led by the ERC, the IASC develops humanitarian policies, determines responsibilities across areas of humanitarian assistance, identifies and addresses gaps in response, and advocates for effective application of humanitarian principles.

The Emergency Relief Coordinator. The post of ERC is held by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, who leads the IASC. The ERC is responsible for overseeing responses to complex emergencies that require UN humanitarian assistance. In countries affected by disasters or conflict, the ERC may appoint a Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). The ERC secures IASC endorsement of HC proposals to activate clusters and appoint cluster leads. The responsibility of the ERC does not detract from the High Commissioner's mandated accountability for refugees.

Humanitarian Coordinator. When crises occur, the HC in a country is responsible for assessing whether an international response is warranted and, if it is, for ensuring that it is well organized. HCs are accountable to the ERC. At national level, they lead the HCT in deciding the most appropriate coordination solutions for a crisis, taking into account the local situation. Agreement must be reached on which clusters to establish, and which organizations will lead them.

Humanitarian Country Team. The HCT is a strategic and operational decision-making and oversight forum established and led by the HC. It includes representatives from the UN and NGOs; the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement often attends with observer status. Agencies that are designated cluster leads represent their clusters as well as their organizations in the HCT. The HCT is responsible for agreeing on strategic issues relevant to humanitarian action.

Cluster lead agencies. Heads of cluster lead agencies are accountable to the HC. They

- Ensure that coordination mechanisms are established and properly supported.
- Act as first point of call for the government and the HC.
- Are the provider of last resort in their respective cluster.

Note. The IASC term 'provider of last resort' "translates into a commitment by the Cluster Lead Agency to do the utmost to ensure an adequate and appropriate response. This means calling upon all relevant humanitarian partners to address critical gaps; if this fails, depending on the urgency, and subject to access, security and funding availability, the cluster lead may need to commit itself to filling the gap"**.**

Cluster coordinators. A cluster coordinator is responsible for ensuring that the cluster fulfils its role with regard to needs assessment, response planning, setting strategies/approaches, provision of policy/operational guidance, coordination of field responses, inter-cluster engagement, information management, monitoring and evaluation, donor engagement, government engagement, advocacy, etc.), as set out in the IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level. Cluster coordinators co-operate through the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) to jointly deliver an effective and efficient humanitarian response that results in meaningful protection outcomes in line with the IASC Policy on Protection; reach a shared understanding of needs, informed by a robust protection and gender analysis; and agree a joint strategy to meet needs. They brief the HCT and raise strategic issues for discussion in the

HCT. Find more information in the 2017 ICCG standard terms of reference.

Shared leadership. The IASC recommends that country-level cluster leadership should mirror global arrangements. Accordingly, UNHCR should lead the protection cluster and, in conflict situations, the shelter cluster and the CCCM cluster. When appropriate, governments should co-lead the cluster. Practice has shown that the appointment of NGOs to co-chair a cluster generally improves partnership, advocacy and information distribution and, therefore, the response as a whole. When an NGO co-chairs a cluster, it should contribute staff to the cluster coordination team in roles that complement and enhance the cluster's capacity. Appointing two UN agencies to co-lead clusters should be avoided because this does not strengthen ownership or make coordination more sustainable, but dilutes accountability and complicates decision-making. Global clusters should be consulted on considerations of co-leads or co-chairs before cluster activation. For IASC guidance on cluster leadership, see IASC, Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level, activation procedures, p. 10.

OCHA. OCHA works closely with global cluster lead agencies and NGOs to develop policies, coordinate inter-cluster issues, disseminate operational guidance, and organize field support. At field level, it helps ensure that the humanitarian system functions efficiently and supports the HC's leadership. OCHA provides guidance and support to the HC and HCT, and facilitates inter-cluster coordination in all phases of the response, when required, including needs assessment, joint planning, and monitoring and evaluation.

A cluster benefits from wide and representative participation, but can become unmanageable if it has too many members or its members are transient. In such cases, the appointment of a smaller strategic advisory group (SAG) or technical working groups (TWIG) can improve its performance.

Minimum commitments for participation. Local, national, or international organizations that join clusters undertake to:

- Adhere to humanitarian principles and principles of partnership.
- Participate in actions that specifically improve accountability to affected populations and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Engage consistently in the cluster's collective work and make capacity available for this.
- Make the best use of resources and share information on organizational resources.
- Take on leadership responsibilities as needed and as capacity and mandates allow.
- Help develop and disseminate advocacy and messaging for relevant audiences.

The minimum commitments are not prescriptive and should be adapted to needs and context. Country-level clusters should consult the IASC's Coordination Reference Module when they develop or update their terms of reference or commitments.

UNHCR's role and accountabilities

Within the IASC system, UNHCR (co-)leads three clusters:

Protection. UNHCR leads the protection cluster in conflict-induced situation and also where a

natural disaster has caused displacement, provided that it has an in-country presence, the government asks it to lead, and there is inter-agency approval. This cluster includes 'areas of responsibility' (AoRs) that are attributed to UNFPA for gender-based violence (GBV), to UNICEF for child protection, to UNMAS for mine action, and to NRC for housing, land and property. Recognizing that protection is central to the purpose of any humanitarian response, the protection cluster advises the HC and HCT, and works with all clusters to strengthen protection and rights-based responses.

Camp coordination and camp management (CCCM). In conflict situations involving IDPs, UNHCR leads this cluster. IOM leads this cluster in natural disasters. The CCCM cluster neither advocates for nor automatically creates camps and similar collective settings; rather, it seeks to establish and maintain the dignity and an appropriate standard of living conditions and services for displaced populations, whether they live in planned or spontaneous collective settings.

Shelter. In situations involving conflict, UNHCR leads this cluster. In natural disasters, the IFRC leads. If IFRC is not present or is not able to lead the cluster at the outset of a natural disaster, UNHCR may temporarily lead until IFRC is ready to do so. Since IFRC is not a recipient of CERF funding, UNHCR can support in natural disasters by receiving CERF funds for shelter. Country operations should consult the Global Shelter Cluster in such situations.

When new emergency situations arise, UNHCR country representatives consult with their respective regional bureau and participate in UNCT or HCT discussions on cluster activation. When a UNHCR-led cluster is activated, in accordance with IASC commitments and accountabilities, UNHCR offices must be prepared to resource cluster coordination, including coordination capacity at national and local level and information management support. Merging of clusters (shelter/NFI and CCCM) is not considered a good practice and should be avoided. Country operations should consult global clusters before taking steps to merge clusters.

What is encouraged is to seek **tri-cluster synergies** where feasible, meaning ensuring that strategies, initiatives and messaging are mutually reinforcing across protection, shelter and the CCCM clusters. Specifically, this may mean to:

- Agree on priority geographic areas and integrate strategies, approaches and activities
- Establish collaboration and a joint communication mechanism between humanitarian, development and where appropriate peace actors working in an area
- Carry out joint sectoral assessments
- To the extent possible, align clusters' results chains in HRPs with UNHCR's
- Ensure dedicated separate UNHCR & cluster IM capacity
- Engage joint resources such as translation services and other services for cluster activities

More UNHCR-internal information in the Implementation Planning Tool for IDP Contexts ("Building Blocks").

Post emergency phase

IASC cluster deactivation can take place for a single cluster or several. It may occur after a coordination architecture review, or after other events in the country reduce the need for humanitarian response. Cluster deactivation must always be based on an assessment of national capacity and consideration of the context. The criteria for deactivation must be met, i.e.: (i) The humanitarian situation improves, significantly reducing humanitarian needs and associated response and coordination gaps and/or (ii) national structures acquire sufficient capacity to coordinate and meet residual humanitarian needs in line with humanitarian principles.

Cluster Activation CHECKLIST

- The RC/HC and Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs), supported by OCHA, consult national authorities what humanitarian coordination mechanisms exist, and their respective capacities.

- Global CLAs are alerted by their country Representatives and OCHA before the UNCT/HCT meeting to discuss activation and to ensure they are represented at the meeting.

- 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 four criteria outlined above.

- 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. **Ideally, the selection of CLAs 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, Cluster Lead Agencies were encouraged to consider developing a clearly defined, agreed, and supported sharing of cluster leadership with NGOs wherever feasible.

- The RC/HC writes to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (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 (such as Gender or PSEA networks), these are also described.

- 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 this in more detail, if necessary.

- 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.

- The RC/HC informs relevant partners when decisions on Clusters and lead agencies are approved.

- UNHCR operations should inform the three UNHCR-led global Clusters as soon as discussions are being prepared on Cluster activation, who can provide support and guidance regarding the way forward. The relevant global Clusters also need to be consulted before making decisions on co-chairing clusters or not leading a country-level cluster in conflict-induced contexts.

  Clusters should not be merged and each UNHCR-led Cluster should have its own dedicated resources, as per the 2019 UNHCR's Policy on Situations of Internal Displacement (minimum a dedicated Cluster Coordinator and a dedicated Information Management Officer).

  As the activation of the CCCM Cluster requires specific considerations, please consult the Building blocks tools (accessible to UNHCR staff only) and guidance for detailed information on what these are.

Annexes

UNHCR-OCHA, Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations

3. Learning and field practices

Accessible to UNHCR staff only

Workday learning components on coordination in situations of internal displacem...

4. Links

IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at country level, 2015

5. Main contacts

- UNHCR Partnership and Coordination Service: hqng00@unhcr.org.
- Global Protection Cluster at gpc@unhcr.org
- Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster at: HQGLOBCC@unhcr.org.
- Global Shelter Cluster at: HQShelter@unhcr.org