Cluster Approach (IASC)

24 March 2023

Key points

- The UNHCR Representative actively participates in the HCT, representing both the agency and the cluster(s) UNHCR leads.

- The cluster approach provides the 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.

- At global level, UNHCR leads the protection cluster; co-leads the shelter cluster when conflict causes displacement; and co-leads the CCCM cluster when conflict causes displacement. UNHCR also leads the protection cluster in cases where disasters induce displacement provided it has an in-country presence, is requested to do so by the Government, and there is inter-agency agreement.

- Through the UNCT or HCT, UNHCR participates in decisions on country cluster activation; at global level, the High Commissioner endorses cluster activation proposals.

- At country level, inter-agency cluster-based responses are led by the HC through the cluster lead agencies. Sector-specific strategic direction and operational coordination is led by national cluster coordinators.

1. Overview

This entry should be read in conjunction with the Entry on International Coordination Architecture.

The Cluster Approach is used for coordinating in non-refugee humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarian organisations have agreed to lead certain clusters at global level (see the chart), and have defined a cluster structure for non-refugee humanitarian responses at country level. At
country level, cluster leadership should ideally mirror global arrangements and clusters are often co-led with government and/or co-chaired with NGO partners. The cluster system emerged to fill accountability gaps in international humanitarian responses. It spreads accountability for the delivery of services (health, shelter, etc.) across different cluster lead agencies, and as a result 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).

**Note.** Protection and assistance to refugees is coordinated and delivered through the [Refugee Coordination Model](#) (RCM). (Clusters are not activated for responses to refugee crises.) In mixed situations, where a response is needed for both refugees and persons who have been internally displaced, the [Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice](#) should be used for guidance.

The foundations of the current non-refugee international humanitarian coordination system were established by UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (December 1991), which created both the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and the post of Emergency Relief Coordinator. Led by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the ERC (who is also head of OCHA), the IASC system brings together its members, which are operational organisations linked with the UN system, and a number of standing invitees, including ICRC, IFRC, ICVA, InterAction, OHCHR, the World Bank Group and the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons.

Almost 15 years later, in 2005, the ‘humanitarian reform agenda' introduced several new operational and policy elements to enhance predictability, accountability and partnership. The Cluster Approach was one of the new elements.

Clusters are groups of humanitarian organizations, both UN and non-UN, 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.

The Cluster Approach was applied for the first time after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. Since then there have been two evaluations. The first, finalized in 2007, focused on implementation. The second, in 2010, examined the contribution clusters made to improving humanitarian assistance. After the 2010 report, the Cluster Approach was further refined and improved in the context of the ‘[Transformative Agenda](#)'.

### 2. Main guidance

**Underlying rationale / objective of the approach or system**

Good coordination is needs-based, not capacity-driven. It establishes a coherent and complementary approach that identifies ways to work together for better collective results.
Large non-refugee humanitarian crises are crises in which needs exceed a government's existing capacity and in which the needs, scale and complexity of the crisis warrant 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 both in humanitarian emergencies caused by conflicts and in humanitarian emergencies caused by disasters.

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

- Increases transparency and accountability. Its mechanisms improve transparency in resource allocation, establish leadership, and focus on operational performance, leading to stronger accountability.
- Enhances predictability. Sector and thematic responsibilities are made clear; formal mechanisms at national and international level bring clarity to areas that are not otherwise covered.
- Engagement 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.
- Inclusion of 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.
- More effective advocacy. 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**

In December 2013 the IASC Principals issued a statement on the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action. It is considered to be a core commitment of HCs, Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), and clusters. It affirms 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). Responses must develop a specific protection strategy at HCT level, covering preparedness, all aspects of the humanitarian response, and solutions. The protection cluster is expected to provide analysis and support the HCT needs to prepare this strategy.
Policy, strategy and/or guidance

Cluster activation
In specific country situations, clusters can only be activated by the ERC, with the endorsement of IASC Principals. In 2018, ‘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. Mobilisation 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 of cluster activation at country level are crucial. In this period, it should make clear its readiness and commitment to lead particular clusters and activate internal mechanisms for rapid deployment of relevant staff.

Core functions of a cluster
At country level, clusters:
1. Support service delivery by providing a space in which to agree approaches and eliminate duplication.
2. Inform strategic decision-making of the HC/HCT by coordinating needs assessment, gap analysis, and prioritization.
3. Plan and develop strategies, including cluster plans, and arrangements for adhering to standards and meeting funding needs.
4. Advocate on behalf of cluster participants and affected populations.
5. Monitor and report on the cluster strategy 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 integrating a solutions-orientation.

**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, the UNICEF Representative the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) cluster, etc. OCHA supports the HC's coordination role, and typically convenes inter-cluster coordination meetings in which national cluster coordinators participate.

At country level, a cluster has six core functions:
1. To support service delivery, it:
   - Provides a coordination platform that ensures service delivery is driven by the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and strategic priorities.
   - Develops mechanisms to eliminate duplication of service delivery.
2. To support the HC/HCT's strategic decision-making, it:
   - Prepares needs assessments and analyses of gaps (across and in clusters), using information management tools as needed, to guide decisions on priorities.
   - Identifies (emerging) gaps, obstacles, problems of duplication, and cross-cutting issues, and finds ways to address them.
   - Formulates priorities on the basis of analysis.
3. To plan and implement cluster strategies, it:
   - Develops sectoral plans, objectives and indicators that directly support realization of the response's strategic objectives.
   - Applies and adheres to agreed standards and guidelines.
   - Clarifies funding requirements, helps set priorities, and agrees cluster contributions to the HC's overall humanitarian funding proposals.
4. To monitor and evaluate performance, it:
   - Monitors and reports on activities and needs.
   - Measures progress against the cluster strategy and agreed results.
   - Recommends corrective action where necessary.
5. To build national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning.
6. To support robust advocacy, it:
   - Identifies concerns, and contributes support and content to HC and HCT messaging and action.
   - Undertakes advocacy on behalf of the cluster, cluster members, and affected people.
Role of partners involved

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The IASC is a unique inter-agency forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making. It includes the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners. Led by the EKC, the IASC develops humanitarian policies, demarcates responsibilities across the various dimensions of humanitarian assistance, identifies and addresses gaps in response, and advocates for effective application of humanitarian principles.

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 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 all complex emergencies that require UN humanitarian assistance. In countries affected by disasters or conflict, the ERC may appoint an 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. 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, and 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" (from UNHCR's IDP policy).
Cluster coordinators. A cluster coordinator is responsible for ensuring that his or her cluster fulfils its role (with regard to needs assessment, response planning, setting of 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. (For more information on ICCG standard terms of reference, see https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/coordination/clusters/global-cluster-coordinators-group-initiatives-0.)

Shared leadership. The IASC recommends that country-level cluster leadership should mirror global arrangements. Accordingly, UNHCR should normally 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 when the appointment of co-leads or co-chairs is considered 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. It also helps coordination between clusters at 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. These set out what local, national, or international organizations undertake to bring to country-level clusters. They are not meant to exclude organizations or prevent national authorities from participating, where it is appropriate for them to do so.

Organizations that join clusters undertake to:
Adhere to humanitarian principles and principles of partnership. Participate in actions that specifically improve accountability to affected populations. 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 to develop and disseminate advocacy and messaging for relevant audiences.

The minimum commitments are not prescriptive and should be adapted to actual 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 leads three clusters:

**Protection.** In situations involving conflict, UNHCR leads the protection cluster. UNHCR also leads this cluster in situations where a 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’ that are attributed to UNFPA for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), 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; it seeks rather to establish and maintain the dignity of living conditions and services of an appropriate standard 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. Because IFRC is not a recipient of CERF funding, UNHCR can provide 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 Representatives at country level consult HQ and participate in UNCT or HCT discussions of cluster activation. When a cluster led by UNHCR 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.
To implement its updated **Policy on UNHCR’s Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement (September 2019)**, UNHCR is currently making an agency-wide effort to strengthen its preparedness, response and solutions interventions in internal displacement situations, underpinned by a robust operational response in each of these sectors. Globally and in all IDP operations, it is strengthening internal tri-cluster synergies, including by mainstreaming protection across all sectors.

**Annexes**

UNHCR-OCHA, Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations. Coordination in Practice

IASC Principals, The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action, statement

Global Shelter Cluster Coordination Toolkit

IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level July 2015

UNHCR-IOM Framework Agreement - Serving and Protecting Together 30.06.2022

**3. Links**

Shelter cluster Global CCCM Cluster Global protection cluster

**4. Main contacts**

Contact

- Annika Sandlund ([sandlund@unhcr.org](mailto:sandlund@unhcr.org)) or Maria Kiani ([kiani@unhcr.org](mailto:kiani@unhcr.org)) at the Partnership and Coordination Service
- The Global Protection Cluster at [http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/general/contact-us/](http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/general/contact-us/) The Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster, at: [https://cccmcluster.org/about/team](https://cccmcluster.org/about/team) or HQGLOBCC@unhcr.org.
- The Global Shelter Cluster, at: [https://www.sheltercluster.org/about-us/global-support-team](https://www.sheltercluster.org/about-us/global-support-team) or HQShelter@unhcr.org.