

International Coordination Architecture

12 January 2024

Key points

- Coordination is a means to maximize the positive effects of action by UNHCR and partners on protection, the delivery of humanitarian responses, and solutions to displacement
- This entry describes, as relevant to UNHCR, the Chief Executive Board, the UN Reform, the UN Sustainable Development coordination components, the main IASC humanitarian coordination features and a summary of the RCM

1. Overview

This Entry summarizes the current international humanitarian coordination structures. In addition, it also touches on areas where humanitarian and development coordination intersect. The Entry should be read in conjunction with the entries on the [Cluster Approach](#), and the [Refugee Coordination Model](#).

2. Relevance for emergency operations

For UNHCR, the pursuit of effective coordination is not an end in itself, but a means to maximize the positive effects that UNHCR and its partners have on protection, the delivery of humanitarian responses, and solutions to displacement. UNCHR and other agencies have been promoting the connection between humanitarian action and development for many years. By recognizing and promoting such ways of working that increase complementarity, the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) has underscored the need to involve development actors. Connections with development should be made from the preparedness phase onwards, and the link is especially crucial when countries emerge from the emergency phase and transition into a phase during which development issues, such as livelihoods and employment, predominate.

3. Main guidance

Chief Executive Board

The UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) is the longest-standing and highest-level coordination forum of the United Nations system. It meets biannually and is chaired by the UN Secretary-General. It provides broad guidance, coordination and strategic direction for the UN system as a whole in areas under the responsibility of executive heads. While ensuring respect for organizations' independent mandates, it focuses on inter-agency priorities and initiatives. The CEB is composed of 31 United Nations entities, including Funds and Programmes, Specialized Agencies such as the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), as well as related organizations (the WTO, IAEA and IOM).

The CEB works through two high-level committees: the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP), and the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM). UNHCR is a member of the CEB and is represented by the High Commissioner; the DHC represents UNHCR in the HLCM and the AHC-O in HLCP.

UN Reform

The Secretary-General (SG) has initiated an ambitious reform agenda to enhance UN performance across the three pillars of UN work: peace and security, human rights, and development, at headquarters and in the field by adopting integrated, decentralized, and impact-oriented approaches wherever approaches have been fragmented, centralized or process-heavy. The SG is also reviewing UN gender policies to enhance gender parity; UN efforts to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse; various components of the counter-terrorism architecture; and the UN's whistle-blower policy. It is important to note that UNHCR strongly supports efforts to revitalize the UN development system because doing so is key to bridging the humanitarian/development divide and delivering responses that are sustainable.

The SG has put 'prevention' at the centre of the reform effort. His vision of prevention requires the UN system to do everything possible to help countries avert the outbreak of crises that take a high toll on human life, undermine their institutions, and weaken their capacity to achieve peace and development. Elements of preventive action include: early identification of risks; intensified diplomacy; acceleration of UN development work; and strengthened member state engagement. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to prioritize efforts to raise prevention concerns with relevant intergovernmental bodies and mechanisms, such as the Security Council, the General Assembly, ECOSOC and the Peacebuilding Commission. The SG has formed a High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation to provide him with advice on mediation initiatives and to support specific mediation efforts around the world. The Board is composed of 18 current and former global leaders, senior officials, and experts. He also relies on the SG's Executive Committee, composed of the Principals of all Secretariat agencies, which raises and discusses issues of critical risk and pursues an overall risk mitigation and prevention strategy.

With regard to peace and security, a broad set of measures seeks to ensure that: risk analysis and responses to risk are shared; women and youth are meaningfully engaged in peace efforts;

peace funding increases (including a 'quantum leap' in support to the Peacebuilding Fund); and partnerships for peace multiply, including partnerships with regional and sub-regional organizations and with the World Bank.

Management reforms mainly focus on the UN Secretariat. They seek to improve the efficiency, transparency and accountability of a system that, according to some, is often slow, unresponsive and ineffective. Ongoing UN change processes are taking steps to: review and simplify human resources procedures to raise the quality and speed of staff recruitment, deployment and development; achieve gender parity; improve workforce planning, training and development, paying special attention to the profile of leaders and managers; refocus the UN's strategy on information and communications technology; and improve global supply chain management.

Of the three areas of reform, reform of the UNDS currently has the most direct impact on UNHCR operations at country level. After the 2016 Quadrennial Comprehensive Programme Review initiated the UNDS reform process, the Secretary-General issued a report containing proposals for action, most of which Member States approved in the GA Resolution on UNDS reform of May 2019.

UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG)

At global level, the UNSDG provides a forum for joint policy formation and decision-making. It guides, supports, tracks and oversees coordination of development operations in 165 countries and territories. It brings together 36 UN funds, programmes, specialized agencies, departments and offices that play a role in development.

The UNSDG's current **strategic priorities** are to: assist countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more swiftly and implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; assist national partners to implement their human rights obligations and integrate human rights principles and international standards into the work of the UN; and deliver effective support that will help crisis and post-crisis countries to build resilient societies and achieve sustainable recovery.

The UNSDG's current **strategic approaches** are to: promote coherent development results across the entire UN development system in order to improve transparency and accountability; ensure that Resident Coordinator systems are participatory, collegial and mutually accountable; simplify and harmonize business practices more swiftly; develop effective partnerships and wider multi-stakeholder engagement; strengthen capacity development as a core function of the UN development system; and integrate planning, programming and policy more completely.

Implementation of UNSDG strategic priorities and work plans is driven by **working mechanisms** – working groups and task teams – that focus on fostering system-wide norms, standards, and policies, as well as operational effectiveness.

The UNSDG meets twice a year under the chairmanship of its Chair, Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General, who chairs the UNSDG on behalf of the SG. The UNDP Administrator, Mr Achim Steiner, serves as Vice-Chair.

The UNSDG is composed of the executive heads of UNSDG member entities. The UNSDG Vice-chair convenes the **UNSDG Core Group**, whose members include DESA, FAO, ILO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women, WFP, WHO, the rotating chair of the Regional Economic Commissions, and chairs of the UNSDG Strategic Results Groups.

Resident Coordinator (and Humanitarian Coordinator)

The [Resident Coordinator system](#) (RC) remains focused on sustainable development; its overarching objective is 'the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions'. RCs report to the SG through the UN Deputy Secretary-General. The UN Development Coordination Office (DCO) in the UN Secretariat will manage and oversee the system, reporting to the Deputy Secretary-General. RCs have authority to lead UN Country Teams (UNCTs) when they implement the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and assist countries to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Where international humanitarian assistance is required, and a separate Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) or lead agency is not designated, the RC leads and coordinates the response efforts of UN and other relevant humanitarian actors. In refugee crises, UNHCR is the designated lead agency and leads the response. To enable the RC to deploy and coordinate the UN development response coherently and effectively, UNHCR should brief the RC on all aspects of this work.

Where the scope and scale of a crisis requires it, following consultation with the IASC, the ERC may designate an HC. In most cases, the RC will take on the role, but in some circumstances a stand-alone HC will coordinate the humanitarian response. In instances where one operational UN agency or NGO is providing most of the humanitarian assistance, the ERC may consider designating that agency or NGO representative as HC; the ERC may also consider designating a Regional HC working with RCs and HCs in several countries.

The primary responsibility for coordinating humanitarian assistance rests with national authorities, but when international assistance is required, the HC or the UN RC is responsible for leading and coordinating the efforts of humanitarian organizations (both UN and non-UN). They also have a role to ensure that humanitarian action is principled, timely, effective, efficient and contributes to longer-term recovery. They are ultimately accountable to all people in need. Effective inter-agency mechanisms for accountability to affected people (AAP) should be established to ensure this is duly recognized and remains central to their humanitarian leadership. More information in the [RC/HC Handbook](#).

The accountabilities of UNCT agencies

Members of a UNCT are accountable and report to their respective agencies on matters relevant to their mandates. They are also expected to report periodically to the RC, on the activities of their individual agencies and on their agencies' contributions to the collective results of the UNSDCF. UNCT heads also report to the RC.

UN Country Teams

UNCTs organize UN inter-agency cooperation and decision-making at country level. The UNCT includes every entity of the UN system that delivers operational activities for development, emergency, recovery and transition in a country. Its main purposes are to ensure that UNCT members plan and work co-operatively, within the Resident Coordinator system, to deliver tangible results in support of the Government's development agenda.

The UN Resident Coordinator (RC) is the designated representative of the UN Secretary-General for development issues. The RC leads the UNCT. The UNCT meets at least once a month to make decisions through a consultative process. All UNCT members are collegially accountable to the RC and the UNCT, as well as directly accountable to their own organizations, for producing results under the UNSDCF and the joint UNCT workplan.

UNHCR can use the UNCT mechanism to exercise its protection leadership role and advocate for the inclusion of refugees in the UNSDCF. Advocacy is recommended both to engage UNCT members in support of UNHCR's advocacy objectives, and ensure that people of concern to UNHCR (PoC) are included in the UNSDCF and other national planning mechanisms.

The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

The UNSDCF is a multi-year strategic programme framework for UNCTs. Each national UNSDCF is designed to streamline UN development programmes at country level by introducing shared objectives, strategies and timeframes; it is prepared in close cooperation with the national Government. The World Bank may also participate in a UNSDCF when it contributes to development programmes.

The [UNSDCF process](#) starts with a Common Country Analysis (CCA). The CCA identifies needs and achievable changes. It provides the essential evidence base from which the UNSDCF's theory of change is derived and sets the direction and content for a strategic UN development assistance framework (UNDAF). CCAs are forward looking. In developing them, the UN system uses its convening power to consult and engage with the Government and other stakeholders. The analysis itself is the UN's, and does not require formal endorsement by Government. At the same time, preparing a CCA creates opportunities to build partnerships with key actors in a country, including international financial institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Unlike humanitarian and refugee planning exercises, the UNSDCF does not include NGO or civil society programmes, although these organizations may be consulted and may be implementing partners. Inter-agency humanitarian plans, IASC-led [humanitarian response plans](#) (HRPs), and UNHCR-led refugee response plans (RRPs) will continue to be independent but as far as possible should complement the UNSDCF.

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)

The IASC is a global humanitarian forum established in 1992 under UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182. Led by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), who is also head of OCHA, its members are operational

organizations that have links to the UN system. Standing invitees include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction, OHCHR, the World Bank Group, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. In practice, no distinction is made between 'members' and 'standing invitees', and the number of participating agencies has expanded significantly since 1992.

The IASC's main purpose is to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action by coordinating the activities of IASC members and other humanitarian actors, assigning responsibilities, and sharing resources and knowledge. The IASC develops and agrees system-wide humanitarian policies and resolves disputes or disagreements between humanitarian agencies or over system-wide humanitarian issues.

A central role of IASC is to activate system-wide [Scale-Up](#) in response to emergencies when conditions apply. An IASC Scale-Up is a **humanitarian system mobilisation** in response to a sudden-onset and/or rapidly deteriorating situation in a given country or region where the capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance does not match the scale, complexity, and urgency of the crisis, and where there is a risk of failure to deliver without a scale-up.

The IASC may empower a **Humanitarian Coordinator (HC)** to lead the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT); in many situations, the Humanitarian Coordinator also acts as a Resident Coordinator, referred to as an HC / RC.

Overview of UNHCR's role in the IASC

- The IASC system deals with humanitarian issues that do not involve refugees. General Assembly Resolution 48/116 (December 1993) provides the legal foundation for UNHCR's engagement with internally displaced persons (IDPs). It is supported by the 2005 Humanitarian Reform that in turn led to the [cluster approach](#).
- UNHCR is actively involved in the IASC. It leads the [protection cluster](#), and co-leads the camp coordination/camp management cluster (CCCM) and the [shelter cluster](#). (On shelter, UNHCR leads in situations of conflict and IFRC leads in natural disasters.)
- The High Commissioner is a 'Principal' (head of agency) in the IASC.
- The Deputy High Commissioner represents UNHCR in the Deputies Group
- The Partnership and Coordination Service of the Division of External Relations represents UNHCR in the OPAG (Operational policy and Advisory Group) and ensure UNHCR coherent engagement in IASC Task forces and Working Group.
- The Division of Emergency, Security, and Supply represents UNHCR in the Emergency Directors' group.
- UNHCR has made firm commitments to fulfil its global and national cluster roles and obligations, and to report to the ERC on these.

It should be borne in mind that, in line with the IDP policy:

- UNHCR will always strive to lead the [protection cluster](#). Because UNHCR is not operational in all countries, however, in natural disaster settings leadership may be allocated to other agencies that have strong in-country capacity (such as UNICEF, OHCHR or UNFPA), subject

to the agreement of peers.

- UNHCR will strive to lead the shelter and CCCM clusters in forced displacement settings. In general, UNHCR is not in favour of merging these clusters because each requires distinct technical expertise.
- The IASC/ERC does not lead on refugee matters, which are exclusively the domain of the High Commissioner, who reports directly to the UN General Assembly. (The ERC reports to the Secretary-General on matters that concern the IASC.)
- The ERC activates cluster-based responses to IDP and natural disasters via the IASC. The ERC does not have authority to declare a refugee emergency. Equally, UNHCR may not issue a system-wide emergency declaration or initiate cluster coordination at its own initiative.

One of the central roles of the IASC is to declare that an emergency has been scaled up. In November 2018, protocols for 'system-wide scale-up' replaced the previous arrangements for activating 'Level 3 emergencies'. An IASC system-wide scale-up mobilizes the entire IASC humanitarian system in response to a sudden onset crisis, or a rapidly deteriorating situation, in a country or region. System-wide scale-ups are called when the local or regional capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance does not match the scale, complexity, and urgency of a crisis. The five criteria for determining a system-wide scale-up emergency are: scale, urgency, complexity, capacity, and risk of failure to effectively deliver to affected populations. Please read the Entry on the [Cluster Approach](#) for more information.

Refugee coordination

Under [its Statute](#), UNHCR provides international protection to refugees and seeks permanent solutions for them, acting on the authority of the General Assembly (GA). In that capacity, it is the lead agency with respect to refugee protection, responsible for seeking solutions in the UN system in association with a wider array of stakeholders. As set out in subsequent GA resolutions, its responsibilities include coordination, provision of protection and assistance, obtaining solutions, and advocacy. Importantly, UNHCR also has a supervisory role: it is the UN entity most immediately responsible for ensuring that States adhere to internationally accepted standards with respect to refugees and stateless persons and for strengthening States' capacity to protect both groups.

UNHCR has led and managed refugee operations effectively for decades. For many years, however, it did not articulate a model of refugee coordination that took account of changes in the humanitarian landscape. The [Refugee Coordination Model](#) (RCM), formalised in 2013 and further updated in 2019, makes UNHCR's approach to coordination more predictable by clarifying roles and responsibilities. Recent UN General Assembly Resolutions have confirmed the RCM and UNHCR's mandate to lead and coordinate the refugee response ([A/RES/69/152](#), [A/RES/70/135](#)).

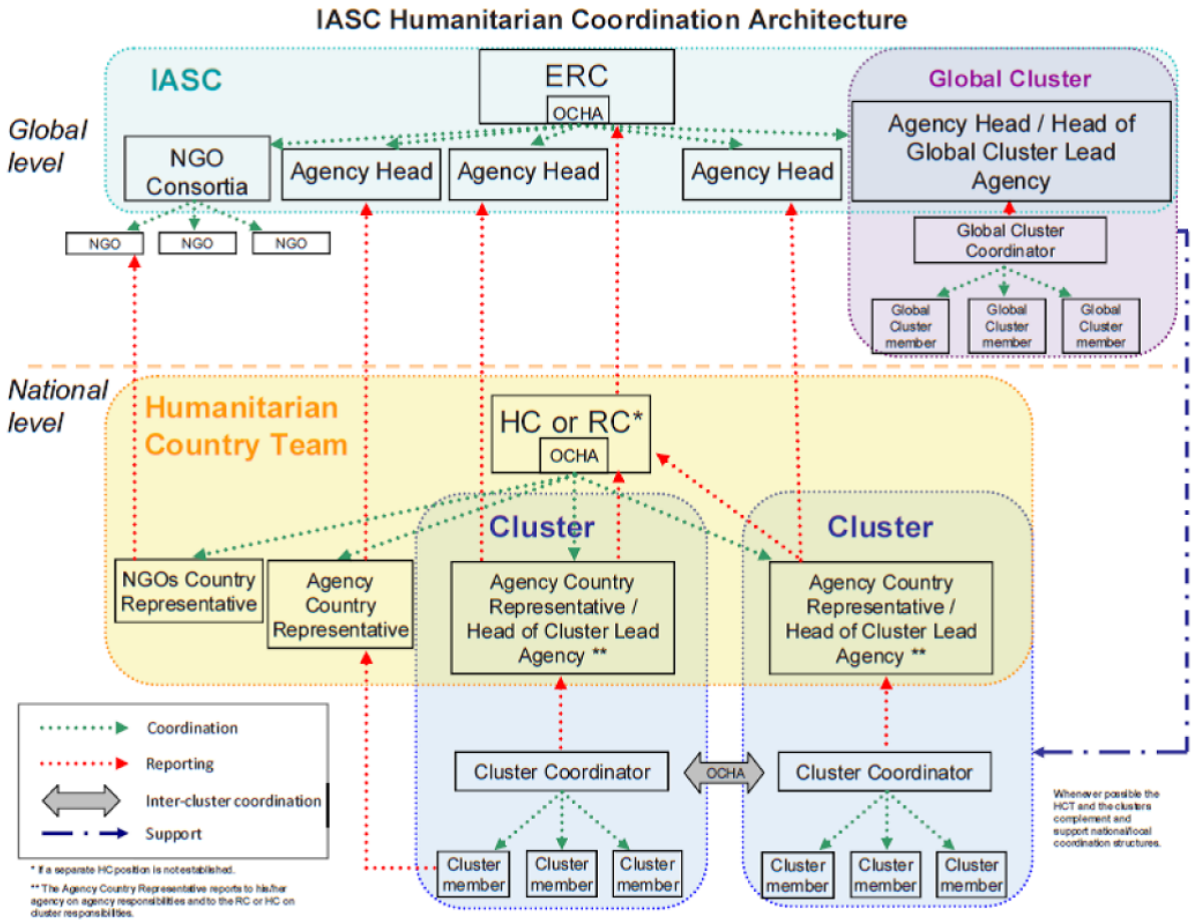
States are primarily responsible for protecting refugees. However, several factors can inhibit their capacity to fully discharge this responsibility. The arrival of large numbers of refugees may strain infrastructures and service delivery, that may be already stretched to begin with. In addition, States may not be equipped to appropriately receive, protect or otherwise respond to the challenges of receiving large numbers of refugees. For these reasons, international cooperation is required to support States that receive refugees. This understanding lay at the

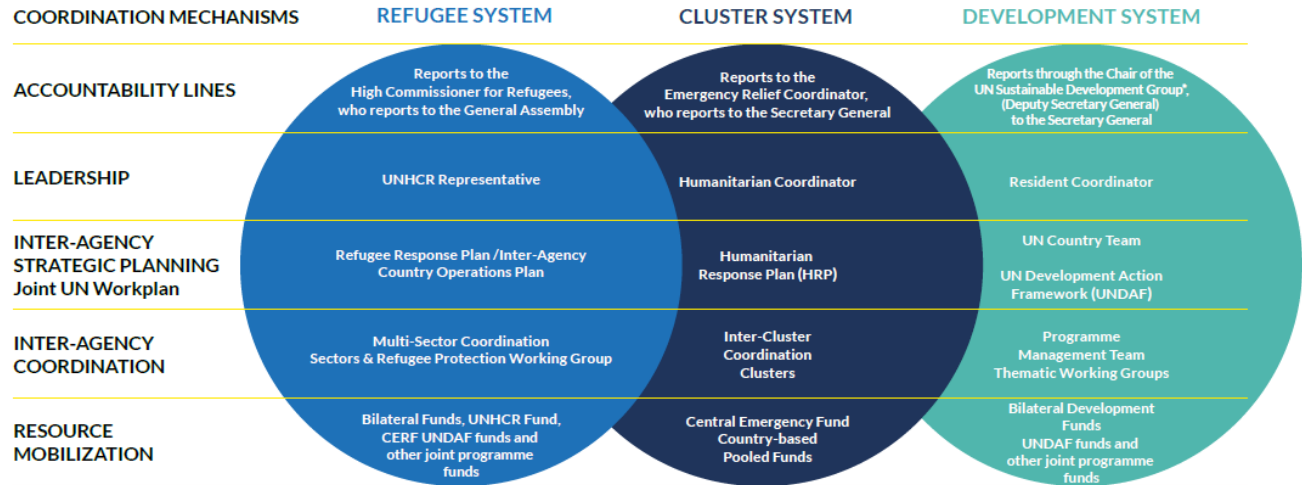
heart of UNHCR's creation and the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees. The importance of cooperation was subsequently confirmed in a range of regional instruments and was underscored by the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) which stated that "there is an urgent need for more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world's refugees, while taking account of existing contributions and the differing capacities and resources among States. Refugees and host communities should not be left behind." The GCR calls for a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach to reach this objective, to achieve which UNHCR plays both a support and catalytic role.

UNHCR is mandated to affirm and support the right of every refugee to a safe and dignified voluntary return to his or her own country. UNHCR provides advice and guides UN action to facilitate voluntary return to countries of origin where conditions are such that return is safe, dignified and sustainable.

The UN system expects UNHCR to advise it on refugee returns, based on its assessment of the country's readiness to receive returnees, guarantee their security, provide essential services, and do so sustainably over time.

For more information on the interface of refugee coordination with the development and cluster systems, see the Entry on the [Refugee Coordination Model](#).





* the UN Development System is under reform

Post emergency phase

Nexus

The humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus approach encourages joined-up complementary efforts across stakeholders to reduce people’s humanitarian needs, risks and vulnerabilities. It does not imply that humanitarian, development, peace and other actors should merge their activities or integrate roles, but it calls for programmes or activities to be layered in all contexts, in line with the respective mandates of each actor.

Responses to both IDP and refugee situations should contribute to operationalizing the HDP nexus by coordinating and combining mutually reinforcing humanitarian, development and peace efforts that work towards solutions for people in need and host communities, in line with the [OECD’s DAC recommendation on the HDP nexus](#). This means that after the live-saving emergency phase, response partners need to embed longer-term objectives in national or local development plans, UNSDCF or other frameworks of relevance, as part of the Agenda 2030 commitment of leaving no one behind.

4. Main contacts

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