The Cluster Approach:
Working Towards Best Practices in Humanitarian Response

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Abstract

The creation of the Cluster Approach has moved the humanitarian response towards a system, which maximizes the effectiveness of aid by identifying and filling in key gaps in services and the coordination of humanitarian actors, including UN, the Red Cross Movement, and international and national NGOs. Formed only in 2005, the Cluster Approach has gone through two in-depth evaluations and has been found to have already had a positive impact on humanitarian response. Most notably in the areas of gap analysis and coverage, leadership and coordination, and monitoring, evaluation and information sharing, the Cluster Approach is an example of best practices within the humanitarian system.

(Key Words: Humanitarian Response, Cluster Approach, Best Practices, Coordination)

<u>Overview:</u>

The purpose of this briefing is to highlight the Cluster Approach of humanitarian assistance in order bring forward emerging best practices from the system. It will cover both the history and need behind the formation of the Cluster Approach, a basic explanation of the system and its goals, and a look at what the Cluster Approach has brought to the humanitarian system in terms of best practices.

<u>History and Formation:</u>

In 2004, the then United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator commissioned an independent Humanitarian Response Review of the current humanitarian system. The review was intended to assess "the humanitarian response capacities of the UN, NGOs, Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and other key humanitarian actors including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), map the gaps, and make recommendations to address them."[1] The review identified major gaps in several areas of humanitarian response as well as expansive problems of coordination between the United Nations, the Red Cross Movement, and international and national NGOs. In 2005, as a response to the review, the Emergency Relief Coordinator, in partnership with the Inter-Agency Steering Committee (IASC) initiated a reform of the humanitarian system. This reform was intended to strengthen the effectiveness of humanitarian response based on four pillars:

- Humanitarian financing

- Humanitarian Coordinator System

- Partnership among all humanitarian actors

- Cluster approach[2]

It was from these reviews and reforms that the fourth pillar, the Cluster Approach, was formed as an attempt to create a more coordinated and effective humanitarian response system.

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[1] Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs. United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator. *Humanitarian Response Review*. 2005. http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ocha_hrr.pdf (Page 8)

[2] Steets, Julia. Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs. Inter-Agency Standing Committee. *IASC Cluster Approach Evaluation, 2nd Phase*. 2010. http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/Inception_Report_CE2_Final.pdf (Page 17).

About the Cluster Approach:

The main role of the Cluster Approach is to strengthen the overall response capacity of the humanitarian system as well as the effectiveness of the responses. It aims to do this in five key ways:

- Ensure Sufficient Global Capacity

- Ensure Predictable Leadership in Main Sectors of Response

- Strengthen Partnerships

- Strengthen Accountability

- Improve Strategic Field-Level Coordination and Prioritization[3]

The Cluster Approach designates a "Cluster Lead," an organization designated as the lead coordinator for a specific area of response, which is responsible for "organizing coordination at global and country level, strengthening global preparedness, developing global guidance and acting as a provider of last resort."[4] Lead agencies were chosen for each of the sectors/areas of activity (clusters): logistics, nutrition, emergency shelter, camp coordination and management, health, protection, agriculture, emergency telecommunications, early recovery, education and sanitation, water and hygiene. The Cluster Approach, beginning in 2005, was to be applied to all major "new" emergency situations as well as in all on-going emergencies that currently have a Humanitarian Coordinator. The Cluster Approach is now being used in 43 countries to respond to natural and man-made disasters (Appendix A).[5]

Best Practices of the Cluster Approach:

The Cluster Approach has been in existence for six years and has already been seen to have a positive impact upon the humanitarian system. While it is still growing and learning the areas in which it can improve, there are notable areas in which the Cluster Approach represents best practices in

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[3] "Cluster Approach." *One Response*. http://oneresponse.info/Coordination/ClusterApproach/Pages/Cluster Approach.aspx
[4] Steets, Julia, 17
[5] "Cluster Approach." *One Response.*

humanitarian assistance in the areas of 1) coverage and gap identification, 2) coordination and

leadership, and 3) monitoring, evaluation and information sharing.

Coverage and Gap Identification

One of the leading motives for the humanitarian review and following reform in 2005 and 2006

was to address priority gaps in humanitarian response. The Cluster Approach was designed to identify

and address gaps in response through "coordination and organizing a collective response" of all actors

of the humanitarian system in the field.[6] In terms of gap and coverage identification, the Cluster

Approach has made great strides in reducing the duplication of humanitarian efforts at the field level.

This means that humanitarian efforts can now become more efficient (as key gaps and service areas are

identified), with less overlap, meaning that there is "greater coverage with the same resources."[7]

While every country in which this Cluster Approach is used can identify duplication in project

coverage through cluster meetings or through the Consolidated Appeal Process, each country also has

its own individual measures and systems in place to maximize efficiency in humanitarian coverage.

Two such cases are the shelter database in Haiti and the education database in Uganda, which

document which types of projects in what geographical areas are currently being implemented.[8]

The Humanitarian Response Review of 2005 found that major gaps in thematic areas were

particularly found in water and sanitation, shelter, camp management and protection.[9] The Cluster

Approach has seen "clear evidence of enhanced coverage in thematic areas of response that had

received no or barely any attention before the introduction of the cluster approach."[10] In many nations,

the main factor for this is the focused attention on cross-cutting issues such as age, gender, disabilities,

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[6] Steets, 54
[7] Steets, 55
[8] Steets, 55
[9] OCHA *Humanitarian Response Review,* 9
[10] Steets, 55

the environment, HIV/AIDs and those with disabilities. However, it can also bring attention to entire thematic areas that have historically been under resourced and undervalued.[11]

One great example of the best practices of the Cluster Approach in gap and coverage analysis is in the nutrition cluster in Somalia. The nutrition cluster in Somalia does coverage evaluations every few months – most recently in November 2011 – where "nutrition assessments are undertaken to assess the coverage of intervention programs in respective areas."[12] This has allowed the nutrition cluster to identify key geographical areas where coverage is too low and further interventions are necessary. It also shows where interventions are currently working and serving the entire targeted population. This information can then be further used to analyze the differences between the gap areas and the covered areas in order to identify why the gaps exist (see section on "Information Sharing").[13]

Coordination and Leadership

Coordination within the Cluster Approach, in particular the use of Cluster Leads in each of the sector clusters, is what most distinguishes it from previous humanitarian coordination systems. The lead agency for each cluster, both globally and nationally, is responsible for "ensuring response capacity is in place and that assessment, planning, and response activities are carried out in collaboration with partners and in accordance with agreed standards and guidelines."[14] The Cluster Lead, along with all of the organizations working within the cluster, creates a partnership where UN agencies, the ICRC Movement, international and domestic NGOs, military and the local government, "work together towards agreed common humanitarian objectives."[15] These partners work together, under the direction of the Cluster Lead, to streamline and build up "preparedness, standards, tools,

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[11] Steets, 55

[12] B UNICEF Somalia. Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs. IASC Global Nutrition Cluster: Somalia. *Cluster Approach Evaluation: Final*. 2007.
http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docid=1008866&ei=OLNNT9vCCIyqsAK85IEB&usg=AFQjCNGFzIzPv9IdquEewm6h8yQBKbrkdg&sig2=pDSx-GWjckwvXt5DNUrmqA (Page 4)

[13] UNICEF Somalia, 4

[14] "Cluster Approach" One Response

[15] "Cluster Approach" One Response

stockpiles, capacity building, assessment, planning, delivery and monitoring" at the global and local levels.[16]

Cluster Leads are chosen based on their global role and reputation, including funding, programming and capacity, within a specific sector. At the global level, these Cluster Leads have already been chosen, but at a national level, if the Global Cluster Lead does not have a strong presence in the field, a different organization will be chosen to be the National Cluster Lead, which has the understanding of the local context and actors within the sector. In the instance of an acute onset emergency, National Cluster Leads are chosen within 24 hours of the emergency. [17] The Lead at the national level should have the "credibility, influence and contextual knowledge to effectively lead implementing actors, to mediate and resolve their disagreements, and add value to their efforts."[18]

The idea of coordination and leadership within sectors at the global and national levels is a novel idea in the humanitarian response sector.[19] With the implementation of lead organizations responsible for coordination within a sector, humanitarian response activities can be done more efficiently, as Cluster Leads ensure the response capacity and make sure key response gaps are filled prior to and immediately following a humanitarian disaster, and that activities are done more effectively, by bringing organizations and information together to discuss best practices, current programs, missing gaps both programmatically and geographically, and fostering partnerships for stronger responses. In a review and evaluation done in 2010 on the effectiveness of the Cluster Approach, findings showed that "the cluster approach has managed to strengthen the predictability and degree of leadership" and that "humanitarian actors mention this frequently as one of the most important added values of the cluster approach."[20]

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[16] "Cluster Approach" One Response
[17] "Cluster Approach" One Response
[18] Stoddard, Abby. Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs. Inter-Agency Standing Committee. *Cluster Approach Evaluation: Final*. 2007. http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/4955.pdf (Page 9)
[19] Stoddard, 9
[20] Steets, 28

Cluster Leads are not only responsible for coordinating humanitarian action at the global and local level, but also for training of cluster staff (from all organizations) in key areas and activities within the cluster and on cross-cutting issues, supplying additional staff to the cluster if necessary, and also for campaigning for any additional funding needs that haven't been fulfilled for key sector response activities.[21] Finally, and often most importantly, Cluster Lead organizations are responsible for being the "Provider of Last Resort," meaning that if there is a gap in humanitarian coverage within the cluster, the lead agency is responsible for filling that gap.[22] This leadership ensures that all areas of a cluster sector are filled and all necessary humanitarian responses are being implemented.

Rather than "directing" or "demanding" role and responsibilities within a cluster, Cluster Leads are seen as facilitators in the discussion of organizations on what has been accomplished, what gaps exist in responses, what can be improved, and what is understood as best practices within the national and cluster context. In this way, the coordination of humanitarian aid in emergencies becomes a true partnership and collaboration between very different types of organizations who all have similar goals of helping those in need and strengthening local capacities to cope with the problems they face.

This can best be seen within the context of the Iraqi Cluster, which, through constant dialogue of all national and international actors, created a restructuring of their clusters based on the specific needs of the nation and its people. The Iraqi Cluster now has only seven different clusters (compared to the typical nine to eleven), and some of the clusters they are using are new to the global system, including: Governance and Human Development, Infrastructure Rehabilitation, and Support to the Electoral Process.[23] The Iraqi case is a perfect example of the flexibility and adaptability of the Cluster Approach at the national level. The basic ideas and structures of Cluster Leads, collaboration,

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[21] "Cluster Approach" One Response
[22] Stoddard, 10
[23] World Bank. "What is the Cluster Approach: Iraq." *World Bank Iraq*. World Bank. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/IRFFI/64168382-1092419001661/20632001/Cluster%20exhibit%20from%20Pamela%20Hussain.doc&ei=vrNNT7OVAYGKsgKq6vko&usg=AFQjCNEv87nk1AHvi0tsG9dtsG-vuNLoFQ&sig2=fHdzRahJTBO_52aSF4na2g

communication, and coordination, are transferrable across sectors and nations, and can be adapted to best meet the needs of a local population. It was the various Cluster Leads within the Iraqi Cluster that facilitated a continued dialogue within the nation to discuss the priority areas and needs within their specific situation.

Monitoring and Evaluation and Information Sharing

One of the most striking examples of best practice within the Cluster Approach is the effectiveness of the clusters to share valuable information across agencies and sectors, carry out analysis, needs assessments, prioritization and monitoring and evaluation. All of this information was previously being collected at an individual organizational level, but now there are actual structures and processes in place for organizations and agencies to share key information and findings, highlight best practices and lessons learned, and identify key areas of concern moving forward. In the six years that the Cluster Approach has been functioning, it has been found to "significantly improve the intra-cluster prioritization and overall strategic planning, reflected in better, more strategic Consolidated Appeals Processes (CAPS)."[24] In addition to facilitating the collaboration of information sharing among agencies and organizations, Clusters are also serving a role as the collector and aggregator of baseline data. While success and prioritization of this role has been inconsistent across countries, the idea that Cluster Leads should be responsible for finding and disseminating key baseline data for emergencies is important to moving forward in improvements within the humanitarian system.[25]

Within the Cluster System, "clusters create a clearly designated space for information sharing and dissemination that is much appreciated by cluster members and leads to an improved understanding of the situation."[26] The importance of this information sharing is crucial when searching for local and cluster specific solutions to pressing problems. Identifying key successes as well as struggles allows organizations to work together to build upon strengths and address areas of

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[24] Stoddard, 19
[25] Stoddard, 19
[26] Steets 47

weakness in a collaborative, coordinated way. As referenced earlier, key examples of this information management can be seen in the shelter database in Haiti and the education database in Uganda, as well as other countries using GPS and GIS data to map key information, and the use of aggregating data on program reaches at the cluster level to identify gaps and duplications in coverage.[27] There is a growing trend towards the adoption of joint needs assessments by organizations, to collaborate on expensive and timely data collection, as well as the successful dissemination of these results at the national level by the cluster system.[28]

Finally, the Cluster Approach has led to enhanced coherence within the humanitarian response by "providing a platform for discussing and resolving contradictions, developing joint strategies, and creating or disseminating relevant standards" within the humanitarian system.[29] One important way that the Cluster Approach has facilitated this is by adapting global standards to local contexts and situations. For instance, a global standard in infant mortality may be at a level twice that of the baseline for a specific country. In that country, the Health Cluster Lead, through discussion with other key agencies and organizations within the cluster, can come up with a context specific emergency threshold of infant mortality through which different regions they are working on can be measured and monitored. Clusters also come up with minimum standards of care and provisions in each of the sectors based on what is available, accessible and appropriate in the local context. Areas where this has been seen is in Uganda where clusters have "defined and implemented common approaches to child protection," in Chad where clusters agreed upon "standard agricultural starter kits," and in Gaza, where clusters created a Rubble Removal Task Force and "successfully developed a common operational plan for involved partners."[30]

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[27] Steets 47-48
[28] Steets 50
[29] Steets 51
[30] Steets 51

In addition to evaluation and information management used at the global and national cluster-level, the Cluster Approach itself has been under intentional monitoring, evaluation and analysis throughout its creation and implementation. Included in the formation of the Cluster Approach was a request for an evaluation, to be carried out in two phases (2007 and 2010), of its implementation to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of the system, where it is doing well, existing gaps and challenges, and ways in which it can improve. Each of these two major evaluations has produced reports in which key improvements as well as lack of improvements in the various key goals of the Cluster Approach within the humanitarian system.[31] Between the first evaluation in 2007 and the second in 2010, improvements could already be seen in the areas that the earlier report made recommendations on and the clusters continued to grow and improve in already strong areas.[32] This shows a strong commitment to the continued improvement of the humanitarian system and the continuation of best practices within the Cluster Approach.

Conclusion:

The creation of a humanitarian system based on best practices, coordination and collaboration between all levels of organizations and agencies has made a significant impact in the successful, efficient and effective delivery of humanitarian services across the globe. Within the six years that the Cluster Approach has been in use, it has continued to not only support best practices within the humanitarian system at the global and national levels, but has also continually analyzed and evaluated its own structural effectiveness to improve and strengthen the system as a whole. Most notably, the Cluster Approach has supported and added to best practices in the areas of gap analysis and humanitarian coverage, leadership, partnership and coordination, and monitoring, evaluation and information sharing at the local, national and global levels. With a continued commitment to
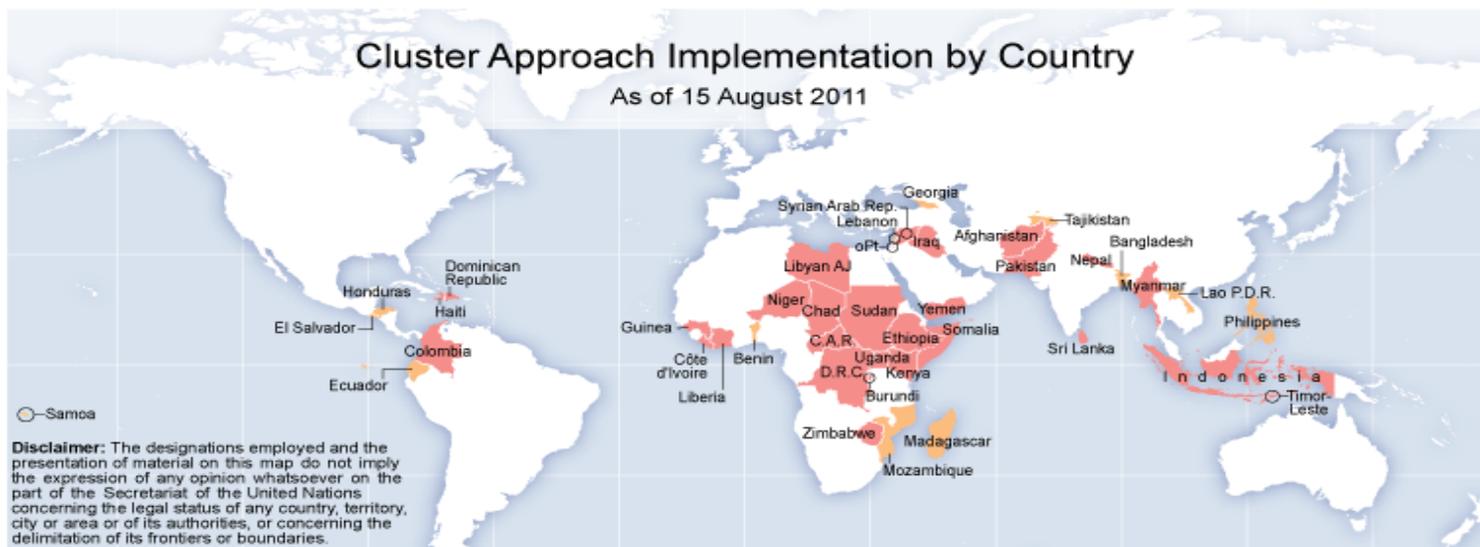
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[31] Steets, 17
[32] Steets

improving the humanitarian system, the Cluster Approach will only lead to a furthering of best practices for all who are involved within it.

Appendix A

Source:" Cluster Approach." *One Response*. http://oneresponse.info/Coordination/ClusterApproach/Pages/Cluster Approach.aspx

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UNICEF Somalia. Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs. IASC Global Nutrition Cluster: Somalia. *Cluster Approach Evaluation: Final*. 2007. http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docid=1008866&ei=OLNNT9vCCIy qsAK85IEB&usg=AFQjCNGFzIzPv9IdquEewm6h8yQBKbrkdg&sig2=pDSx-GWjckwvXt5DNUrmqA

World Bank. "What is the Cluster Approach: Iraq." *World Bank Iraq*. World Bank. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/IRFFI/64168382-1092419001661/20632001/Cluster%20exhibit%20from%20Pamela%20Hussain.doc&ei=vrNN T7OVAYGKsgKq6vko&usg=AFQjCNEv87nk1AHvi0tsG9dtsG-vuNLoFQ&sig2=fHdzRahJTBO_52aSF4na2g