

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE  
66<sup>TH</sup> WORKING GROUP MEETING

**IASC Interim Self-Assessment of Implementation of the  
Cluster Approach in the Field**

15-17 November, 2006

Hosted by OCHA – Conference Room “A” (basement level), UN Secretariat Building  
New York

*Circulated 6 November 2006*

## **I Preface**

During the IASC Working Group in July 2006, OCHA was requested, “to lead a process to evaluate the cluster approach in the pilot countries.” Given that field implementation had been delayed for a number of reasons, including lack of guidance and funding, it was felt that an interim self-assessment, rather than an evaluation (internal or external) would be more appropriate at this point in time.

The Interim Self-Assessment is a progress report and is not intended to be a comprehensive evaluation of the cluster approach. Such an evaluation is expected to take place in late 2007. The Self-Assessment is intended to highlight main trends, themes and lessons from field experience, in order to inform IASC Working Group and Principals’ discussions about the implementation of the cluster approach in the coming year.

Three exercises, carried out between September and October 2006 and led by an IASC Core Learning Group, have contributed to this self-assessment:

1. Development of an Analytical Framework against which to assess efforts to implement the cluster approach at the field level. Recognizing that benchmarks for successful field implementation were not established prior to the roll-out of the cluster approach, the Analytical Framework was based on the overall aim and objectives of the approach, as outlined in the Preliminary IASC Guidance Note, issued in July 2006. Based on this, the primary issues of concern for the Self Assessment were the extent to which the cluster approach improved the effectiveness of overall humanitarian assistance through: greater predictable leadership and gap filling, strengthening partnerships, improving accountability to the Humanitarian Coordinator, and strengthening field-level coordination and prioritization.
2. Desk Review of more than 50 documents from various UN and non-UN IASC sources. The documents included various formal and informal observations and evaluations of agency efforts to implement the cluster approach at the field level in both the four IASC-selected “roll out” countries (DRC, Liberia, Somalia and Uganda) and in “new” emergencies (e.g. Pakistan, Indonesia and Lebanon).
3. Four in-country self-assessments and workshops that took place in the “roll out” countries.

The below document summarizes the main issues emerging from these three exercises. The complete set of documentation (Analytical Framework, Desk Review and country reports) has been shared with the IASC Core Learning Group.

The Self -Assessment was time-limited and took into account the views of individuals and organizations that either submitted documentation for the Desk Review, attended workshops, engaged in interviews, or responded to questionnaires. Insight from this base of respondents may not, therefore, encapsulate all views or issues related to the cluster approach. The Self-Assessment was also consciously focused on gathering input from field practitioners, but given limited time, not all stakeholders were necessarily able to contribute to the process.

Although some efforts have been made to incorporate the views of Global Cluster Leads, an acknowledged gap in the Self-Assessment is the inadequate analysis of the role that Global Cluster Leads may have played in supporting field implementation. As agreed by the IASC WG in July 2006, a Report on Implementation of Global-Level Cluster Capacity-Building (i.e. a report on the goals and objectives for each cluster as outlined in the revised 2006 cluster appeal) will take place in early 2007, prior to the development of a 2007 Global Cluster Appeal.

The documents covered in the Desk Review each reflect on a point in time in a fast evolving process of roll out. Therefore, conclusions or lessons identified may have been surpassed by events or may have been incorporated into subsequent response or by subsequent clarification of policy guidance. The potential time lag of the Desk Review material is balanced, to some extent, by the validation against findings from the four field workshops.

Despite the above constraints in the Self-Assessment methodology and time frame it is noteworthy that there was a remarkable consistency of issues raised during the in-country workshops and in the documents submitted for the Desk Review. There appears to be more or less consensus among field and headquarters-based practitioners on the core strengths and weaknesses of agencies' efforts to implement the cluster approach. As such, the lessons identified in the Self-Assessment point to a clearer direction for future implementation of the approach.

Cluster lead agencies, other organizations, and country teams that provided inputs—many of which were helpfully self-reflective and critical—should be particularly thanked for approaching the Interim Self-Assessment in the spirit of learning and transparency, which was its original intent.

## **II General Observations**

1. The overall perception among humanitarian partners is that the cluster approach has demonstrated potential to improve the overall effectiveness of humanitarian response. Field teams, especially in DRC, Somalia, Liberia and Lebanon credit the approach with helping to focus more attention on long-standing “gaps” and creating a more predictable response trigger for these areas, which in some cases meant deployment of increased capacity to address unmet needs. Especially in new emergencies, roles and responsibilities for “leading” different aspects of the response can be considered more predictable today than one year ago. The cluster approach has also helped to foster an atmosphere for critical reflection and debate at both the headquarters and field level on the coordination structures and mind-sets needed to facilitate improved partnerships with authorities (where appropriate) and between UN and non-UN partners.

2. However, many challenges remain and are fairly consistent across each of the situations. These include (a) cluster leads interpret their role differently, making it difficult for partners to know what to reasonably expect, and *vice versa*; (b) internal management of clusters varies greatly depending on the skills of the individual leading; (c) “participation” in clusters has come to mean attending (often poorly managed) meetings; (d) some perceive that the clusters mainly serve the programme and financial interests of cluster leads and that cluster leads are not always “honest brokers.”
3. Additionally, there has been inconsistency in the way field teams have applied the cluster approach, with some (e.g. Pakistan, Somalia and DRC) regarding it as an approach to strengthen leadership, coherence and sectoral coordination in all major areas of humanitarian activity and others (e.g. Uganda) regarding clusters and sectors as distinct bodies, which led to the development of a “two tiered” coordination structures. The fact that the IASC has emphasized that clusters are primarily to fill “gaps” has been interpreted by some as suggesting that “clusters” are fundamentally different “sectors,” and has contributed to the confusion of field colleagues.
4. Some NGOs at the global level have expressed concern that the perceived distinction between clusters and sectors has inadvertently increased the visibility of “new” clusters, while “sectors”, such as education, continue to be less visible and, consequently, receive less donor support. This argument is debatable, as it is far from certain if there is a correlation between being called a “cluster” and receiving donor funds. Yet, these NGO concerns highlight the different perceptions of the cluster approach among stakeholders, which have been exacerbated by a lack of clear guidance.
5. There have been some differences between the application of the cluster approach in new and ongoing emergencies. In new emergencies, the cluster approach was more readily accepted as a way in which to organize a coordinated response, primarily because the new approach was not competing with existing humanitarian coordination frameworks. In ongoing emergencies (e.g. the IASC “roll out” countries), this was not necessarily the case. The cluster approach was in some cases (particularly Liberia and Uganda) perceived as “imposed” by headquarters. In ongoing emergencies, there has been more difficulty in rationalizing the cluster approach with existing structures, which has caused, in some cases, duplication of coordination mechanisms, frustration with excess meetings, and further resistance to application of the approach.
6. The inability of the IASC to agree on clear guidance for the “cluster approach” and to disseminate this to the field at the beginning of the process led to considerable confusion at the field level and did not inspire confidence in the new approach. The Self-Assessment confirms that confusion persists in some cases and remains an obstacle to implementation.
7. Based on an analysis of the issues consistently raised by field colleagues, and the current draft of the IASC’s Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach (which benefited greatly from field inputs), it appears that some of the common concerns raised during the Self Assessment, such as the confusion over the difference between clusters and sectors, and the accountability of sector leads, may be addressed once the Guidance Note is disseminated.
8. Documents submitted for the Desk Review, and the field workshops strongly recommended that sector leads receive training to fulfill their roles and responsibilities, as outlined in the generic Terms of Reference (which was first disseminated during the Pakistan earthquake and has since been revised). In particular, recommendations called

for training on skills such as: meeting management, facilitation, consensus building, and other cross-cutting skills necessary to carry out the ToR. Following discussions with Cluster Leads in July 2006, OCHA hired a consultant in October 2006 to identify the main generic training requirements of sector leads, in close collaboration with IASC partners, and to design appropriate training tools to complement cluster-specific training.

9. Some field teams (Liberia, Uganda and Somalia) and interviews with several individuals working on global cluster lead issues found that the relationship between global cluster leads and field level clusters is still being worked out. Field colleagues were unclear on the support and services they could reasonably expect from global cluster leads. At the global level, clusters have interpreted their roles somewhat differently (often depending on whether they are dealing with a specific technical issue, such as health, or a cross-cutting issues, such as early recovery), and have made varying degrees of progress, making it difficult to provide “predictable support” to the field. In some cases at the field level, “clusters” were created for areas of humanitarian activity for which there is no corresponding “lead” at the headquarters level. In other cases, field-based leads differed from global leads. In such cases, it was doubly unclear—from both the perspective of the field and global cluster leads—how to provide support.
10. The Self-Assessment reconfirmed the interdependence of the four main prongs of the Humanitarian Reform Agenda: ensuring predictability and greater accountability of humanitarian response; strengthening humanitarian leadership and coordination; strengthening partnerships; and improving the predictability and timeliness of humanitarian financing. It is apparent from the Self-Assessment that strengthening the Humanitarian Coordinator system and working with donors to manage the competition that arises from unpredictable funding both have a direct bearing on the success of the cluster approach.
11. The Self Assessment found that the process of “benchmarking,” which was identified in the Humanitarian Response Review as a major factor for improving overall humanitarian response and was expected by some to be included more rigorously in the humanitarian reform process, is an issue that requires further elaboration. This issue is explored below under the section on *Accountability*.

### **III Predictable leadership and gap filling**

12. There is not yet sufficient information and comparative analysis to determine the extent to which the cluster approach has contributed to more effective humanitarian response in countries where it is being used. However, the cluster approach appears to have made a predictable response more likely, by automatically triggering a designated group of organizations to “lead” response in key emergency sectors. For example, by the time of the Lebanon emergency, it was reasonably clear which organizations would be responsible for mobilizing different aspects of the response, such as Logistics, Protection and Water and Sanitation, which have been considered as “long-standing gap areas.” This example stands in stark contrast to previous emergencies, such as Darfur, in which lack of agency mandate and responsibility for gap areas led to lengthy discussions, delays in response, and *ad hoc* solutions. Although there are clearly important issues to be resolved – related to the consistency of cluster set-up and performance, the lack of a common understanding of “leadership,” and internal management of clusters – the achievement of greater predictability in countries using the cluster approach is clearly a positive step forward.

13. According to some individuals working with global cluster leads, major questions remain regarding the extent to which agencies have been able to ensure that their cluster lead responsibilities and commitments are reconciled with their organization's systems. While agency Principals have agreed to the cluster approach, there is still a need to ensure adequate interpretation of what these commitments mean for the organization, as a whole, and to make the necessary institutional changes. While it is acknowledged that these changes will require considerable time and effort, some individuals working within the global clusters feel that much of the responsibility for institutional change is left to them. The fact that there will only be one more cluster appeal (2007) gives greater urgency to the need for senior management within agencies leading clusters to look for means to mainstream their cluster responsibilities.
14. Based on analysis in the Desk Review and field workshops, it appears that some gaps previously identified by country teams and IDD/inter-agency/donor missions in the "roll out" countries are beginning to be addressed. Some cluster lead agencies have expanded their presence to both provide greater sector coordination and increase programming:
  - In the case of Water and Sanitation in the DRC it is clear that there is now much greater capacity amongst humanitarian actors working in this sector. Investment in this sector has grown exponentially, from US\$ 1 million in 2005 to US\$ 13 million in 2006. For 2007, the draft Humanitarian Action Plan includes US\$ 99 million for water and sanitation projects, representing about 15% of the total appeal. At least in terms of resources, water and sanitation is no longer the "gap" area that it was in DRC one year ago.
  - In the case of Protection, in Uganda, UNHCR has begun expanding its presence in the north, as have sub-cluster leads, UNICEF and OHCHR. In the DRC a number of new protection officers have been deployed, leading to better monitoring, advocacy and follow-up, and there are several instances in recent months when MONUC troops have been deployed to help protect civilians as a direct result of the advocacy efforts by the Protection cluster. In Somalia, the application of the cluster approach has finally put protection "on the agenda," though gaps have not yet been comprehensively addressed.
  - In the case of early recovery, implementation has been mixed, with a great deal of uncertainty as to how best to ensure effective early recovery planning and implementation across all areas of activity. In some instances (Uganda and DRC), an early recovery cluster has been established and has helped to bring more attention to return and reintegration issues, though concerns remain regarding the synergies between the early recovery cluster and other clusters. In Liberia, it was unclear how the early recovery cluster was to complement other early recovery initiatives and how best to implement the cluster approach at all in a mainly "transitional" context. In Somalia, following initial confusion and concerns about excessive meetings, efforts are being made to ensure that early recovery issues are integrated into all sector work, e.g. the health sector meeting now includes an agenda item on early recovery and an agenda item on humanitarian issues, but both are addressed within the same forum.

Again, while there are clearly still issues related to the level of participation and effectiveness of these initiatives, there are more systematic attempts to meet needs in previously considered "gap" areas.

15. Documents submitted for the Desk Review and field workshops identified the establishment of well-functioning information management (IM) systems as critical to improving humanitarian response in terms of identifying and filling gaps, supporting strategic planning and prioritization and reporting. The field identified IM gaps both within, and across, sectors. As pointed out in Liberia and Uganda, filling gaps demands knowledge of who is doing what, where (3Ws), as well as disaggregated data on needs. The premature departure of the HIC from Liberia resulted in a decline in basic 3Ws databases and mapping services declined, and made basic identification of gaps more difficult. In DRC, the establishment of a web-based humanitarian information exchange platform is viewed as a useful tool for disseminating information on the cluster approach.
16. Field staff were largely unaware of efforts within the recently established IASC Information Management Working Group to ensure a more rigorous and consistent approach to IM in the field. An action plan, agreed by the IASC Working Group, includes clarifying the roles of OCHA and sector leads in IM, and taking stock of existing IM tools and how they could support better sector coordination. The group will also look at how Humanitarian Information Centers (HIC)—a common service—should be enhanced. These efforts should make full use of the lessons identified by field staff.
17. In terms of “leadership,” the long delay in providing cluster roll-out countries with specific guidance on the cluster approach, with detailed Terms of Reference for cluster leads, meant that there was a lack of shared understanding of this role, both among the institutions and individuals leading and participating in the clusters. In the absence of guidance on cluster leadership, cluster leads improvised as best they could. Sometimes, however, this improvisation contributed to the perception by non-UN partners that the cluster approach was too “UN centric.” Several field teams validated findings in the Desk Review that the separation of cluster lead and programme functions is often unclear, and can exacerbate the perception that agencies are pursuing their own programme priorities, especially when the cluster lead is also involved in funding decisions (e.g. pooled funding or CERF, as in DRC). In Uganda, some clusters are perceived as “a lead agency and their implementing partners,” which is contrary to the spirit of partnership as construed in the humanitarian reform agenda (see *Partnership* section below).
18. To address some of these issues, some field teams, such as Somalia and DRC, have appointed NGOs as “cluster co-chairs.” Some global cluster leads, such as WASH, have recognized the need for dedicated sector leads (especially in new emergencies) and have deployed staff accordingly, e.g. in Lebanon. Following the Lebanon crisis, an internal evaluation of UNHCR’s performance called for the appointment of leaders “with the necessary seniority and interpersonal skills to conduct meetings effectively and make them into a forum for prioritization and decision-making,” and further noted the need for cluster leaders to “place the interests of cluster members and the UN as a whole above the interests of their respective agency.” In order to establish a common approach to predictable sector leadership, all field teams recommended training for sector leads on their roles and responsibilities, as outlined in their ToR.

#### **IV Partnership**

19. While efforts to implement the cluster approach have helped strengthen partnerships between UN and non-UN organizations in some places and have created a greater “spirit” of collaboration, the general feeling is that there has not yet been sufficient tangible progress in this area. That said, tensions arising from efforts to implement the cluster approach have been a catalyst for frank, senior-level dialog at the headquarters level on

the obstacles that make closer collaboration more difficult (see *Chairs' Summary, Enhancing the Effectiveness of Humanitarian Action: A Dialogue Between UN and Non-UN Humanitarian Organizations*, 12-13 July 2006). As a result, a Global Humanitarian Platform has been established to agree on concrete measures to strengthen collaboration.

20. Field colleagues validated the Desk Review by noting that discussions about the cluster approach raised expectations about partnership, but provided few feasible and practical recommendations for realizing this. Most field teams in both new and ongoing emergencies noted the need to include *national* NGOs in a meaningful way into strategic discussions. However, from the perspective of some cluster leads and OCHA staff, the issue of how to feasibly facilitate strategic discussions with dozens or hundreds of different stakeholders remains a real dilemma. Broadly speaking, field level coordination structures to facilitate partnership either do not yet exist or are inadequate. The Global Humanitarian Platform has recognized this as a key concern, and aims to develop concrete proposals for establishing inclusive Humanitarian Community Partnership Teams at the field level.
21. A related issue is the extent to which individual NGOs can or even should represent a “homogenous” or “unified” “NGO perspective.” Given the myriad of international and national NGOs in a given emergency (not to mention UN agencies), how do cluster leads and coordinators feasibly accommodate the myriad of interests? An early ICVA review of the roll out of the cluster approach in the DRC (March 2006) highlights the dilemma of ensuring appropriate NGO representation in existing coordination structures:  
  
“The selection process of the NGOs and the responsibilities around that NGO participation were unclear; no terms of reference were developed explaining what participation entailed. There was no clear discussion about who (if anyone) the NGOs represented. The “responsibilities” of the NGOs ... were also not clearly discussed or agreed. As such, there was no mechanism to feed in the views of other NGOs ... nor was there a mechanism to report back to other NGOs on what took place.... From the perspective of NGOs that participate ... as well as from the perspective of those NGOs that do not, the NGOs attending the [meetings] do not represent anyone except themselves: they participate in the meetings in their own right.”
22. In line with the above, some cluster leads at both the field and global level called for greater clarity on the role of organizations participating in clusters. Given that cluster leads are “accountable” for ensuring an adequate humanitarian response and providing services and support as outlined in their ToR, and that success of clusters relies on effective partnership with others, some cluster leads felt it was both pragmatic and fair to expect some level of predictable commitment from participants.
23. Field teams in Uganda and Somalia noted that INGOs are often unaware of the extent to which their headquarters, or NGO consortia to which they belong, are involved in discussions and decisions regarding the humanitarian reform agenda. For example, a number of INGOs (e.g. ACF, Danish Refugee Council, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, World Vision) have developed position papers on the cluster approach and have contributed significantly to the development of the IASC Guidance Note. Field colleagues suggested that these views should “trickle down to the field level to ensure that positions are organizational, rather than individual.”
24. Much of the discussion on partnership has focused on the relationship between the UN and non-UN humanitarian organizations. However, issues of visibility and competition for funding, not to mention issues related to different programme priorities within the

same sector, can be as much an obstacle to closer collaboration between UN agencies as they are between UN and non-UN organizations, and do not necessarily ensure that that “the whole humanitarian response equals more than the sum of its parts.”

25. Many field teams cited competition for visibility and limited donor funding as an impediment to partnership. There are differing views on the extent to which cluster leads should be involved in humanitarian financing decisions, be they related to the CERF, pooled funding, Flash Appeals or the CAP.
26. Some argue that clusters should be a mechanism through which project activities are (peer) reviewed before being submitted to donors. This argument is based on a view that only donors can effectively shape an incentive system to reward collaboration (see Desk Review, Olsen and Hystad). Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) provides a sound foundation for donors to make funding decisions based on a shared analysis of needs and priorities, and for rewarding collaboration. Some have advocated that sector leads should be more aware of and use GHD Principles in order to strengthen advocacy to donors, and encourage their accountability to their GHD commitments. Others have pointed out that the guidance issued for Flash Appeals and Consolidated Appeal Process have, for a number of years, called on sector groups to jointly assess needs, prioritize activities, and review projects according to agreed criteria. Thus, the cluster approach simply improves on the long-standing practice of sector groups to play a role in humanitarian financing decisions.
27. Others are concerned that the focus on “leads” may prejudice donors to fund cluster lead agencies at the expense of other partners. The perception that donors have sometimes used clusters as a filter for selecting partners causes further suspicion and undermines partnership. Various pooled funding initiatives (which are not always viewed as transparent) and the CERF—which the General Assembly has agreed cannot be disbursed directly to NGOs—have done little to allay this perception. Many NGOs and non-cluster lead UN agencies are deeply sceptical that that cluster leads can remain “honest brokers” if they have undue influence on funding decisions.
28. Another issue is a perception among some that participation in clusters implies funding, and if funding is not forthcoming, there is little incentive to collaborate. At the same time, some NGOs are concerned about being too closely affiliated with “UN” funding mechanisms. In Somalia, there is a growing perception that “partnership seems to be funding related,” and in DRC it was felt that efforts should be made to emphasize that the Pooled Fund should be used to support the clusters and not the other way around. Some cluster leads have interpreted their relationship to “partners” as contractual (Somalia and Uganda), which undermines the spirit of the humanitarian reform. In Lebanon, UNHCR noted that in some cases “agencies ceased to attend cluster meetings once they had obtained funding for their activities.”
29. If cluster leads, together with partners, were to play a larger role in humanitarian financing decisions, leads would need to be perceived as “honest brokers,” independent of their agency affiliations, and would need to lead a transparent process by which funding proposals are reviewed in consultation with partners, based on evidence and clear criteria. Donors, for their part, would need to live up to GHD principles by rewarding collaboration. In truth, however, competition has been, and will likely remain, a reality in the aid business. It may be necessary to agree on practical, operational tools to manage the stated desire for more effective and coherent humanitarian response with the reality of funding competition.

30. Another area related to “partnerships” is the role of governments. The lack of specific IASC mention of this matter in the earliest phases of the roll-out has caused some (including UN member states) to conclude that the UN has positioned itself above governments as the “lead” in humanitarian emergencies. In some respects, this issue appears to have become overblown more by what was *not* explicitly said, than what was said. The current version of the IASC guidance note related to clusters corrects this omission, stating the clear responsibility of the government, where appropriate, for leading humanitarian response, and the role of cluster leads to ensure cooperation among international actors, appropriate linkages with government and local authorities, and capacity building.
31. That said, as with NGOs, efforts to implement the cluster approach have heightened recognition that national authorities are often overlooked as viable partners in humanitarian action. This has spurred discussion among humanitarian organizations on how best to include authorities in humanitarian coordination and decision-making mechanisms at the field. In Somalia, as elsewhere, it is acknowledged that meaningful consultation with authorities and affected communities is almost non-existent. In Liberia, three of the seven clusters have yet to identify government counterparts at the national level. Though few practical recommendations emerged from this Self Assessment, the issue of how best to involve national authorities in humanitarian action is a matter that still requires work.

## V Accountability

32. “Accountability” is a key principle of the humanitarian reform generally, and has a specific meaning within the cluster approach. However, the revised draft IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach provides greater clarification on the accountability of cluster leads to Humanitarian Coordinators, and outlines the scope and limitations of the concept of “provider of last resort.” The draft generic Terms of Reference for Sector Leads at the Country Level, which provides a detailed list of activities for which Cluster Leads are accountable, has not yet been widely disseminated and used in the roll-out countries. As a result, little progress has been made to ensure systematic accountability of cluster leads to HCs.
33. There was initially much concern that the cluster approach demanded accountability of non-UN actors to the UN. It took some time to explain to all humanitarian partners that this is not the case. Some field colleagues, having not been involved in these discussions and having not received adequate guidance from the IASC, still perceive that the cluster approach demands NGO accountability to the HC or the UN (Somalia, Uganda). The revised Guidance Note reflects a clearer understanding of “mutual” accountability between UN and non-UN agencies in implementing the cluster approach, stating ultimately that, “Individual humanitarian organizations can only be held accountable to sector leads in cases where they have made specific commitments to this effect.” In line with this, field staff in Uganda and Somalia have emphasized the need for mutual accountability that is earned through trust and relationship building, and is not imposed.
34. Apart from the question of accountability of Cluster Leads to the HC, there is concern among field staff that more needs to be done to ensure greater accountability to recipients of assistance and that this has not been adequately addressed within the cluster approach, to date.

35. In many respects, the issue of ensuring greater accountability to recipients of aid is tied to improving a collective approach to needs assessment and analysis, establishing agreed objectives, identifying benchmarks and indicators of success, and effective monitoring of programme implementation and impact. These are long-standing concerns of the humanitarian community, and improvements have been attempted through such efforts as Good Humanitarian Donorship, the Sphere Project, CAP and CHAP reform, and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International, to name a few. Based on field inputs to this Self Assessment, it is not yet evident that these efforts and tools are being harnessed consistently to advance the aim of greater accountability to aid recipients.
36. Field staff also raised the issue of benchmarking the “roll out” of the cluster approach. At its inception, field teams began implementing the approach without guidance on what was meant to be achieved, and how this would be measured. In preparation for any future implementation of the cluster approach and the evaluation that is meant to take place at the end of 2007, it will be immediately necessary to define benchmarks for successful implementation, which should include reference to both process indicators (e.g. rationalizing coordination structures, identifying leads for all areas of humanitarian response, ensuring partnership) and impact indicators (e.g. to measure the impact of the cluster’s work on affected populations).

## **VI Strategic coordination and prioritization**

37. As mentioned above, improving strategic field-level coordination and prioritisation has been the subject of previous efforts to strengthen humanitarian response. The current humanitarian reform, including the cluster approach, has perhaps not been articulated strongly enough as a continuation of previous efforts, and the result is that processes and tools that have been established previously have not always been sufficiently linked to, or utilized in complementing, the approach.
38. There are some examples in which field teams have used existing tools to strengthen coordination, planning and prioritisation. In the DRC, there have been some improvements to the “Action Plan,” which includes improved (for 2007) benchmarks and indicators, as a result of a more systematic approach to collaboration in clusters. In Uganda, the Needs Analysis Framework (NAF) was used by the Food Security sector group as an evidence-based foundation for the CHAP. In Liberia, sector leads have committed to identifying benchmarks for each sector, which will be reported to the IASC CT so they can monitor progress.
39. Field staff identified several factors that seem to work against greater strategic coordination and prioritization, namely poor or inconsistent sector leadership (mentioned above), the unclear role of cluster participants and their “responsibility” to the wider group (mentioned above), poor or non-existent IM systems (mentioned above), overlapping or inappropriate coordination structures at both the capital and regional/district level, and confusion over the difference between “sectors” and “clusters,” which has led in some cases to the creation of two-tiered field coordination mechanisms.
40. A lessons learned report produced by the Emergency Shelter Cluster following the Pakistan earthquake notes that, despite having issued standardized planning tools, most humanitarian organizations reverted to their own assessment and planning tools and standards during the emergency, making it difficult to organize around a common approach and work towards agreed objectives. A Red R/IOM review of the shelter cluster

in Pakistan notes “confusion” among stakeholders on the status and expected role of standards and guidelines for cluster participants in terms of “adherence to them, dissemination of them and resolution of any differences.” In Uganda, field colleagues noted that some cluster work plans appear to be individual agency plans “knitted together.”

41. The role of global clusters in developing common tools that can be used by the field is an area where there have been different levels of progress. Some global clusters have been able to provide tools to the field, but there remains a disconnect between the understanding of the relationship between global and field level clusters. Global cluster leads can only “offer” services to the field and not impose anything on them. At the same time, there may be a need to better understand the requirements of field clusters so that global clusters can better service them.
42. The Self-Assessment found that in some cases, coordination structures themselves worked against effective coordination and prioritization, as well as integration of cross-cutting issues such as gender and HIV/AIDs. Field colleagues often looked to the Humanitarian Coordinator, with OCHA support, to ensure that such structures were rational, efficient and effective and sometimes found leadership to be lacking. A major source of confusion, especially in the “roll out” countries, was the creation of clusters alongside existing sector groups, which gave rise in some cases (Somalia and Uganda) to two-tiered coordination systems (one for clusters, one for sectors). In ongoing emergencies, especially, field staff recommended that a thorough analysis of existing coordination mechanisms is necessary before using the cluster approach. Other key lessons regarding coordination structures include the need to ensure that:
  - Designated leads are assigned for major areas of humanitarian action in a given emergency, understand their roles and responsibilities, and report, in this capacity, to the HC.
  - The cluster approach is not “added on” as an extra layer of coordination, but rather the principles and standards of the approach are used to raise the bar of performance of existing structures.
  - Consideration is given on how best to ensure valid participation by INGOs and national NGOs in all coordination mechanisms, bearing in mind the need to balance representation with the pragmatic need to keep meetings manageable and strategic.
  - There is some forum for technical sector leads to discuss and propose strategies for ensuring a cross-sectoral (e.g. holistic) approach to the response, and integration of cross-cutting issues, which reports to a higher level, strategy/policy-making entity, such as an IASC CT.
  - Coordination structures are rationalized at both the capital and regional/district level and seek to minimize meetings and maximize participation to improve strategic decision-making.
  - To the extent possible, and depending on the context, that discussions about relief and early recovery (and where possible development) on a given issue (e.g. health) are discussed in a single forum, with the aim of fostering more natural linkages between relief and development, minimizing meetings, and ensuring that development takes preparedness for emergencies into consideration.
43. At the global level, coherence and coordination between global cluster leads and those areas for which clusters have not been created (e.g. education, food, agriculture and

refugees) is considered by some to be too *ad hoc*. There is a need to ensure more systematic collaboration between the various leads at the global level to ensure a more complementary and coherent approach to addressing the concerns raised by the humanitarian reform. While it is acknowledged that some work is now underway to develop operational guidelines on cross-cutting issues, such as gender, HIV/AIDS, the environment and early recovery, it is felt that this guidance should build on existing work and be incorporated quickly into user-friendly “toolkits” for clusters as both the global and field level.

## VII Issues requiring further discussion and action

There are a number of issues that have emerged from the Self-Assessment that require further action and which should be considered in discussions regarding further application of the cluster approach. These include:

**Ensure that lessons identified in this report are applied in future use of the cluster approach.** Key lessons include ensuring that gaps are adequately identified and addressed, global cluster leads provide the necessary support to their respective field groups, sector leads with the appropriate skill-set and training are appointed for priority areas of response, coordination mechanisms are efficient and inclusive, and facilitate cross-sector collaboration, IM systems are in place, and Humanitarian Coordinators, with OCHA support, lead the process effectively.

**Translate agreed guidance into training and a practical “toolkit.”** To improve the field’s understanding of the cluster approach, it will be necessary to translate agreed guidance, lessons and best field practice into training and a user-friendly, field-based “toolkit” with standard operating procedures, operational guidance and checklists for “operationalising” the approach at the field level.

**Develop additional operational guidance and resolve outstanding issues.** It is recognized that many of the major policy issues concerning the cluster approach have been carefully defined in the revised Guidance Note following extensive consultation with partners in the field and at headquarters. However, some practical issues raised in the Self Assessment require additional action to avoid confusion at the field level. These include:

- Providing more explicit operational guidance on how sector leads at the field level should interpret their role in resource mobilization (mentioned in the ToR), especially in relation to the CERF, pooled funding mechanisms, Flash Appeals and CAPs.
- Providing practical guidance on the role of the early recovery cluster at the field level, as well as the role of sector leads in mainstreaming early recovery.
- Clarifying the operational mechanics of using the cluster approach in countries with integrated UN missions.
- Identifying and promoting the tools that are available to promote greater system-wide accountability to people affected by conflicts and disasters.
- While at global level, some areas of humanitarian activity are referred to as “clusters” and others are not, it is necessary to recognize that all areas of humanitarian activity should strive to achieve standards of leadership, capacity, preparedness, partnership and accountability. All areas of humanitarian activity should receive equal recognition and treatment.

---

**Prepare for 2007 evaluation of the cluster approach.** It is proposed that OCHA begin working with IASC partners immediately to ensure development of benchmarks for any future implementation of the cluster approach (against which the evaluation will measure progress), as well as a realistic timeline and methodology for the evaluation to be undertaken.

## **VIII Proposed Actions by the IASC Working Group**

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The IASC WG is requested to take note of the findings of the Interim Self-Assessment, in particular when deliberating continued usage of the cluster approach.</li><li>2. The IASC WG is requested to endorse that OCHA lead the process to ensure timely follow up on the above-mentioned points, together with IASC and cluster lead partners.</li></ol> |
|---|

Prepared by: OCHA-HRSU and ICVA – November 2006