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Cluster Approach (IASC)

Key points

- The UNHCR Representative actively participates in the Humanitarian Country Team, representing both the agency and the cluster it 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 and the camp coordination and camp management cluster for conflict related displacement
- 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, the inter-agency cluster-based responses are led by the Humanitarian Coordinator.

1. Overview

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. 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).

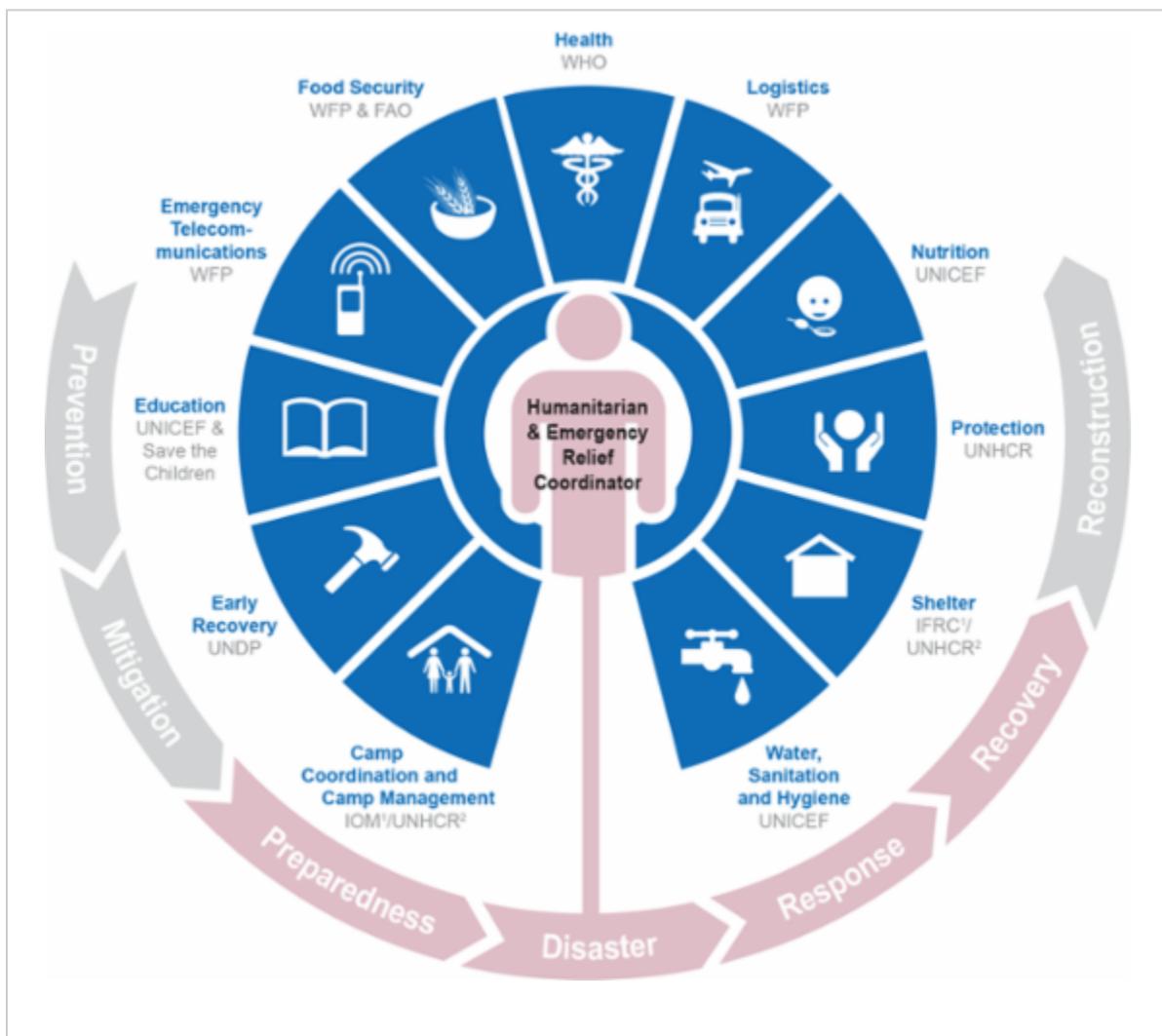
Note. Protection and assistance to refugees is coordinated and delivered through the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM). (Clusters are not activated for responses to refugee crises.) In addition to the RCM, where a response for both internally displaced persons and refugees is underway (mixed situations), 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 Emergency Relief Coordinator. Almost 15 years later, in 2005, the 'humanitarian reform agenda' introduced a number of new 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 a process called the 'Transformative Agenda'.



2. 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 complex humanitarian crises, in which needs extend beyond any one agency's mandate and where the needs are of sufficient scale and complexity to justify a multi-sectoral response with the engagement of a wide range of humanitarian actors, justify a cluster response, which is led by the designated HC.

A Cluster Approach may be used in conflict-related humanitarian emergencies and disaster situations.

The Cluster 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 co-leadership, and focus on operational performance, leading to stronger accountability.
- Enhances predictability. Sector and thematic responsibilities are clearer, and formal mechanisms at national and international level clarify areas where they are not.
- Engagement with national and local authorities. Having a single person to call within the international humanitarian architecture speeds up the resolution of issues, and allows greater access for NGOs to government and UN decision-makers.
- Inclusion of affected communities. The Cluster Approach requires humanitarian actors to 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 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*, which is a core commitment for Humanitarian Coordinators (HC), Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and clusters. While the primary responsibility to protect people in humanitarian crises lies with governments, humanitarian actors must protect people and respect and promote their human rights in accordance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law. This requires a dedicated protection strategy, which should extend from preparedness, throughout the humanitarian response and into early recovery. The protection cluster is expected to provide the necessary analysis and support to help the HCT develop this over-arching strategy for achieving protection outcomes.

3. Policy, strategy and/or guidance

Cluster activation

Clusters in specific country situations can only be activated by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), with the endorsement of IASC Principals. The ERC bases the decision on a recommendation by the UN Resident Coordinator (RC) or HC in the concerned country, who draws on the advice of the UN country team (UNCT) or HCT. Initial discussions of cluster activation at country level are therefore quite important.

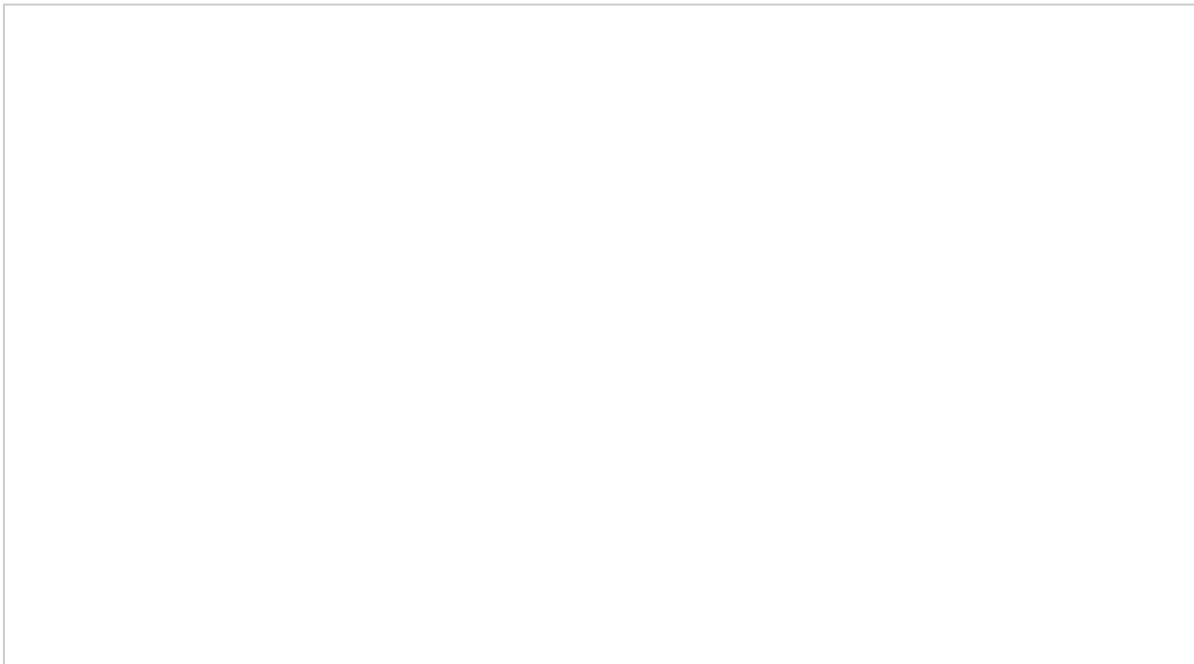
The core functions of a cluster at country level

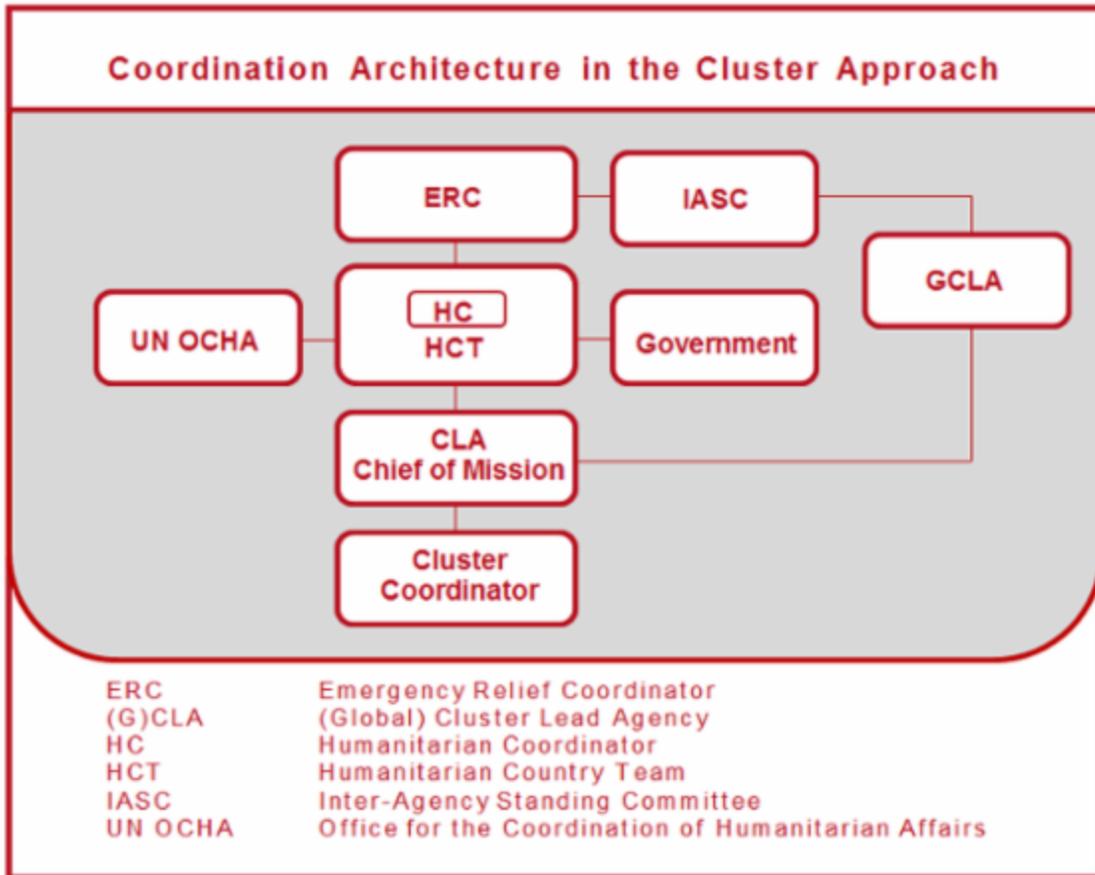
1. Support service delivery by providing a platform for agreeing approaches and eliminating duplication.
2. Inform strategic decision-making of the HC/HCT by coordinating needs assessment, gap analysis, and prioritization.
3. Plan and develop strategy, including cluster plans, adherence to standards and funding needs.
4. Advocate to address concerns 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, preparedness, or capacity building where needed and where capacity exists in the cluster.

Each cluster is also responsible for mainstreaming protection and integrating early recovery from the outset of the humanitarian response.

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





4. 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 Emergency Relief Coordinator, 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 national actors**, 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 a Humanitarian Coordinator. 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 towards 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 organised. 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, IOM, NGOs, and with the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement often attending with an 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 related 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.

Cluster coordinators are responsible for ensuring that cluster-specific concerns, and challenges that cannot be solved within a cluster, are raised and properly discussed by the HCT, and that strategic decisions are shared and implemented at operational level.

Shared leadership. This approach distributes cluster lead agency and cluster coordination responsibilities equitably at global, national and sub-national level. Studies have shown that sharing leadership between UN agencies, NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and other key humanitarian actors, including the IOM, generally improves partnership, advocacy and information distribution and therefore the response as a whole.

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, OCHA 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, including needs assessment, joint planning, and monitoring and evaluation.

Clusters benefit from wide and representative participation, but can be ineffective if their membership includes too many transient actors.

Minimum commitments for participation. These state 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, as appropriate.

Organizations that join clusters undertake to:

- Adhere to humanitarian principles and the 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 *Coordination Reference Module* when they develop or update their terms of reference and their commitments

5. UNHCR's role and accountabilities

Within the IASC system, UNHCR leads three clusters:

Protection. This cluster includes 'areas of responsibility' attributed to UNFPA for sexual and gender based violence (SGBV); to UNICEF for child protection, to UNMAS for Mine Action, and to UN Habitat for housing, land and property. Recognizing the centrality of protection as core to the very purpose of any humanitarian response, the protection cluster advises the humanitarian coordinator and HCT, and works with all clusters to strengthen protection and rights-based responses.

Camp coordination and camp management (CCCM). UNHCR leads this cluster in conflict-related IDP situations; IOM leads this cluster in natural disasters.

Shelter. UNHCR lead this cluster in conflict-related situations; the IFRC is the convener of this cluster in natural disasters.

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, UNHCR offices must be prepared to resource cluster coordination, including coordination capacity at national and local level and information management support.

6. Links

OCHA overview of cluster approach and guidance

Shelter cluster

Global CCCM Cluster

Global protection cluster

Humanitarian Response - Clusters

Need help?

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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 Country Level
- UNHCR Provisional Guidance on Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement

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