

Partnership in clusters

Why is this issue important?

Humanitarian partnerships are critical for effective emergency response as no single individual or group is capable of sufficiently responding to any crisis. The cluster approach has been repeatedly criticised for being too “UN centric” and for failing to consult with NGO partners, even though non-UN organizations may contribute anything from 40% to 80% of response capacity. Cluster/sector coordinators and groups which ignore local capacity and local knowledge risk responding in ways that are inefficient and ineffective and which contribute to future dependencies and vulnerabilities. Successful application of the cluster approach will depend on all humanitarian actors working as equal **partners** in all aspects of the humanitarian response: from assessment, analysis and planning to implementation, resource mobilization and evaluation. Support and links with local institutions and communities from the outset is critical to supporting early and longer-term recovery.

What is expected of you in your role as Cluster/Sector lead in the field?¹

Sector leads are responsible for ensuring – to the extent possible – appropriate complementarity amongst different humanitarian actors operating in their sectors or areas of activity. While sector/cluster lead agencies at the country level cannot be held accountable for the performance of all humanitarian **partners** operational in that sector, they are accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator for ensuring, to the extent possible, the establishment of adequate coordination mechanisms for the sector or area of activity concerned, adequate preparedness, as well as adequate strategic planning for an effective operational response.

Cluster/sector leads are responsible for finding “non-bureaucratic ways of involving all humanitarian actors in a collaborative and inclusive process focused on areas of common interest. Some humanitarian actors may not be prepared or able to formally commit themselves to structures which involve reporting to sector leads. Sector leads should ensure, however, that all humanitarian actors are given the opportunity to fully and equally participate in setting the direction, strategies, and activities of the sectoral group.”

A key responsibility of sector leads is to ensure that humanitarian actors build on [and support] local capacities and that they develop and maintain appropriate links with Government and local authorities, State institutions, local civil society and other stakeholders.

While the cluster approach encourages strong **partnerships** and joint planning amongst humanitarian actors, it is up to individual agencies to determine levels of participation in the work of the different sectoral groups. The cluster approach itself does not require that humanitarian actors be held accountable to sector leads. Likewise, it does not demand accountability of non-UN actors to UN agencies. Individual humanitarian organizations can only be held accountable to sector leads in cases where they have made specific commitments to this effect.

What challenges will you face?

Some NGOs characterized the UN culture as arrogant and aloof. Increasingly, NGOs are finding partnerships with UN agencies to be unappealing. The lack of practical and fair operational frameworks between UN agencies and NGOs has made the cost of partnership too high for many NGOs. The lack of cost recovery has put NGOs in the position of 'subsidizing' UN projects. NGOs are increasingly turning away from the UN for partnerships as practical financial problems linger unresolved.²

Clusters face many challenges in establishing and sustaining partnerships. Some of these challenges include:

- competing among humanitarian actors for visibility– which is invariably tied to competition for funding;
- defining participation levels and accountability in clusters – not all cluster participants can or want to engage or be held accountable in the same way;
- engaging key humanitarian actors who have sufficient and independent sources of funding;
- including national organizations and civil society in cluster proceedings and building their capacity;
- facilitating strategic discussion with dozens or hundreds of independent stakeholders; How do cluster leads in the field accommodate the myriad of national and international NGOs and their diverse interests?;
- working with national authorities where government institutions are weak or are party to the conflict;
- managing conflict-of-interests as cluster lead when your agency controls the funding and set the priorities.

What can you do to promote effective partnerships? Tips and practices.

- ☑ Engage local NGOs, seek their input on strategies and priorities, and find ways to transfer and build their capacity. Local NGOs often have, amongst other things, a comparative advantage in early response and operational planning due to their links with local communities and authorities.
- ☑ Establish regular dialogue between key actors, to reduce adverse institutional attitudes and suspicions, agree on standards of assistance and encourage teamwork and creative thinking.
- ☑ Adopt a “collaborative leadership” approach: view other organizations and their personnel as pathways to strengthening response in your sector, not as competitors or obstacles. Your ability to lead and coordinate will depend on the trust and relationships you build and the services or value you provide to cluster members, rather than on line authority (which you don’t have). Listen, ask and consult rather than direct or command. Refer to the tip sheet on “Collaborative Leadership” for more suggestions on this.
- ☑ Be proactive. Personally invite key actors to participate in the cluster and contact those who aren’t to find out why they are not participating and what it would take to get them to participate.
- ☑ Consider various forms of humanitarian partnership: from close coordination and joint programming to looser associations based on the need to share information, avoid duplication and enhance complementarity.
- ☑ With large numbers of cluster participants, establish a strategic planning (or oversight) committee which is representative of the cluster participants and which guides the operational work of the cluster. Set-up interagency technical working groups to address technical issues.
- ☑ Concentrate on, and help cluster participants recognise, their common goals, common interests and mutual interdependencies. Ensure that any fora or meeting provides added-value to those participating.
- ☑ Look to UN OCHA country office to facilitate and provide coordination support to NGOs and cross-cluster coordination.
- ☑ Focus on solving common problems and developing cluster action plans. An action plan is necessary to guide the cluster participants and serves as a means of accountability and/or tracking progress.
- ☑ Base your partnerships on the following principles endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform³:
 - **Equality:** Equality requires mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of size and power. The participants must respect each other’s mandates, obligations and independence and recognize each other’s constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organizations from engaging in constructive dissent.
 - **Transparency:** Transparency is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communications and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organizations.
 - **Result-oriented approach:** Effective humanitarian action must be reality-based and action-oriented. This requires result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities.
 - **Responsibility:** Humanitarian organizations have an ethical obligation to each other to accomplish their tasks responsibly, with integrity and in a relevant and appropriate way. They must make sure they commit to activities only when they have the means, competencies, skills, and capacity to deliver on their commitments. Decisive and robust prevention of abuses committed by humanitarians must also be a constant effort.
 - **Complementarity:** The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other’s contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.
- ☑ Develop clear, simple T.o.R’s that will help the cluster work together in an effective and efficient manner and which clarify basic expectations and minimum requirements for participating in the cluster.

- ☑ Engage partners in assessing the effectiveness of the partnership and in providing feedback on how to strengthen it. Such an assessment can be done spontaneously and built upon the tips and principles noted above. The strength of a partnership comes from hard work and from continually applying the principles of collaboration. Routinely examining “what’s working” and “what’s not working” is essential to building and sustaining partnerships that can achieve humanitarian results.

Notes

1. IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response, and Generic Terms of Reference for Sector/Cluster Leads at the Country Level, 24 November 2006.
2. Enhancing the Effectiveness of Humanitarian Action: A Dialogue between UN and non-UN Humanitarian Organizations, Overview of Consolidated NGO Views, 10 July 2006. <http://www.icva.ch/doc00001836.html>
3. Global Humanitarian Platform Principles of Partnership: A Statement of Commitment, Endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform, 12 July 2007. See www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org.

Reference material

“Enhancing the Effectiveness of Humanitarian Action: A Dialogue between UN and non-UN Humanitarian Organizations”, [Background Paper 2: Enhancing UN/non-UN Engagement at Field Level](#), 3 July 2006. Geneva.

Patronage or Partnership: Local Capacity Building in Humanitarian Crises, edited by Ian Smillie for the Humanitarianism and War Project. 2001 Kumarian Press, Inc. USA. at <http://www.idrc.ca/openebooks/944-5/>

“Humanitarian Partnerships: A Rapid Review of Recent Experience”, by Mihir Bhatt, All-India Disaster Mitigation Institute. Presented at ICVA conference “How Compatible are UN Coherence and Humanitarian Partnership?” Geneva, Switzerland, 2 February 2007. <http://www.icva.ch/doc00002014.html>