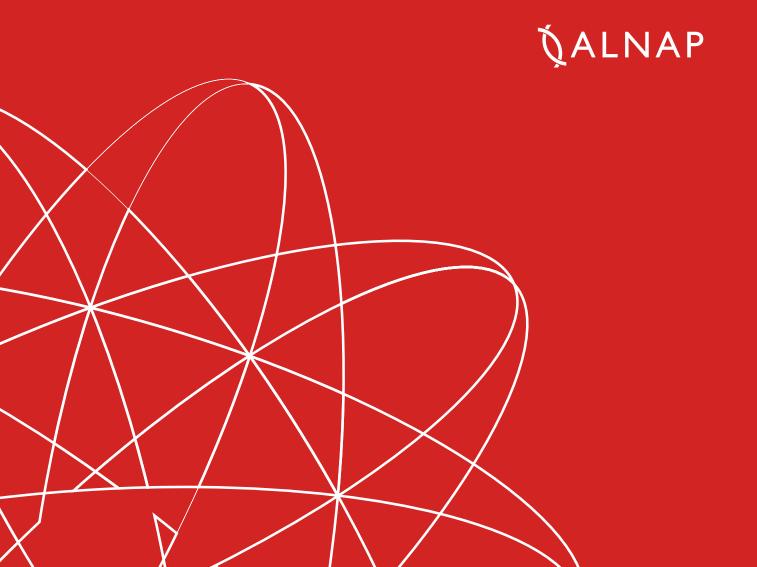


# COORDINATION WORKSHOP BRIEFING PAPER

How can we improve humanitarian coordination across a response?



#### **ABOUT ALNAP'S WORK ON HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION**

This briefing paper is part of an ongoing research initiative on humanitarian coordination. It outlines key issues and questions related to cross-coordination in a humanitarian response, one of the four themes that will be discussed at ALNAP's meeting 'Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination' in London on 30 June to 1 July 2016. In particular, it will concentrate on how to improve coordination across a response within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism (Clusters, inter-Cluster and humanitarian country teams, or HCTs). Alongside this paper, ALNAP has also produced additional materials for background context: a video and a recording of a webinar on the same topic, which can be accessed at www.alnap.org/coord-meeting.

This briefing paper draws on a literature review and interviews conducted for the broader research initiative. It has also been informed by **ALNAP's previous work on humanitarian leadership and coordination** over the past several years.

The meeting will address four aspects of coordination:

- 1. How can humanitarians better coordinate across a response?
- 2. How can we better involve national actors in humanitarian coordination?
- 3. How to make the most of information management in coordination?
- 4. How can we improve decision-making in humanitarian coordination?

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### **Abbreviations and acronyms**

HCT	Humanitarian country team
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICC	Inter-Cluster Coordination
ICCM	Inter-Cluster Coordination Mechanism
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SAG	Strategic Advisory Group
TWIG	Technical Working Group

#### **Sub-national coordination**

#### Why address sub-national coordination?

In the Cluster-based humanitarian coordination system, coordination occurs at different geographical levels – at the national level in the country where the Cluster response occurs, and at the subnational level closer to humanitarian operations in various field locations. Evaluations and research have consistently identified sub-national coordination as an area in need of significant improvement (Krueger et al., 2016; Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015; STAIT, 2015; Polastro et al., 2011b; Diagne and Solberg, 2008; Stoddard et al., 2007; Wright et al., 2007; Young et al., 2007; De Silva et al., 2006).

ALNAP's work on coordination (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Campbell, 2015) has identified sub-national coordination as a critical gap in the coordination architecture. At present, sub-national coordination is inconsistent, under-resourced and disconnected from strategic coordination processes in most humanitarian responses. A great deal of the difficulty relates to the many different approaches to sub-national coordination currently used in different response contexts. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is currently mapping out what sub-national coordination structures exist in each country where Clusters are active, which will be a helpful first step in understanding the issue of coordination.

The IASC Cluster Reference Module (IASC, 2015) – the central guidance document for Cluster coordination – recognises the importance of context-appropriate sub-national coordination, suggests a list of activities appropriate for sub-national clusters, and refers to the support and direction given to these sub-national clusters by national clusters. However, it does not outline how roles and responsibilities are to be divided, what the structure of sub-national coordination mechanisms should look like, or how national and sub-national coordination processes should communicate.

# What are the main issues around sub-national humanitarian coordination?

# Sub-national coordination lacks consistency, and therefore predictability, across Clusters and countries.

The Cluster coordination system is built around a generic model that can be adapted to different responses, but which follows a standard format and for which there is general guidance (see IASC, 2015, for example). At the national level there is typically a Cluster Coordinator and Information Management Officer, who often work with a strategic advisory group to make decisions. The Cluster format can be adapted to different crises, but generally those participating in a Cluster in one emergency will recognise the overall structure, process and outputs of a Cluster from one response to another.

There is, however, no such standard guidance on or approach to sub-national coordination. While this may provide more flexibility to adapt to different circumstances, it means that in any given response the humanitarian system could be implementing sub-national coordination in different ways. This makes sub-national coordination unpredictable for potential participants.

# There is probably no one-size-fits-all approach to sub-national coordination that would be appropriate for all contexts.

The problem of inconsistency is unlikely to be solved by getting Clusters and their members to agree to one format for sub-national coordination in the future. The range of contexts around the world where the Cluster system is used means that sub-national coordination may occur in a large, well-connected city where coordination mechanisms will differ greatly from a remote area with a small affected population and small response.

The diversity of sub-national contexts means more than one model for or approach to sub-national coordination is needed. However, at the moment there is no guidance on or criteria for which approaches work best in a particular location. The result of this is a constant reinvention of different approaches, where efforts are inevitably duplicated and lessons about sub-national coordination from a particular response are not taken forward.

#### Sector-based coordination may not be the best approach to sub-national coordination.

There are several advantages to the sector-based coordination system, which organises Clusters in the following way: those working on similar programming approaches are connected, a complex system is broken down into more manageable areas, and there is a predictable system or coordination mechanism in each response. However, coordination divided by sector may not be the most appropriate at the sub-national level. Due to the interconnectedness of humanitarian needs, the way in which humanitarian programmes and local actors are structured, and the level of capacity, subnational coordination may require a different approach.

Dense urban environments, for example, may necessitate different approaches to the sector-separated, centralised model currently used and replicated at the sub-national level in many contexts. Some have called for the adoption of area-based coordination (also called integrated or neighbourhood-based), where coordination would be divided in terms of a defined geographical area. Varying forms of this approach have been suggested, including integrated response, which has been proposed by Catholic Relief Services. Integrated response would see one NGO take the lead on coordination in a particular neighbourhood, thus providing a single point of coordination with local authorities and communities, with support from sector-based technical working groups (CRS, 2016).

Without any guidance on the different forms of sub-national coordination and where they are most appropriate, it is unclear how different approaches, including the call for area-based coordination, would look in practice and how they would link to existing sector-based clusters at the national level, and there is no consensus on what should be tried.

## Coordination is centralised by default, which keeps it away from local actors and crisis-affected people.

Humanitarian coordination is nearly always centralised at the national level. This is in part due to the generic model for Clusters – at the national level, coordination follows an approach that is known and replicated in most crises. Sub-national coordination, as noted above, varies widely in approach, but centralisation is a consistent factor. This is also because humanitarian response programming is typically centralised, since organisations base themselves close to key resources and connections (including with central government) where there is access to transportation and communications facilities.

Because local authorities, national civil society organisations, and crisis-affected people are more likely to be able to engage in coordination close to the field, at the sub-national level centralised coordination often occurs in the absence of local, affected actors. Centralised coordination is also more time intensive and on occasion results in critical information from the field being missed.

This centralised approach to humanitarian coordination and response is markedly different from the one used by the emergency management and civil defence sectors. These actors typically respond to a crisis and coordinate a response by building from the bottom upwards. For example, many emergency management systems used by national authorities and emergency responders around the world keep operations and decisions as close to the field level as possible, supported by 'higher' levels who review critical information coming in from the field, consider the strategic direction of a response, and allocate resources depending on the overall picture. These systems are modular, building upwards from the bottom and growing larger as needs increase. The humanitarian coordination system has been considering decentralisation for some time, but little progress has been made in this regard (Krueger et al., 2016; Lawday et al., 2016; Kruke and Olsen, 2012; Polastro et al., 2011a, 2011b; Steets et al., 2010). When considering how the humanitarian coordination system can be improved it may be useful to reflect on the various decentralised emergency response models.

### The mandates, roles, and responsibilities of national and sub-national coordination mechanisms are not clear.

Despite a list of suggested activities for sub-national Clusters in the key Cluster guidance document (IASC, 2015), a lack of clarity remains about what decisions and actions should occur at the national or sub-national level of coordination. Gaps and duplications are the result of this lack of clarity . Decisions may be taken at the national and sub-national levels, which creates conflict, and time may be wasted pursuing discussion or action in more than one place, without these processes feeding into one another, restricting the time left for other discussions, which then become gaps (Buijsse, 2015; Bennett, 2009).

While the Transformative Agenda introduced a process for regularly reviewing the coordination architecture in each country, coordination architecture reviews have only recently been implemented,

and only in a handful of countries. In most countries there has been no strategic discussion of what should happen and where it should happen among national and sub-national Clusters.

This lack of clarity makes it unclear what the purpose of sub-national coordination is, which discourages participation in the process. It also leads to inconsistency among different Clusters, who are all doing different things at the sub-national level. Knowing that there is an 'active' sub-national Cluster does not indicate the level of capacity or type of activities in place, leading to further confusion.

### There is often only limited communication between national and sub-national coordination structures.

Strategic humanitarian coordination is centralised at the national level and often disconnected from coordination as implemented in the field at the sub-national level. Those engaged in operational coordination at the sub-national level are often unaware of strategic planning processes happening at the national level (Turner et al., 2008; ActionAid, 2006), which can result in their exclusion – often unintentionally – from activities or decisions in which they should be included. This disconnect can mean that critical information from the field is not adequately included in strategic decisions and can also break down trust between actors. Campbell and Hartnett (2005) point out that often agencies have their own internal barriers to communication, particularly between headquarters and field level, and when these agencies join coordination mechanisms, these barriers are replicated.

#### Sub-national coordination is not adequately resourced.

In many responses sub-national coordination mechanisms lack capacity and resources, particularly in terms of dedicated leadership. Sub-national Clusters face the most double-hatting (where Cluster coordinators perform their coordination roles while also holding positions in their own organisations). ALNAP's study of Cluster coordination found that double-hatting was an impediment to effective coordination (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015). This lack of resources often leads sub-national Clusters to over-focus on information sharing and funding discussions.

The potential participants in sub-national coordination mechanisms are also constrained at this level. Cluster members often have insufficient resources to dedicate time to complex coordination processes. Local governments and the sub-national departments of government line ministries are also likely to be poorly resourced, further reducing the likelihood that they will be able to effectively engage in coordination, particularly where it is complex and the value of such engagement is unclear.

### Suggested questions for the meeting

#### Inconsistent approaches to sub-national coordination:

- Does sub-national coordination need to be predictable across responses and, if so, how can this
  be achieved?
- Is it possible to establish generic guidance for sub-national coordination processes that would create consistency, but also maintain adaptability?

#### Lack of a one-size-fits-all approach:

- What are the different models/options for sub-national coordination?
- Which criteria can be used to determine what form of sub-national coordination is most appropriate for a particular context?

#### Centralisation as the default position:

- Which coordination activities should be centralised vs decentralised? What evidence is there to support this?
- Can the decentralised emergency management approaches to response and coordination be useful models to learn from?

#### Unclear roles/responsibilities:

- Which roles/responsibilities should be located at the national vs sub-national levels of a response?
- If this varies, what criteria can be used to determine what should happen and where it should happen?

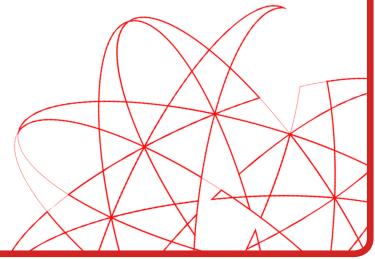
 Whose responsibility is it to clarify the roles/responsibilities of national and sub-national coordination mechanisms?

#### Poor communication between the national and sub-national levels:

- How can communication and connections between national and sub-national coordination structures be improved?
- How can sub-national coordination mechanisms be included in strategic processes led from the national level?

#### Lack of resources:

- What is the optimum level of resources for the different forms of sub-national coordination?
- How can we obtain more support (financial and human resources) for sub-national coordination?



#### **Inter-Cluster Coordination**

#### Why address Inter-Cluster Coordination?

The humanitarian coordination system includes 11 different Clusters, each representing a different sector of response (for example, food security, protection, logistics, etc.). This is helpful in many ways – those working on similar programming approaches (building shelters, establishing school feeding programmes, issuing vaccinations, etc.) are connected with one another, data are more easily gathered about the number of people receiving food or shelter assistance, and it would be impossible to address all aspects of coordination in one body. However, it does have an impact on coordination across a response. Some issues span across more than one cluster and may even affect all the active Clusters in a response. It is therefore important that Clusters are connected in some way, which is often referred to as Inter-Cluster Coordination (ICC).

ICC has been widely cited as an area needing significant improvement (Krueger et al., 2016; Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015; STAIT, 2015; Humphries, 2013; Darcy et al., 2012; Polastro et al., 2011a; Steets et al., 2010; Kauffman and Kruger, 2010; Steets and Grünewald, 2010; Stoddard et al., 2007; Young et al., 2007; De Silva et al., 2006). ICC has also been a critical issue emerging from ALNAP's work on coordination (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Campbell, 2015).

Some guidance materials on ICC are available: see IASC (2015) and OCHA (2013). However, these mentions are brief, and do not clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of different bodies and actors. There is also disagreement as to what form ICC should take, what issues fall within an OCHA-led Inter-Cluster Coordination Mechanism (ICCM), and which should be dealt with in other inter-Cluster or inter-agency coordination forums. There has been great interest in this subject among OCHA, Global Cluster Coordinators and the donor community, who held a joint meeting in March 2016 to examine these and related issues.

Because the humanitarian system has chosen to use a sector-based coordination model, more effort must be made to ensure effective linkages across a response, particularly because – as both the literature and interviews for this research have emphasised – people affected by a crisis are not affected one sector at a time, and both operational and strategic aspects are required to ensure an effective and holistic response.

#### What are the main issues around ICC?

#### The relative roles and responsibilities of Clusters, ICCMs and HCTs are unclear.

According to the latest revision of the Cluster Reference Module, the inter-cluster coordination mechanism is the 'critical link' between the strategic HCT and the operational clusters (IASC, 2015).

The humanitarian coordinator and HCT, supported by OCHA, are tasked with determining the 'shape and function' of the inter-cluster mechanisms in a response (IASC, 2015:27). At the moment ICC is expected to occur in an ICCM and address both technical and strategic areas.

Globally, despite this guidance on paper (IASC, 2015; OCHA, 2013), in practice there is no consensus about what actions or decisions should be taken at the various levels and mechanisms involved in coordination. Due to the need for context-appropriate coordination, this may be different in each response. However, in many responses there has not been a discussion about what should happen and where it should happen (Friss and Jarmyr, 2008; Van Brabant, 1997).

Where there is a lack of clear purpose for ICC, meetings can default to information exchange, resulting in a gap in the coordination of cross-cutting issues and a failure to strengthen coordination among sectors and address common areas of improvement. In other cases, the ICCM starts to make decisions that should be made elsewhere (see, for example, Clarke et al., 2015).

#### The best mechanism for ICC is unclear.

In most large deployments of the Cluster coordination architecture a formal ICCM has been established. This is a group comprising in-country Cluster Coordinators and chaired by OCHA, which in this role is supposed to provide a link to the HCT, in which OCHA also participates. There are few examples of where the ICCM has been able to effectively move beyond information sharing and tackle joint issues.

There are, however, several examples of more ad hoc coordination among clusters – a more informal ICC – which raises the question of whether the ICCM is the most appropriate format for ICC. While more ad hoc approaches may work for certain issues, this method can make it difficult to strategise and it may be unclear how ad hoc ICC connects to work in the HCT and other Clusters. The 2015 revision of the Cluster Reference Module (IASC, 2015) suggests that ICC should occur in multiple formats – in a broader OCHA-chaired ICCM to address strategic objectives, and in smaller groups to work on a specific strategy or issue. Further thought needs to be focused on determining what the best mechanism(s) may be for effective ICC, whether in a formal ICCM, more ad hoc groups, or a combination of both, and how these are best established and connected.

#### Cross-cutting issues do not have a home in the current coordination system.

Overall, the coordination of cross-cutting issues in the current humanitarian architecture has faced considerable criticism (Kauffmann, 2012; ALNAP, 2012; Steets and Grünewald, 2010; Steets et al., 2010). Programming themes and approaches (including gender, accountability, cash responses, etc.) cut across sector-divided clusters, as do some programming activities, which need to be done by all Clusters (needs assessments, the engagement of local authorities, etc.). In the current architecture these issues have no one clear 'home', there is no common understanding on which issues are crosscutting (Steets et al., 2010), and they are coordinated differently in each response (or, in some cases, are not coordinated at all).

One such issue under debate is cash programming. At present, cash coordination is performed by different agencies/organisations depending on the context, is ad hoc without predictable leadership, and has varying levels of interaction with other humanitarian coordination structures (CaLP et al., 2015). Cash coordination groups are sometimes set up as a sort of inter-sectoral working group, while in other responses they form a sub-group of one particular sector. While these solutions are useful at the time, they can also create confusion. In some cases there has been a lack of clarity about issues dealt with by ad hoc groups/sub-groups vs issues tackled by the ICC group (Kauffmann, 2012).

In some ways it may be an advantage not to have one designated place for these issues – Kauffmann (2012:24) notes that having no predefined site for cash coordination provides 'flexibility to establish the most appropriate coordination mechanism depending on needs and the context'. However, there are also downsides, including the risk of either establishing duplicative coordination mechanisms or that issues will not find a place, and thus not be coordinated, as well as lines of accountability not being clear. A lack of consistency in how cash is coordinated also makes it difficult to understand who is responsible for making key decisions about the use or scale-up of cash in a response (CaLP et al., 2015).

#### There is a lack of clarity over ICC responsibilities.

Existing guidance does not make clear whose role it is to ensure that ICC is achieved or whose responsibility it is to make the link between the different coordination bodies (HCT, ICCM, clusters, etc.) (STAIT, 2015). Cluster coordinators and members often do not feel responsible for ICC, seeing it as the responsibility of OCHA (Steets and Grünewald, 2010). On paper, OCHA does have a role in 'supporting' ICC (IASC, 2015) and in many places does facilitate the ICCM groups. ICCMs can take many different forms, and OCHA's role varies in terms of function and effectiveness. However, it seems quite obvious that ICC cannot work without the active participation of cluster coordinators.

#### Trust and communication issues among country Clusters can impede ICC.

In many ways the effectiveness of ICC in a response comes down to the relationships among those involved. When present, trust is an incredibly enabling factor for coordination; when missing, it is a significant impediment. Many of the challenges to achieving ICC could be addressed by improving trust among Cluster Coordinators, Cluster members, OCHA and the HCT.

Steets and Grünewald (2010:33) sum up the importance of communication across the response when they explain that 'for ensuring cohesiveness of the humanitarian response, the relationships between clusters are as important as the relationships within them'.

### Suggested questions for the meeting

#### **Unclear roles:**

- What functions should an ICCM have in relation to the roles of the HCT and Clusters?
- Which mechanisms would support regular reviews of what happens and where it happens across the coordination architecture?

#### The mechanism for ICC:

- What is the best format for effective ICC (formal ICCM, ad hoc groups, or both)?
- How can this be linked to other parts of the coordination architecture?

#### **Cross-cutting issues:**

- Which cross-cutting issues are not coordinated elsewhere?
- Where/how should cross-cutting issues and activities be coordinated?

#### **Responsibility for ICC:**

 What are the relative responsibilities of OCHA, Cluster Coordinators, Cluster members and the HCT in terms of achieving ICC?

#### Trust and communication:

 How can trust among the Clusters, OCHA and the HCT be improved at the country level?

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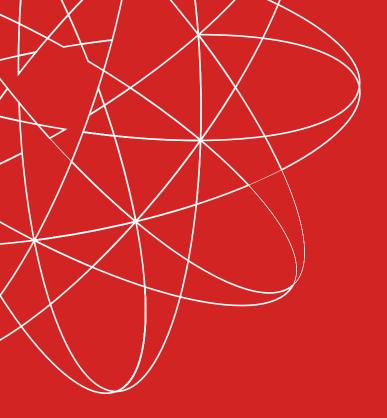
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