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Humanitarian Coordination at the country level
How did the current system evolve?

ICVA *humanitarian learning*

HOW DID THE CURRENT SYSTEM EVOLVE?

The humanitarian architecture at the country level – as it exists today, has been informed through several key processes.

Following a large-scale response in Darfur, Sudan, and witnessing recurrent weaknesses in the humanitarian system, in 2005, the Humanitarian Response Review was undertaken, identifying significant weaknesses of the then-standing humanitarian system, including:

- Long standing gaps;
- Unpredictable capacity;
- Ad-hoc response;
- Erratic coordination;
- Weak partnerships;
- Insufficient accountability amongst agencies;
- Inconsistent donor policies.

The findings of this review lead to the Humanitarian Reform process of 2005, proposing reforms across four key pillars, including:

1. **Coordination:** Establishing the cluster approach;

2. **Leadership:** Creating an overarching in-country accountability figure – the role of the Humanitarian Coordinator;

3. **Financing:** Creating additional rapid response financing mechanisms;

4. **Partnerships:** Supporting partnerships between all humanitarian actors, leading to the Principles of Partnership.

Affected Population — Coordination | Leadership | Finance | Partnership — Engagement with country system
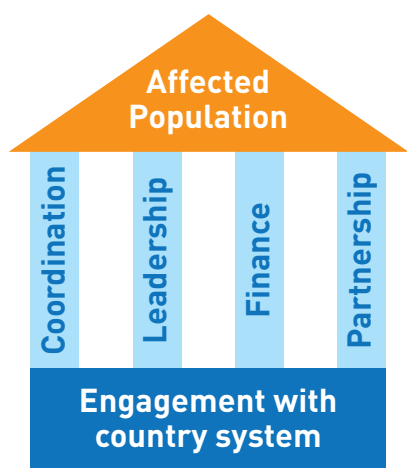
KEY ACTORS AND COORDINATION STRUCTURES AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL:

Country Level Cluster

At the country level, clusters focus on a number of key tasks, including:

1. **Support service delivery:**
   a. Ensure all agencies are driven by the same strategic priorities.
   b. Develop appropriate coordination mechanisms, including the '4Ws' (who, what, when, where); link with other clusters; and strengthen capacity of humanitarian actors where possible.

2. **Inform the decision making of the Humanitarian Coordinator and the Humanitarian Country Team:**
   a. Produce needs assessment and response gap analysis both within and across sectors.
   b. Ensure cluster response priorities are based on analysis and facts.
   c. Ensure cross cutting issues are addressed (age, gender, environment; HIV/AIDS).

3. **Plan and implement cluster strategies:**
   a. Develop cluster plans, objectives and indicators.
   b. Apply standards and guidelines – such as through the technical advisory group, and ensure adherence to national guidelines and Sphere standards.
   c. Clarify funding appeals and requirements.

4. **Monitor and evaluate performance:**
   a. Monitor and report on activities.
   b. Measure progress against agreed objectives.
   c. Recommend corrective action whenever necessary.

5. **Strengthen national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning:**
   a. Support the primarily responsibility of national authorities.
   b. Ensure early recovery principles are integrated into programming from the beginning of the response.

6. **Support robust advocacy:**
   a. Identify humanitarian concerns and contribute key messages to the HC and HCT.
   b. Undertake advocacy activities on behalf of affected people and cluster members.

To read more about the clusters' operations at the country level, review the online cluster reference module.

Humanitarian Coordinator:

The humanitarian coordinator (HC) is the overall lead of the humanitarian response in-country, leading the Humanitarian Country Team. The key tasks of the HC include:

- Define scenarios, alerting partners and support services – such as the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC);
- Prioritize, assess and plan response priorities;
- Strengthen and support national coordination mechanisms – and establishes more when needed;
- Advocacy;
- Lead the response and ensures accountability;
- Facilitate humanitarian access;
- Promote adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL), principles and standards.

Regional Humanitarian Coordinator:

In some complex regional humanitarian contexts, such as the Syria response (impacting Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon) and the Sahel, there may also be a regional Humanitarian Coordinator role, to ensure the overall response remains integrated across countries.

The Humanitarian Country Team:

The Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) comprises of key humanitarian actors on the ground, which:

- Recommends the establishment of clusters and periodically confirm their relevance;
- Develops humanitarian strategy and plans;
- Mobilises and allocates resources;
- Agrees to common policies;
- Promotes adherence to humanitarian and guidelines;
- Acts as an interface with other coordination mechanisms.

Which organisations participate in the HCT?

Entities which participate in the HCT include:

- UN agencies;
- National and International NGOs;
- The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement;

Whilst there may be defined criteria to join a HCT, organisations must be operationally relevant in-country, with a focus on humanitarian programming;
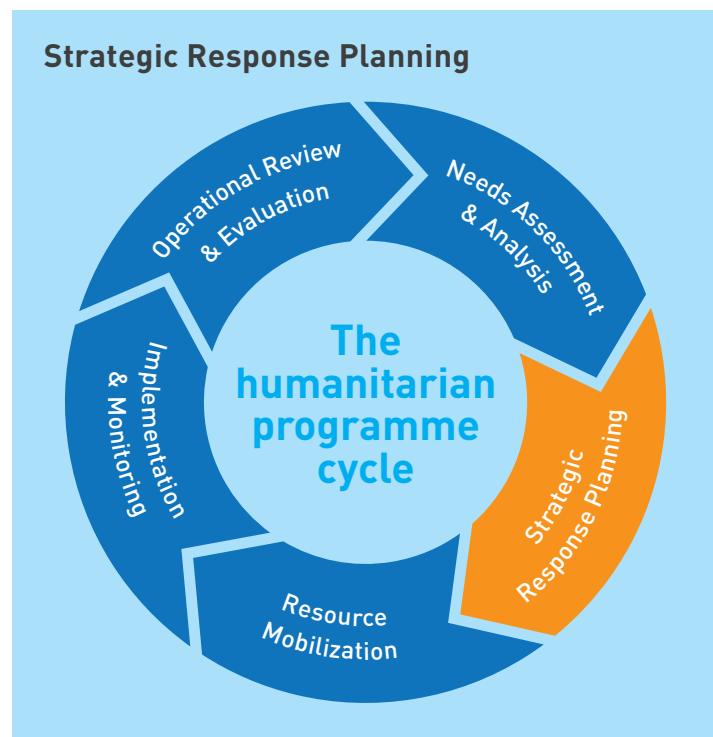
Although NGOs participate in numerous HCTs, their engagement – especially that of National NGOs, needs to be increased – and supported by other humanitarian actors.

The humanitarian programme cycle

In-country humanitarian programming is guided by the humanitarian programme cycle, which includes a number of clear steps in a humanitarian response, including:

- Needs Assessment and Analysis;
- Strategic Response Planning;
- Resource Mobilisation;
- Implementation and Monitoring;
- Operational Review and Evaluation;

Access further information on the **humanitarian programme cycle** here.

Strategic Response Planning

The humanitarian programme cycle

- Operational Review & Evaluation
- Needs Assessment & Analysis
- Strategic Response Planning
- Resource Mobilization
- Implementation & Monitoring

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HOW CAN COORDINATION AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL BE IMPROVED?

Based on recent findings from a series of ALNAP studies, and whilst each context is different, the current humanitarian coordination system is good at enhancing operational cooperation and supporting good practice on the ground, yet has limitations in addressing strategic response-wide issues at the country level. Some practical steps to strengthen coordination at the country level include:

Clarify the meaning of coordination

Coordination can mean different things to different people. Coordination was once more about encouraging different, autonomous organisations to coordinate. Now, it is more about encouraging autonomous organisations to work towards one single, overarching plan.

Especially in rapidly evolving and complex contexts, overarching plans can be slow to develop and slow to change. However, if organisations are more loosely coordinating with each other, at the field level, it can be more responsive to field concerns.

> Coordination is more about agencies coordinating with each other... rather than 'being coordinated;

Some practical steps to strengthen coordination at the country level include:

- Rethink the humanitarian programme cycle process – design from the ground up – rather than top down;
- Focus the HCTs more on strategic, response wide issues, and less on the process;
- Clarify the information needs that operational agencies have – then subsequently focus the information management around these needs;
- Strengthen the inter-cluster function to create a better overall picture of the response.

## Build on and support existing systems:

Often, the same coordination structures are created in humanitarian responses within very different contexts, often not properly considering national and sub national capacity. To better support pre-existing systems and not impose a one-size-fits-all approach, some practical recommendations include:

- Map out coordination structures in advance: Engage with government authorities and civil society to understand existing coordination structures and support any gaps which may exist;
- Re-think the incentive structure for cluster activation: Cluster lead agencies are financed when activating clusters, which may act as its own incentive;
- Better support HCT's to design context-appropriate systems.

Inclusion:

National civil society is regularly excluded from humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Whilst this is not always the result of deliberate exclusion by international humanitarian actors, practical recommendations to strengthen inclusion of national civil society include:

- Decrease the various constraints to access, including language, the location of meetings, and often – connectivity issues;
- Intentionally engage with civil society on the value of the coordination mechanisms and the opportunities to engage;
- Work proactively with National NGO networks as an amplifier of National civil society.

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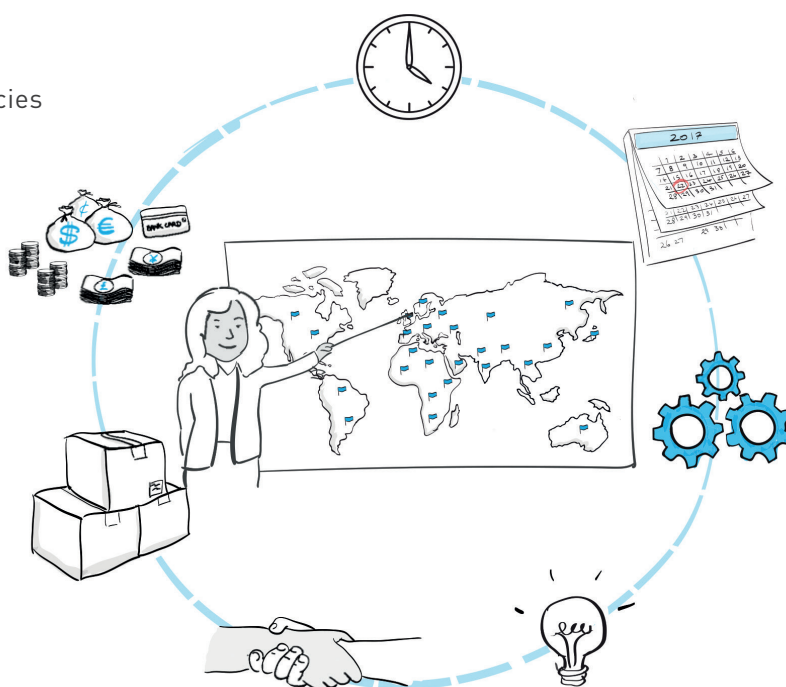
COORDINATION MECHANISMS AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL: CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Ms. Najat Rochdi, the Deputy SRSG, Humanitarian Coordinator, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in the Central African Republic (CAR), listed various active coordination mechanisms in-country, including the HCT, cluster and sub-working groups – amongst others, which are operating at differing levels of success and with various levels of NGO participation. **Specific challenges faced in these coordination mechanisms include:**

- **Limited Government presence:** There is an absence of the state in areas outside of Bangui and other key urban centres, severely limiting the level of security and coordination in peri urban and rural areas;

- **Large number of NGOs:** A significant number of NGOs operating in-country, with different goals, capacity, understanding of Humanitarian principles can have implications on operations and perceptions of neutrality and impartiality;

- **Limited time and capacity to invest in coordination processes:** Participating in humanitarian coordination mechanisms requires a significant investment of resources – most strongly impacting smaller national actors;

- **Staff capacity and turnover:** Staff in coordination roles need to have sufficiently strong coordination skills. Staff with strong relevant skills can be difficult to secure – and difficult to retain due to a high staff turnover rate. This is compounded by surge staff rotating at frequent intervals, contributing to low institutional memory;

- **Insufficient National NGO inclusion:** Compounded by the above factors, the level of National NGO inclusion in many coordination mechanisms remains insufficient;

- **Escalating needs:** The increasing needs requires complementary coordination at the sub-national level to strengthen relevance and flexibility of response. This need for increased coordination therefore requires additional investment.

Some practical steps to improve coordination processes and mechanisms from lessons learned in CAR include:

- **Cluster co-facilitation:** Increase the opportunities and support of cluster co-facilitation with national government and National NGOs;

- **Promote and strengthen shared analysis:** Ensuring key information and knowledge of the context is better shared amongst humanitarian actors;

- **Strengthen engagement with national NGO fora:** Further ensuring National NGOs are actively engaged in coordination mechanisms;

- **Reinforce and strengthen sub-national coordination mechanisms:** Support sub-national coordination hubs in strategic areas of need.

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