

# The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence  
the humanitarian system

## The Cluster System in Ethiopia: An NGO Perspective

### Background

The roll-out and application of the cluster approach has perhaps been the most visible aspect of the humanitarian reform process for NGOs. At the global and field level, NGOs have welcomed efforts to improve coordination and sought to utilize the cluster system as a means to help strengthen collective capacity to share information, aim for joint programming where possible and, ultimately, lead to better humanitarian responses. There is evidence that NGOs have invested significant efforts in engaging with country level clusters as it is recognised that sectoral coordination provides an opportunity to strengthen the overall capacity, effectiveness and management of humanitarian response in four key ways:<sup>1</sup>

- I. Ensuring **predictable leadership** through identifying cluster leads (and including provider of last resort)
- II. Ensuring **timely and effective response** including the maintenance of global capacity and stockpiles
- III. Developing **partnerships** within the clusters between UN agencies, NGOs and the International Red Cross Red Crescent movement
- IV. Improved **strategic field-level coordination** and prioritization

Yet, there is considerable variation in the approach of NGOs to clusters. Some NGOs have advocated strongly for active engagement and participation, taking on co-leadership or co-chairing responsibilities at the country level because they recognise the need for improved humanitarian coordination and emphasis on certain sectoral approaches. Others have resisted country-level participation where the clusters are perceived to be UN-centric or introduced without adequate consultation with non-UN actors. At the country level, attitudes of NGOs towards clusters tends to vary by agency and cluster with a number unsure whether the clusters are efficient or effective, or what level of engagement they should have with the clusters in country.<sup>2</sup>

### The cluster roll-out in Ethiopia

The clusters were rolled out in February 2007 following a high level workshop in partnership with GoE, NGOs and UN agencies. The event was designed to bring relevant GoE line ministry officials on board with the cluster approach and aimed at sensitizing government ministries to new coordination structures, strengthen partnership and reaffirm the importance of strong predictable relationships between GoE, UN and NGOs. The purpose of the workshop was to ensure that the cluster approach complimented rather than duplicated the work of existing GoE coordination bodies

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<sup>1</sup> IASC (2006) Guidance Note on using the cluster approach to strengthen humanitarian response: [www.humanitarianreform.org](http://www.humanitarianreform.org)

<sup>2</sup> Synthesis Report: Review of the engagement of NGOs with the humanitarian reform process, NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project (2009).

(Sector Task Forces) and to illustrate the importance of the international community aligning themselves in support of national structures, especially in the key GoE sectoral areas of food, nutrition and health.

Mutual accountability arrangements were highlighted at the workshop and NGOs welcomed the opportunity to find practical ways for the clusters to work in partnership with the GoE and not add a parallel structure working in competition to the GoE line ministries. Accordingly, NGOs broadly endorsed the approach outlined by the Humanitarian Coordinator: that the clusters should be assessed by their ability to work in support of, rather than duplicate, Sector Task Forces (STF) and act as a facilitator rather than a blocker with GoE structures.

The cluster roll-out in Ethiopia was broadly understood by NGOs to:

- work at the technical level in support of government-led STFs
- strengthen partnership with and capacity of government ministries by ensuring clusters link to government STFs and corresponding bureaus at regional and sub-regional level
- enhance accountability by ensuring cluster leads are accountable to HC<sup>3</sup>
- facilitate improved sectoral response by mandating clusters to identify gaps, share needs assessments, develop response plans and mobilize resources

### **The challenges of cluster application in Ethiopia**

Three years after the clusters were formally introduced at the federal level; there remains limited understanding amongst NGOs of cluster arrangements, intended aims and mandates and differing interpretations of the cluster approach in Ethiopia persist. Feedback from NGOs highlights that purposes of meetings are not always clear, there is seen to be a real risk of duplication where multiple coordination meetings are convened and a desire for guidance to be issued to NGOs on how to better engage in sectoral coordination. Key to this confusion for NGOs relates to misunderstandings around the separation of STF and cluster meetings (and the terminology used in relation to both).

NGOs are also unclear as to the added value of clusters vis-à-vis STF meetings and of the relationship and linkages between the two coordination groups – this is evidenced by the inconsistent levels of NGO attendance and participation at cluster and STF meetings (especially national NGOs). Coupled with complaints of meeting overload from NGOs, there is a marked lack of understanding as to whom clusters are accountable to and how federal level coordination structures link to regional response mechanisms.

NGO reflections on the cluster approach in Ethiopia can be summarized as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- **Terminology:** Cluster approach in Ethiopia not perceived by NGOs to be field-led and needs-driven. Semantic variations ('STF', 'ETF', 'Cluster', 'Sector WG') illustrative of top-down imposed model perhaps not appropriate for Ethiopia context.
- **Engagement:** NGOs tend to participate in clusters that are seen as working. Duplication of coordination structures is a key concern and strengthening interface between clusters and sector task forces (merging where possible) perceived to be a

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<sup>3</sup> IASC guidance for Humanitarian Country Teams also states that representatives of Cluster Lead Agencies should represent their cluster(s), in addition to their organisation, at HCT meetings.

<sup>4</sup> Based on qualitative discussions with NGOs in Ethiopia from November 2009 to March 2010, including consortium agencies of the *NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project*. The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of all project member agencies.

strong incentive for longer-term NGO involvement. NGOs are often unclear how to engage with coordination

- **Agency vs. Cluster lead:** NGOs believe current cluster leads tend to associate cluster functions with UN agency role rather than for overall sector. Accordingly, there is a perceived tension between technical and process accountability lines where it is unclear whether cluster lead is accountable to own agency on technical matters and accountable to cluster members on process issues.
- **Resources:** Management and facilitation of clusters sometimes weak. NGOs unclear why clusters do not receive dedicated technical cluster coordination support, believing this to impact adversely on coordination capacity at regional level especially. NGOs recognize that coordinators have a vital role to play in ensuring the cluster members understand responsibilities, enable the cluster to be action, rather than process, oriented and believe UN cluster agency leads are not deploying sufficient capacity and resources to be effective in their functions.
- **Accountability:** Linkages between clusters, donors and EHCT perceived to be lacking. Weak inter-cluster relationship and inconsistent reporting from cluster leads to EHCT also viewed as adding to the overall accountability deficit within the cluster system<sup>5</sup>. It is unclear, for example, whether cluster leads provide monthly progress reports on humanitarian response to the HC or whether the cluster is represented at EHCT meetings. A number of NGOs would like to see the EHCT utilize clusters to help understand programme caseload, coverage, gaps and to facilitate the prioritization of resources and determination of priority humanitarian advocacy issues.
- **Performance:** Cluster performance widely perceived to be variable depending on sector and cluster lead commitment. NGOs frequently complain that there is a lack of purpose, mandate and objectives attached to sector coordination meetings. NGOs report that meetings providing only information sharing (such as programming updates from other agencies) and not strategic planning (including sector trends analysis and related advocacy needs) are not considered useful. Operational effectiveness and decision-oriented cluster meetings are key incentives for NGO engagement. Reporting lines and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for clusters are also often unclear.

#### **Case Study: Education Cluster**

As no pre-existing government sectoral group on Education existed in Ethiopia, UNICEF and Save the Children UK (as global cluster co-leads) worked with the Ministry of Education to establish the Education Cluster in October 2008. Chaired by the Ministry of Education and coordinated jointly by UNICEF and Save the Children UK, the cluster is open to all agencies that are active in education in emergencies (EiE). Both UNICEF and Save the Children UK worked with the Ministry of Education to gain support for objective of supporting education during emergencies. Recognizing a need for the cluster to support the development of EiE capacity at local levels, the cluster is currently working to jointly establish EiE Task Forces in four regions. Building the capacity of Regional Education Bureaus is a key priority for the Education Cluster, though a challenging goal to realize in practice given the lack of resources and dedicated cluster human resource support the cluster at the national level.

<sup>5</sup> NGOs report that it is unclear how additional coordination bodies, such as the Humanitarian Coordination Forum and the Government-led Disaster Risk Management Technical Working Group (DRMTWG), fit within overall coordination structures.

The Education Cluster experience provides a useful snap-shot of both the successes partnership (between GoE, NGOs and UN agency) can promote in sector coordination and the challenges inherent in sustaining longer-term support to these processes.

**Successes:**

- Structure adapted for country context - **one national level sector coordination** group known to all actors as a 'cluster', led by Ministry of Education and jointly co-chaired by UNICEF and Save the Children UK.
- Cluster Terms of Reference and **annual work plan developed jointly** by Ministry of Education and cluster members.
- Cluster **capacity-building activities** aimed at supporting Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureaus (REBs), UN and other humanitarian actors
- supporting the development of **regional level task forces for education** included in cluster work plan.
- UNICEF and Save the Children **working jointly** to establish regional education in emergency task forces in Gambella, Somali and Afar, with linkages to national Education Cluster.
- **Model adapted** for Amhara as Regional Education Bureau focal point situated and works within Regional Humanitarian Coordination mechanism (Food Security and Disaster Management Bureau).
- Meetings with relevant regional authorities to **clarify coordination mechanisms** and ensure support.

**Challenges:**

- National cluster **linkages to regional task forces remain weak** owing to **lack of dedicated cluster coordination** support to Regional Education Bureaus in developing action plans for EiE preparedness and response planning at regional/district level.
- Capacity-building needs remain large, especially at regional level but at national level also. Aim to build **longer-term capacity** of Regional Education Bureaus and facilitate stronger needs-oriented coordination based on Woreda and school level. information threatened by **lack of national cluster support at regional level**.
- Enabling greater education input to DPFSB zonal offices response plans and assessments, supporting the development of emergency preparedness plans and developing information system for education cluster required far greater **human resources** than currently available.
- Need to fund a **full-time cluster coordinator** positioned at the MoE at federal level to strengthen capacity for cluster coordination and mainstreaming of EiE. Coordinator ideally to work with national cluster as well as regional task forces and provide technical support in mainstreaming EiE.
- **Lack of cluster resources tends to inhibits work**. Cluster work perceived to be an 'add-on' to existing roles, meaning dedicated human resources are not available. There is no money available in country to support cluster activities.

## When do clusters work well for NGOs?

- ☑ When meetings are **consistent**, well-chaired, **decision-oriented** and information is managed and shared well
- ☑ When technical full-time **coordinators** are dedicated to and understand the purpose of coordination
- ☑ Where coordination and **information tools** are utilized (eg: sector guidelines, technical standards and minimum standards, 3Ws, meeting agendas, minutes)
- ☑ When **partnership** and needs of cluster members are understood
- ☑ Where **NGOs** (including NNGOs) take on a co-chair role and help inform common strategies
- ☑ Where **linkages to national and sub-national government are strong** and local-level coordination assists capacity-building of local government
- ☑ Where clusters are **flexible, facilitative** in structure and **adaptable** to local context (for example, taking DRR approaches into account)
- ☑ Where cluster identify and function is not UN centric and there is **collective independence** from the lead UN agency
- ☑ Where clusters are felt to be **accountable** to affected people
- ☑ Where cluster is seen to **improve quality and effectiveness of humanitarian response**
- ☑ When clusters address **cross-cutting themes/issues**

### Next Steps:

Three years after the roll-out of clusters in Ethiopia, a composite review of how the clusters have impacted on sectoral planning and assessing whether the cluster system has improved humanitarian response to affected populations in Ethiopia would be useful. This review should take its reference point from overall impact to affected populations, assessing downward accountability to beneficiaries, upward accountability of clusters to the HC and involvement of NGOs, including national and local NGOs. Such a review must be mindful of the institutional constraints present in Ethiopia that have hindered the effective application of the cluster approach, as well as the political challenges in decentralizing structures to regional and local level.

New IASC guidance on how to involve government bodies in clusters where they have capacity to participate has recently been issued and should help inform this process, as should the findings of the recent Cluster Approach Evaluation Phase 2 report – which provides recommendations on how to synergize more effectively with existing coordination and response mechanisms and capacities, how to strengthen cluster management and implementation modalities and how to target more resources for cluster approach at local level, ensuring more resources are provided to fund cluster management and activities.<sup>6</sup>

As a first step, clarity on the distinction between STFs and clusters, along with guidance on appropriate terminology, is crucial. Not only will this help ensure all humanitarian actors are able to support the intended aims of the cluster approach at the country-level, but will also clarify the goals and aims of each sectoral group(s) and how they relate to

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<sup>6</sup> The Cluster Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report (May 2010) suggests that cluster activities and strategies might be 'sponsored'

<http://ocha.unog.ch/ochafileupload/upload.aspx?publicID=u070510092144svlFXO6knB>

each other. Longer-term efforts should seek to ensure accountability structures are strengthened and inter-agency/cross-sector dialogue and planning is improved.

The HC, with the support of the EHCT, has an important role to play in providing the necessary oversight and guidance for instituting an improved system of humanitarian sector coordination in Ethiopia.

### **NGO Recommendations:**

- **Reform of clusters:** Global IASC guidance states international humanitarian actors should organize themselves in such a way as to ‘support or compliment existing national response mechanisms’ rather than creating parallel ones which may actually weaken or undermine efforts at national level.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the EHCT should task OCHA with a structural review of STF-Cluster relationship (by sector and assessing sectoral linkages to DRR/early recovery) to provide recommendations on whether (and which) coordination groups should be merged. Terminology for such groups should be decided at field level by the EHCT in Ethiopia and in partnership with GoE and based on context and government capacity, presence and willingness.
  - **Action Point:** Production of a cluster reform roadmap for Ethiopia with clear instructions relating to cluster relationship to government sectoral groups, agency roles and responsibilities and performance assessment
  
- **Training and Guidance:** Following coordination structure review, EHCT guidance on coordination model should be issued to government, NGOs and UN agencies. A joint GoE-UN-NGO-donor workshop could be organized to sensitize all humanitarian actors to new model and strengthen mutual understanding of reformed coordination structure.
  - **Action Point:** OCHA cluster refresher training for GoE, INGOs, NNGOs and cluster leads should accompany activation of the new model and experienced global cluster staff should be deployed, if necessary, to facilitate such trainings
  
- **Accountability:** EHCT should task cluster leads with standardized sectoral reporting to the OCHA coordination meeting, which should be led according to a set agenda. The EHCT should also ensure OCHA provides ongoing cluster assessments to strengthen accountability to beneficiaries. Serious consideration should be given by the EHCT to the design of common accountability framework for clusters consistent with specific roles and relationships with external stakeholders and not adding to reporting burden. Greater donor support and oversight of clusters should be encouraged by the EHCT to increase their engagement with cluster system. Regardless of how sector coordination groups are structured, the EHCT should ensure same standards of leadership, accountability, partnership, predictability and technical standards are applied. As a first step OCHA should conduct a review of all cluster lead agency TORs to ensure that cluster lead roles and responsibilities are clearly delineated, reporting lines and relationships are clearly stated and cluster modus operandi is smarter and more specific.

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<sup>7</sup> IASC Operational Guidance for Cluster Lead Agencies on Working with National Authorities (Draft March 2010)

- **Action Point:** Bi-annual cluster assessments conducted by OCHA (monitoring capacity, technical competencies and operational effectiveness) to strengthen HC-Cluster interaction and enhance accountability relationship
  - **Action Point:** HC to encourage donors to participate in cluster meetings so that strategic links can be developed between clusters and bilateral donors
- **Strengthening Regional Sector Coordination:** Flexibility of approach should be of paramount consideration in supporting existing regional coordination approaches through relevant line ministries and should be accompanied by a thorough evaluation of technical sectoral response support needed at regional level. This should include an assessment of how decentralization of coordination can compliment the ongoing BPR process and strengthen information flow between national and sub-national authorities. OCHA should also consider whether combination sector groups could be instituted at regional level, such as health and nutrition, to reduce administrative burden on local authorities. To facilitate this process, the EHCT should consider whether secondments of technical sector experts to line ministries at federal level are required to act as coordinator for cluster and how resources to support this can be secured.
- **Action Point:** EHCT to instruct OCHA to develop and issue guidance to cluster leads on regional application
  - **Action Point:** OCHA to develop appropriate training modules to accompany regional cluster roll-out
- **NGO Engagement:** International NGOs and UN agencies should identify ways to better involve national partners in humanitarian coordination to promote more effective humanitarian responses. Clusters should seek to share best practice on involving national partners – drawing on and making use of positive NGO practice where available. The Principles of Partnership (as endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007) should be included in all Cluster TORs as a means of improving the effectiveness of coordination mechanisms and the participation of local, national and international NGOs.
- **Action Point:** Cluster leads should seek to encourage NGOs to take on co-facilitation/co-chair roles to better encourage wider NGO participation and engagement with cluster processes. The Education Cluster (UNICEF-Save the Children UK-Ministry of Education) could share best practice with other clusters to support this

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\*The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project is a 3 year NGO consortium project funded by DfID to strengthen NGO engagement in and understanding of humanitarian reform mechanisms in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. Member agencies are Action Aid, CAFOD, CARE International UK, ICVA, International Rescue Committee, Oxfam and Save the Children UK.