



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

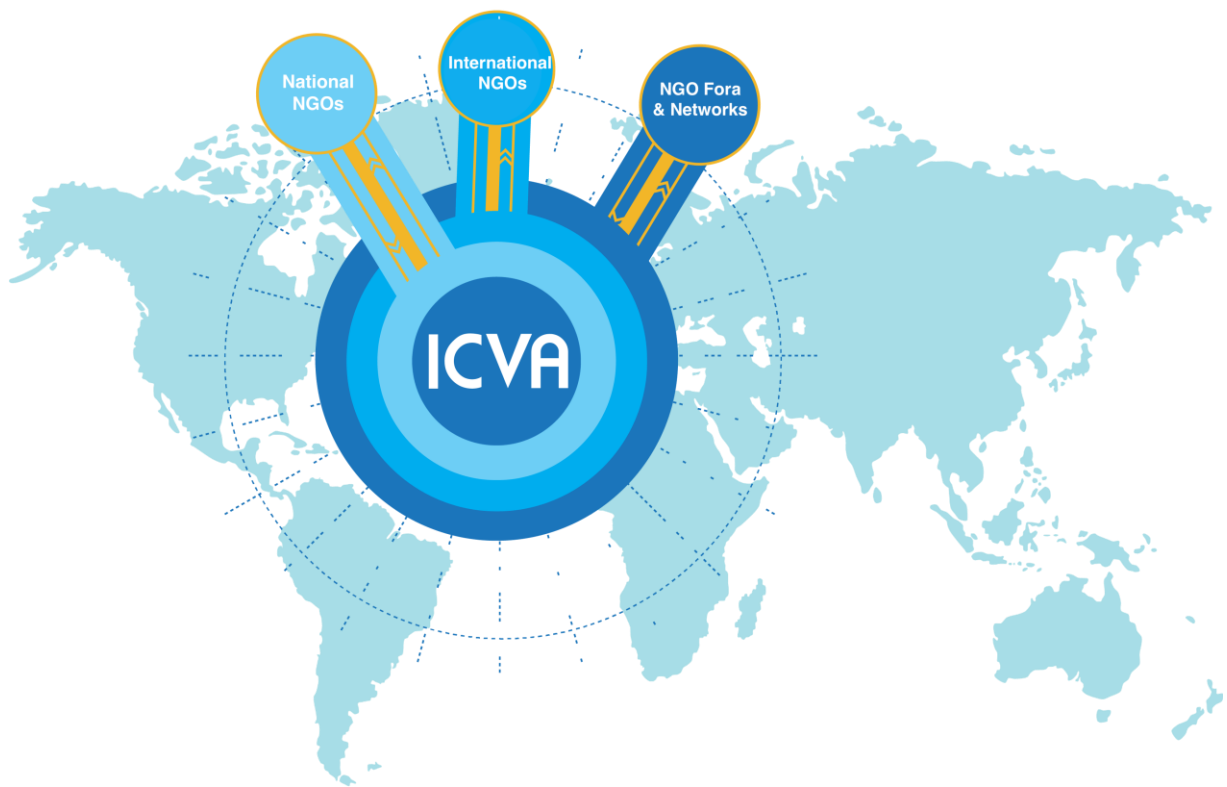
NGO Guide to:

Understanding and influencing the IASC system at country level

MAY 2025

**The ICVA Demystifies series:
Humanitarian Coordination**





About ICVA

ICVA is a global network of over 160 non-governmental organisations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

This paper was authored by Albert Philip Burger, ICVA's NGO Policy and Practice Coordinator. The author would like to thank the NGO Fora and OCHA for their insights and contributions to the substance of this paper.

Table of Contents

About ICVA	1
Acknowledgements	1
Table of Contents	2
Understanding and influencing the IASC system at country level	3
What is coordination?	3
Foundations of the IASC coordination approach	4
<i>UN-driven and NGO inclusive</i>	4
<i>Standing dualism of the coordination purpose</i>	4
<i>Principles of partnership</i>	4
In-country IASC coordination mechanisms	6
The Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)	6
The Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG)	9
The cluster system	12
Sub-National Structures	15
Key recommendations	18

Understanding and influencing the IASC system at country level

What is coordination?

The response to humanitarian emergencies involves large numbers of diverse humanitarian organizations, possibly delivering similar activities in proximity to one another and usually in a context of limited resources that are insufficient to meet all needs. Thus, coordination is instrumental to identify needs and prioritize the response, avoid gaps and duplications and deliver an efficient response through improved predictability and accountability.

There are multiple definitions of coordination leading to different expectations. The definition below is the most consistent; it dates to the origin of the humanitarian system and is taken from an evaluation of the [coordination of] an international humanitarian response:

Coordination is the systematic utilization of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner.

Such instruments include:

1. strategic planning;
2. gathering data and managing information;
3. mobilizing resources and assuring accountability;
4. orchestrating a functional division of labor in the field;
5. negotiation and maintaining a serviceable framework with host political authorities;
6. providing leadership

[...] such instruments inject an element of discipline without unduly constraining action. (Minear *et al.*, 1992).

Although the humanitarian coordination architecture has become significantly more sophisticated and complex in the past 30 years, the fundamental purpose remains largely unchanged.

Active participation in coordination is a corollary to an organization's commitment to an efficient, accountable response. It includes the identification of priorities - which areas are most affected, which sectors need urgent response; agreeing on a division of labor - what each organization involved in the coordinated response will be doing; ensuring that strengths and expertise are duly considered - which organization is best placed to respond.

The degree of coordination is a choice for an organization. Adopting a common approach (e.g., common standards, shared strategies, and potential resources, etc.) leads to a more effective multi-agency response. However, it lowers an organization's autonomy. In some cases, organizations may prioritize their independence but can still adapt their response (activities, locations) to build complementarity/synergy between their projects. ([Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015](#)).

Foundations of the IASC coordination approach

UN-driven and NGO inclusive

Building an effective coordination requires an inclusive system bringing together the major networks of humanitarian organizations.¹ Agreement was made for humanitarian coordination to be driven by the United Nations.² But NGOs are meant an integral part of the system and to be fully included in the decision-making processes. As such, IASC structures should not be seen as UN structures to which NGOs are invited to participate, but as a joint structure with full NGO involvement at all levels.

In practice, considerable imbalances remain, and the IASC architecture often responds better to UN agencies' concerns than to those of NGOs. At the global level, UN agencies are Members of the IASC, while NGOs are Standing (permanent) Invitees. While the IASC is keen to point out that "in practice, no distinction is made between "Members" and "Standing Invitees", the very language used points to very different statuses within the system. At country level, the ability of NGOs to participate meaningfully in the decision-making processes remains very dependent on the willingness of the humanitarian leadership and that of the UN agencies.

Nevertheless, the original promise of a fully NGO-inclusive system remains a strong argument when negotiating for more space in decision-making spaces for NGOs.

Standing dualism of the coordination purpose

A dual interpretation of the role of coordination has remained: *Is it meant to reach an agreed upon alignment between individual organizations operating autonomously, or is it about getting organizations to set a common single strategy and to manage them as implementing partners of a unique response plan?*

In practice, the humanitarian community oscillates between "coordinating with" others and "being coordinated" by others. As a result, a country's strategy (as defined in the Humanitarian Response Plan) is often likely to reflect a patchwork of individual activities resulting from the mandates and interests of each organization, as opposed to a common vision for implementing and sustaining a needs-based response.

Principles of partnership³

The need for inclusive, system-wide coordination is instrumental to the humanitarian reform. The Principles of Partnership (PoP) are a recognition of the complementarity, diversity, and interdependence of humanitarian organizations. They draw on the premise

¹ The international Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; The United Nations agencies; the NGOs connected through the main consortia ICVA, InterAction and SCHR.

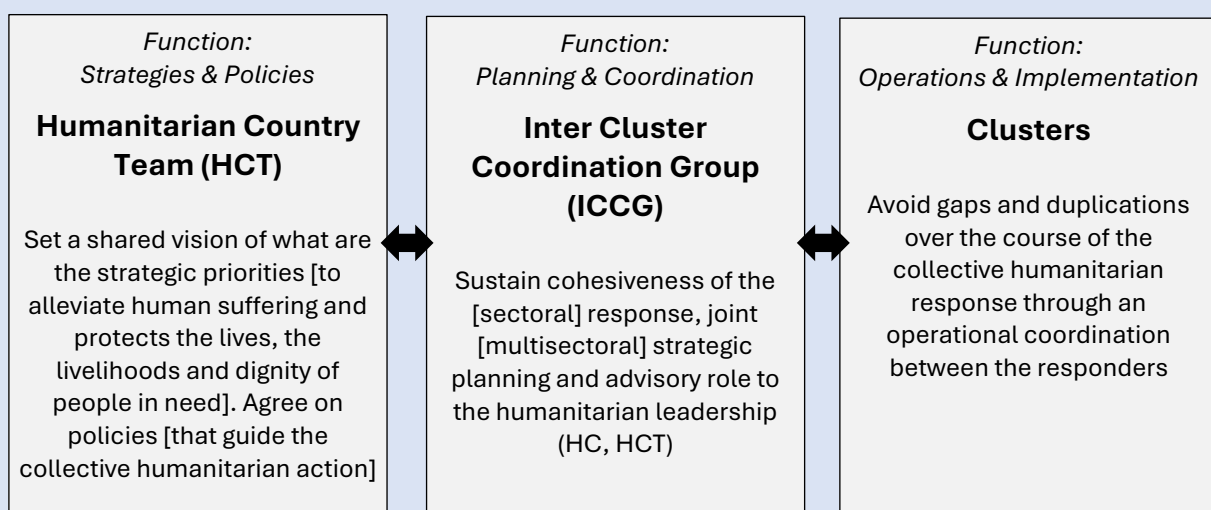
² The rationale for it includes the ability for the UN to take binding elements on their agencies (which NGOs cannot do), their large presence in the field, and the fact the IASC was the most representative humanitarian forum yet established in 2005 when building the system-wide inclusive coordination mechanism.

³ The principles of Partnership, their translation and additional resources can be found here: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/transforming-our-network-for-impact/principles-of-partnership/>.

that no one actor can meet humanitarian needs on its own and working in partnership can increase the effectiveness of humanitarian action.

The PoP is a statement of commitment that was endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform⁴ in 2007.

The Principles of Partnership are enshrined in the Terms of Reference of the Humanitarian Country Team, the most senior humanitarian coordination structure in a country.⁵ These can be an important tool to build meaningful partnerships and to promote a balanced approach to coordination. The PoPs were developed in an attempt to put humanitarian actors on a more equal basis and, importantly, constitute an early attempt at a framework for quality partnerships between national and international humanitarian actors:



Equality of the organizations - equal footing irrespective of size and power.

Transparency through dialogue, which increases the level of trust.

Result-oriented approach for effective humanitarian action.

Responsibility – ethical obligation to each other when committing to deliver activities.

Complementarity - the diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset (notably local capacity).

⁴ The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) was first established in 2006 by leaders of 40 humanitarian organisations including NGOs, UN agencies, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Bank, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The GHP adopted Principles of Partnership (PoP) in 2007.

⁵ See the companion ICVA paper: The Humanitarian Country Team Standard Terms of Reference - Commented

In-country IASC coordination mechanisms

The IASC in-country coordination is built around 3 core structures: the Humanitarian Country Team, the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group, and the clusters. This standardized architecture is meant to provide a predictable and accountable response, delivered in an efficient and cohesive manner, and can be further supplemented by sub-national structures.

The Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)⁶

As the senior-most inter-agency humanitarian leadership body in a country, the HCT's primary purpose is to provide strategic direction for collective inter-agency humanitarian response.

The HCT is composed of organizations that undertake humanitarian action in-country and that commit to participate in coordination arrangements. It should include the operational UN agencies, OCHA, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and, subject to their individual mandates, components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The total number of participants should remain limited to promote efficiency.

When present, it is customary for MSF and the ICRC to hold observer status.

Similarly, on the invitation of the Humanitarian Coordinator, representatives of the donors can also hold seats as observers.⁷

The terms of reference of the HCT call for balanced - but not necessarily equal - representation between the United Nations and NGOs, and the presence of national NGOs should be supported and encouraged. Participation is at director level only. For the UN agencies, heads of country offices will represent both their respective agencies and their associated clusters. For NGOs, seats are allocated to individual Country Directors, not to organizations. As such, NGO Country Directors should not represent their own organizations at HCTs, but instead reflect the views and positions of NGO collectives, usually NGO fora. NGO fora directors should always be given a seat, with the other NGO seats being allocated on an elective basis.

Roles and responsibilities of the HCT

The HCT function is guided by international humanitarian and human rights law, the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, and the Principles of Partnership.

⁶ The standard terms of reference for HCTs can be found here:

https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hct_tors.pdf

⁷ To note: The participation of donors in HCTs remains a debated and at times contentious subject and there is not clear IASC guidance on this issue.

The terms of reference outline 6 core responsibilities for HCTs:

1. Provide a shared strategic vision for collective humanitarian action in-country which is set out in a common strategic plan (the Humanitarian Response Plan or equivalent).
2. Oversee the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), sub-national coordination bodies and other groups that are part of the inter-agency coordination architecture in-country.
3. Support efforts led by the HC⁸ to obtain free, timely, safe, and unimpeded access by humanitarian organizations to populations in need.
4. Ensure that preparedness and response efforts are inclusive and coordinated.
5. Ensure that the international humanitarian response is coordinated with national, sub-national and local level authorities
6. Support and contribute to efforts to address the humanitarian-development nexus.

Accountability

HCT membership is conditional on a commitment to mutual accountability among the members and a commitment to contribute to the collective. The specific mutual responsibilities and specific actions to implement the above-mentioned 6 core responsibilities should be outlined in an annual HCT Compact, developed in country in collaboration with all HCT members and that will provide the basis for a performance review.

The IASC also requires 4 areas of mandatory responsibilities to be included in the compact. From the HCT terms of reference:

- ❖ A collective approach for ensuring that protection is central to humanitarian action, including developing and implementing a common HCT strategy on protection.
- ❖ A collective approach to Accountability to Affected People (AAP) for engaging with, ensuring feedback to, and adjusting the response based on the views of affected people.
- ❖ A collective mechanism and approach to Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) by humanitarian workers, including a Code of Conduct, aligned with any other mechanisms in place to deal with this issue.
- ❖ A collective approach to addressing Sexual and Gender based Violence.

Where a HCT Compact is not already in place, NGOs are encouraged to approach the Humanitarian Coordinator to seek its implementation.

⁸ It should be noted that while efforts on access and BAI are led by the HC, all HCT members are expected to contribute.

The Principles of Partnership, discussed above, is not an IASC document per se, but is the modus operandi of the HCT as per the IASC terms of reference. The PoPs define in what spirit HCTs should take place and outline the need for mutual respect irrespective of size and power, the early sharing of information, the need for a result-oriented approach, and other elements that are key to an efficient HCT. The PoP are not always well known by HCT members, and a reminder of their foundational role in the HCT terms of reference can be useful to support a stronger NGO voice within those meetings.

Ultimately, the HCT is accountable to the affected populations, and it is essential to link the performance of the HCT to a humanitarian response that is effective and principled.

Effective NGO participation

1. Decisions are not taken *ex-nihilo*, being aware of the full context is essential to take informed decisions.

HCT members are expected to be aware of the larger context leading to the points being discussed in the meeting. HCTs agendas are often the result of discussions that take place upstream of the decision-making: The HCT is part of a larger coordination system, its agenda should reflect matters that have already been identified and discussed in other coordination mechanisms (ICCG, Clusters, taskforces, etc.) where NGOs are present. For example, the Humanitarian Response Plan is initially produced by OCHA and the ICCG based on the planning within each of the clusters, and only reaches the HCT after extensive work within the clusters and the ICCG. While background documents can be shared during the HCT, the views they present may not be self-explanatory or can elude elements of major importance to some members.

As such, it is key to be fully prepared before the meeting itself. NGO Fora can play a key informer role for NGO representatives at the HCT to keep a comprehensive view of the system. In addition, a constant engagement with the HC and the HCT secretariat (OCHA) is instrumental in complementing the understanding of the whys and wherefores.

2. Understanding all stakeholders' mandates and priorities is needed to consistently influence the HCT.

Inter-agency decision-making is a complex affair. Where NGOs might require several meetings or working sessions to achieve consensus, the same is true for UN agencies. It is important to remember that while the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator can hold considerable influence over the UN system, they have no formal line management, and each agency reports internally.

In the absence of a unified leadership structure, achieving influence requires understanding the mandates and goals of each agency and the motivations and interests of its representative. Developing a relationship with individual head of agencies and maintaining a constant dialogue on key issues is thus vital to avoiding 'split' HCTs, for example devolving into a scenario where UN positions developed in the UNCT are presented versus NGO positions developed within the NGO forum, as these situations tend to lead to tense blockages.

3. NGO representatives at the HCT and NGO Forum member of the HCT must be able to represent and articulate the complementary viewpoints of the NGO community.

The ability of the HCT to achieve its purpose relies on the capacity of its members to take decisions on behalf of their organization or those they represent, and to have both a strategic and an operational vision of humanitarian action.

As representatives of a collective, rather than their own organizations, NGO Country Directors at the HCT must be able to represent the views and positions of the collective and be able to rightly gauge the expected level of commitment of NGOs more broadly to any decision. It is the responsibility of those Country Directors to regularly go back to the wider collective to gather the various positions and, with the support of the NGO forum secretariat (where available), build a consensus before the HCT proper.

The HCT terms of reference recognize the representational nature of NGO participation, and as such discussions with OCHA - as the HCT secretariat - can help ensure the system is adapted to these specific needs. This would, at minimum, include ensuring the agenda is submitted sufficiently in advance of the meeting proper to allow for consultations. Similarly, NGOs can request for a key decision to be delayed where further consultations are required.

The Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG)⁹

The ICCG provides a platform for clusters/sectors to work together to jointly deliver an effective and efficient humanitarian response. The ICCG provides operational direction and support to sub-national coordination groups. It plays a critical role in tracking and monitoring the response, compiling updates from sub-national coordination groups, and transmitting clear messages to the HC and HCT on operational matters for advocacy purposes and decision-points.

The inter-sector coordination is under the sole mandate of OCHA on behalf of the HC. The ICCG, via OCHA, advises the HCT and provides clusters with overall strategic guidance from the HCT. This can leave limited space for NGO involvement, since only the single mandated chair of the ICCG has the full picture and links with both the HCT and the individual clusters.

The core members of the ICCG are the cluster leads and co-leads,¹⁰ protection sub-clusters/AORs, the coordinator of the Information Management Working Group, relevant IASC advisors (gender, PSEA, protection early recovery etc.), and OCHA Head or Deputy Head of Office. The coordinators of sub-groups and technical working groups set up by the ICCG to work on specific areas of work such as access, needs assessments, AAP/community engagement, cash, and durable solutions, are also members.

⁹ The standard terms of reference for ICCGs can be found here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/standard-terms-reference-inter-cluster-sector-coordination-groups-0>

¹⁰ The terms cluster coordinator, co-coordinator, co-facilitator or co-chair are all use interchangeably.

OCHA chairs the ICCG on behalf of the HC, facilitating the overall functioning of the group and providing secretariat function which in some cases may be a dedicated resource.

It is encouraged, but not compulsory, for the ICCG to include representatives of the international and national NGO fora. In several responses, the NGO Forum has successfully negotiated for a seat on the ICCG and ICVA is engaging with OCHA to make this standard practice for all ICCGs.

In practice, the ICCG is a mechanism with significant influence but limited NGO engagement. Its role as the interface between the strategic and the operational sectoral coordination has no direct equivalent within NGO coordination fora, and as a result, ICCG participation is often limited to NGO cluster leads and co-leads who may not see their role to represent the broader NGO collective.

Roles and responsibilities

While standard terms of reference were produced in 2017, the ICCG's form and function in any country are decided by the HC and HCT at country level. As such, it is important for NGOs to request the terms of reference for the ICCG in their context to identify the exact roles and responsibilities. The common scope as defined by the standard terms of reference is as follow:

1. Supporting service delivery across clusters/sectors:

- ❖ Informing, advising, and alerting the HCT of operational priorities and response gaps.
- ❖ Taking action or advising the HCT on action required on issues impacting the effective delivery of the response across clusters.
- ❖ Maximizing resources, minimizing duplication, and enhancing complementarities between clusters.
- ❖ Identifying and facilitating the coordination of multi-sectoral or joint programming such as multi-sectoral or multi-purpose cash transfer programs
- ❖ Supporting sub-national level coordination groups.

2. Supporting analysis, planning, and monitoring across clusters/sectors

- ❖ In consultation with the HCT, jointly analyzing and monitoring risks.
- ❖ Conducting joint needs assessments and joint analysis.
- ❖ Reaching agreement on joint strategic objectives and the draft humanitarian response plan to be recommended to the HCT.
- ❖ Recommending changes to the response based on a continuous gap analysis and monitoring.
- ❖ Elaborating funding requests and contributing to allocation papers (CERF/Country-Based Pooled Funds) in a collaborative manner, based on agreed priorities across sectors.

3. Integrating cross-sectoral issues into response

- ❖ Integrating gender, age, and diversity characteristics of the affected populations into the response across clusters.
- ❖ Mainstreaming protection across all clusters.
- ❖ Integrating early action, preparedness, and early recovery across all clusters.

4. Advocacy

- ❖ Identifying core advocacy concerns such as humanitarian access, preventing, and addressing violations of international law or durable solutions for displacement and requesting the HCT to advocate or provide strategic directions on these issues accordingly.

Effective NGO participation

1. Ensure seats for representative NGOs at the ICCG, and where possible, negotiate an NGO co-chair for the ICCG

The ICCG is often overlooked but plays a pivotal role in linking sectoral coordination to the HCT. Many of the recommendations made to the HCT that can then lead to key decisions are initially submitted by the ICCG. Better participation at the ICCG stage thus allows for better influence at HCT level.

While encouraged, NGO participation beyond the NGO cluster leads and co-leads is not defined in the terms of reference, the option to co-chair must thus be negotiated with OCHA. If co-chairing is not an option, ensuring a seat for the NGOs (ideally designated by the NGO Fora) remains an important goal. It should be noted that effective ICCG participation requires an in-depth knowledge of sectoral coordination issues that can go beyond the remit of NGO forum secretariat staff. As such, an ICCG seat could be delegated (e.g. to a forum steering committee member) rather than the forum director if deemed more suitable.

2. Coordinate NGO HCT participation with NGO cluster leads and co-leads

Many of the issues brought forth to the HCT stem from discussions having taken place in the clusters or the ICCG. As such, regular exchanges between the HCT participants and the NGO leads and co-leads, supported through the NGO forum where available, allows for more effective participation and influence, allowing for a better tracking of issues rising through the cluster-ICCG-HCT ladder.

3. Contribute to the ICCG workplan

The ICCG is supposed to have TORs, conduct an annual performance review and produce an annual workplan, although these are not always followed through. According to the Note on IASC coordination structures at country level in 2022, the last one available at the time of this writing, ICCGs reported on the status of annual workplans, having Terms of Reference and whether they had conducted an annual performance

review. All three responsibility areas registered varying levels of drops compared with 2021 figures. All but four ICCGs (87% in 2022 compared with 90% in 2021) had ToRs with over half (58%) having updated their ToRs within the past three years. Fewer ICCGs (53%) reported having workplans in 2022 compared with 60% in 2021.

If they are not being fulfilled, these areas should be discussed in HCT and offer an avenue for NGOs to provide feedback.

The cluster system

The cluster system was set up in 2005 and is intended to strengthen the predictability, efficiency, and effectiveness of the humanitarian response. The approach is intended to strengthen the predictability, efficiency, and effectiveness of the humanitarian response. The system is based on:

1. “Clusters”: groups of humanitarian organizations, UN, and non-UN, active in the main technical sectors of humanitarian action (currently 11 sectors) and in charge of strategic and operational gaps analysis, planning, assessment, and results (in total, 6 core functions);
2. Designating a lead organization for each cluster to ensure that there is predictable leadership and accountability. The Lead also has the responsibility to act as providers of last resort.¹¹

Clusters are organized at country and global levels. At the country level, clusters are activated for each sector that has clearly identified gaps. As such, not all clusters are necessarily activated in all emergency settings. Activation and deactivation takes place via a formal request from the HC to the ERC, with the endorsement of activation delegated to the Emergency Directors Group (EDG).

Country-level clusters sustain coordination and effectiveness of humanitarian action by mobilizing humanitarian actors of their sector. At global level, clusters have a mandate to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies via a designated global lead.¹²

The cluster system is not the only model for sectoral coordination. Where host governments have significant capacity and where deemed suitable, the humanitarian coordination model will integrate with the existing coordination mechanisms (usually through the coordination provided by the line ministries and their technical services).

Cluster members are the participating organizations with activities in that sector, the cluster lead, and the cluster co-lead. Representation is at the technical level (technical advisor or head of project), and each member represents their own organization.

¹¹ Where necessary, and depending on access, security and availability of funding, the cluster lead, as POLR, must be ready to ensure the provision of services required to fulfil crucial gaps identified by the cluster and reflected in the HC-led Humanitarian Response Plan (revised definition, July 2015, IASC).

¹² Country level cluster lead may not be the same agency/organization as the Global Cluster Lead. [About Global Cluster Leads | HumanitarianResponse](#).

The cluster lead agency or organization is designated by the Humanitarian Coordinator, following consultations with the Humanitarian Country Team and endorsement by the Emergency Directors Group. The lead agency must be operationally relevant in that sector, must be capable of providing a dedicated staff with demonstrated technical expertise and coordination skills, and capable of discharging its responsibility as provider of last resort. The IASC term ‘provider of last resort’ “translates into a commitment by the Cluster Lead Agency to do the utmost to ensure an adequate and appropriate response. This means calling upon all relevant humanitarian partners to address critical gaps, and if this fails, depending on the urgency, and subject to access, security and funding availability, the cluster lead may need to commit itself to filling the gap”.

While in most contexts the cluster lead belongs to a UN agency and the cluster co-lead is an NGO representative, NGOs both international and national can be nominated cluster leads when the technical capacity is available and if they are deemed capable of discharging the provider of last resort responsibility. In practice, this is rare, and the UN Cluster Lead Agencies usually maintain this role.

Cluster co-leads are not compulsory, but their implementation is strongly recommended. Practice has shown that the appointment of NGOs to co-chair a cluster improves partnership, advocacy, and information distribution and therefore the response as a whole. Where appropriate, governments can co-lead clusters through their line ministries and technical services. The exact scope and responsibilities of the cluster co-lead must be negotiated with the lead agency. As a co-lead, the organization supports the work of the cluster but is not accountable for its functioning or for discharging the provider of last resort responsibility. NGO cluster co-leads should be selected by NGOs, in consultation with the cluster lead, through an elective process among organizations capable of providing the required technical capacity and dedicated staff.

Roles and responsibilities

There is no “one size fit all” approach to cluster management: not all clusters have defined standard terms of reference, and the exact scope and function of each cluster must be defined according to the context. However, all clusters are expected to deliver on the following core functions:

1. Supporting service delivery
 - ❖ Provide a platform to ensure that service delivery is driven by the agreed strategic priorities
 - ❖ Develop mechanisms to eliminate duplication of service delivery
2. Informing strategic decision-making of the HC/HCT for the humanitarian response
 - ❖ Needs assessment and response gap analysis.

- ❖ Analysis to identify and address gaps, obstacles, duplication, and cross-cutting issues.
 - ❖ Prioritization, grounded in response analysis
3. Planning and strategy development
 - ❖ Develop sectoral plans, objectives and indicators that directly support realization of the HC/HCT strategic priorities
 - ❖ Apply and adhere to existing standards and guidelines
 - ❖ Clarify funding requirements, prioritization, and cluster contributions for the HC's overall humanitarian funding considerations (e.g., Flash Appeal, CAP, CERF, Emergency Response Fund/Common Humanitarian Fund)
 4. Advocacy
 - ❖ Identify advocacy concerns to contribute to HC and HCT messaging and action
 - ❖ Undertake advocacy activities on behalf of cluster participants and the affected population.
 5. Monitoring and reporting the implementation of the cluster strategy and results; recommending corrective action where necessary.
 6. Contingency planning/preparedness/capacity building in situations where there is an elevated risk of recurring or significant new disaster and where sufficient capacity exists within the cluster.

Effective NGO participation

1. Ensure cluster participants have the authority to take operational decisions on behalf of their organization.

One of the key roles of the clusters is to provide operational guidance and define a sharing of responsibilities to avoid gaps and duplications. As such, all participants must be able to commit their respective organizations to certain tasks or activities, or to prioritizing certain geographical areas. This can be a source of tension for organizations that strictly separate technical expertise and operational decision-making (technical advisor versus head of programme, for example).

This tension can be alleviated by ensuring the agenda of the cluster meeting is shared in a timely fashion to allow for internal discussions to take place prior to the meeting, and by clearly defining a scope for decision-making for the cluster members.

2. Ensure cluster accountability through annual performance reviews

Cluster accountability lies with the Lead Agency which is accountable to the HC for a well-run and managed cluster. Cluster performance¹³ is the cluster contribution to

¹³ [IASC Reference Module for Country Level Coordination, revised July 2015](#). p.34 sqq.

organize the humanitarian community and to address accountability to affected population; This is different from evaluating the quality of the humanitarian response. A review (self-assessment) of cluster performance against its 6 core functions should be done on an annual basis.

Annual cluster performance monitoring is an IASC mandated exercise to reflect on efficient and effective sectoral coordination. NGOs as cluster members are co-responsible for its planning and completion. OCHA, the HC/HCT, lead agency and Global cluster should all support the process.

3. Promote NGO leadership and co-leadership

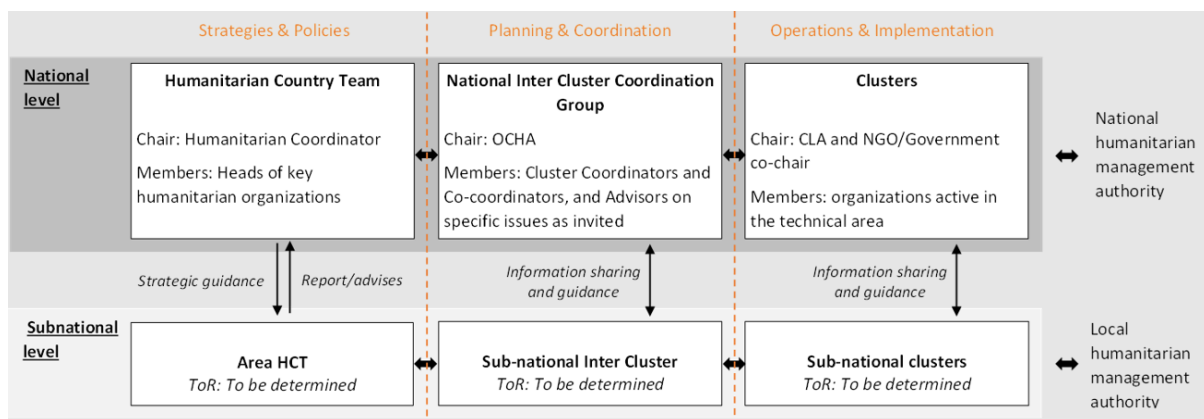
Leadership arrangements can be strongly conducive to producing stronger engagement and better coordination in clusters. Still, in-country cluster leadership rarely reflects operational realities, instead mostly mirroring global arrangements, and globally leading agencies are the most common leads at country level. But the selection of a cluster lead agency is not a given, it is an HC decision – in discussion with the HCT and subject to endorsement by the EDG – that is based on operational presence, technical expertise, ability to scale up and to act as provider of last resort. As such, cluster leadership can be challenged if the cluster is seen as under-performing and better alternatives are available.

As to cluster co-leadership, transparent consultations with the lead agency regarding the mutual expectations towards the roles and accountabilities of co-lead are essential. Co-lead organizations mostly act as co-facilitator, co-chair or focal point which are involved in the organizational management of the cluster. Still, key decisions and functions usually remain with the lead agency (*i.e.*, approval of the cluster response plan, its targets and sector budget, engaging with the authorities, setting advocacy priorities). The selection process of co-lead organizations should remain an NGO-led process that NGO fora are well placed to facilitate provided it is transparent and inclusive.

Sub-National Structures

There is no standardized model for sub-national structures. Instead, structures should be set up according to the needs and the available funding. The HCT oversees defining the sub-national architecture and terms of reference.

Generally speaking, sub-national structures will reflect one or more of the national structures but at field level:



(Note the actual names of the sub-national structures will vary from country to country)

Most settings will not need or have the means to implement the three pillars at sub-national level. Instead, the two most common models are:

- ❖ Sectorial coordination: area HCT + sub-national clusters
- ❖ Area-based coordination: area HCT only with sectoral and operational coordination

Area-based coordination is becoming more popular as a sub-national model, breaking the siloed approach of cluster-based operational coordination. It is also a more efficient approach in resource-starved contexts, as providing dedicated technical personnel for sub-national cluster coordination is costly. It does, however, require the members of the area HCT to be technically proficient, and can be difficult to implement where large operations in the area are covered by the structure.

Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of sub-national structures are defined by the HCT. They would reflect the same roles and responsibilities as national-level structures, only circumscribed to the area they cover, but with some key additional considerations:

- ❖ How are the responsibilities shared between the national and sub-national levels?
- ❖ What are the channels of communication between the two levels?
- ❖ How is accountability achieved (performance metrics, review process)?

Effective NGO participation

1. Support HCT-Sub-National communication

While the HCT oversees all other in-country IASC structures, this overseeing function is not formalized in a hierarchical link. As such, it is important for each member to ensure their own organization communicates internally on the decisions taken. Where OCHA might instruct their head of field office following an HCT decision, it is important for NGOs to similarly instruct their area managers, and vice versa for field offices wishing to bring topics to the attention of the HCT.

2. Engage in defining the sub-national structures

As members of the HCT, NGOs should have a voice in defining the sub-national coordination architecture. However, particularly during the onset or scale up of an emergency, there is often little time dedicated for these discussions. As a result, the initial architecture lies for the most part with OCHA and cluster leads or prominent actors. This can result in ad-hoc arrangements, based on the immediate operational needs and capacities.

Once established, structures are often inflexible as relocating or repurposing them can be costly or difficult once further operations are built around those hubs. As such, entirely redefining a sub-national structure is rare and generally only undertaken when substantial changes in needs occur, especially large geographical shifts in the humanitarian response. The critical time to influence structures is during the establishment phase.

However, terms of reference can be reworked to improve efficiency, and the services provided can be reviewed to better answer the operational needs (such services could include mapping capacity, installing an access advisor...). NGOs should ensure the performance of the sub-national architecture is regularly reviewed in HCT and be propositional to improve it. Where new services are required, NGOs should support identifying the required resources (this can be through funding and detaching NGO personnel for the task).

Key recommendations

1. **Humanitarian organizations should increase the scope and consistency of commitment to coordination.** No one can cover all the needs, and humanitarian action is a collective response. As such, organizations should be mutually accountable to ensure gaps and duplications are addressed.
 - 1.1 **Organizations should commit to selecting staff having the relevant competences to participate in coordination mechanisms.** When necessary, **NGO HQs should provide technical support to their staff** on matters of coordination.
 - 1.2 Staff involved in the coordination of an international humanitarian response should have an accurate **knowledge of the humanitarian system** and have **good command of the coordination arrangements** in their duty station.
2. **All Humanitarian responders should promote meaningful partnership and co-leadership** within the response. The diversity of humanitarian actors is a strength that should be relied on through complementarity.
 - 2.1 **HCT, ICCG and Clusters should actively promote the application of the Principles of Partnership.**
 - 2.2 Lead organizations of coordination mechanisms are encouraged to promote **shared forms of leadership that reflect a balanced distribution of roles, responsibilities, and accountability to co-leading organizations.** This applies to the multiple working groups, task forces, sectoral and intersectoral coordination mechanisms, at national and subnational level of the response.
3. **The HC, OCHA and Cluster leads should ensure the in-country coordination structure and processes are regularly updated and known to humanitarian responders.**
 - 3.1 As per IASC requirements, **all coordination mechanisms should have accurate, approved, and accessible ToR, and workplan / compact / strategic framework are in place.**
 - 3.2 **Performance review of the coordination architecture is conducted timely, and their recommendations are enforced** (HCT architecture review, Clusters' coordination monitoring)
4. **Together with their NGO forum if any, NGOs should improve their ability to consistently influence the international humanitarian response at country level.**

- 4.1 **Sustained participation to NGO fora is instrumental to be more influential.** Supporting NGO Forums' involvement across the coordination mechanisms at national and subnational level enables their membership to get a comprehensive understanding of the response. In turn, NGOs are more likely to meaningfully engage in coordination.
- 4.2 **Increasing NGOs' presence at country representative level in the ICCG is pivotal** to strengthen the ability to influence the planning and coordination function of the response, and to enhance the links with the HCT and the Clusters.



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Regional Hubs

Africa

Nairobi, Kenya
Dakar, Senegal

Asia-Pacific

Bangkok, Thailand
Islamabad, Pakistan

MENA

Amman, Jordan

Latin America

Guadalajara, Mexico
(Coordination)

Geneva Office

Humanitarian Hub, La Voie-Creuse 16, 1202 Geneva
secretariat@icvanetwork.org
www.icvanetwork.org