

The humanitarian Reset: Cluster Simplification – FINAL VERSION SENT TO IASC PRINCIPALS

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Introduction

Clusters play an essential role in the humanitarian system, providing a structured, sectoral approach to coordination, expertise, and response planning and delivery. They have enabled clearer leadership, improved accountability, and stronger technical standards and represent one of the most inclusive parts of the humanitarian architecture, with over 20,000 participating national entities. However, in the context of today's increasingly complex and protracted crises and constrained funding environment, the current system is costly and not agile or inclusive enough to meet the needs of affected people. The *Humanitarian Reset*, as articulated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), calls for a fundamental shift—one that re-centers the system on people and enables more locally led, anticipatory, gender-sensitive, and collaborative action. Clusters remain needed, but they must evolve to better support national systems, connect with local actors and their lived experience, support collective outcomes, and align with broader approaches such as nexus programming and area-based coordination.

While upholding the two core principles of accountability and predictability, our recommendations propose a more localized, adaptive, inclusive, and impact-oriented coordination system. Key proposed changes include a focus on multisectoral response planning and delivery, and a shift in power that enables frontline responders—especially local and national actors—to lead where they are best placed to do so, elevating leadership of Women-Led Organizations in particular.

By consolidating platforms, reducing overlap, and promoting local actors' leadership, overall coordination costs will be minimized (fewer layers and fewer meetings, especially at global level), while responsiveness to community needs will increase (more direct decision-making at country level), resulting in a net efficiency gain. Our recommendations account for the risks raised through consultations, identify mitigation measures (see Annex) and should be considered alongside propositions to revisit the Humanitarian Programme Cycle and Humanitarian Needs Response Plans¹ to reduce process-overload, notably reporting requirements, and support multisectoral response planning.

Problem statement

1. While recognizing the positive elements of the cluster system, it has become too heavy, bureaucratic, burdensome, siloed, centralized at capital-level, focused on process at the expense of operational agility, and UN-centric. There are currently 11 humanitarian clusters and 4 Protection Areas of Responsibility (AoRs) at global level. In addition, there are parallel thematic groups, of which many overlap with clusters' mandates, and multiple operational groups.
2. Effective humanitarian action requires a people-centered approach, guided by those it aims to assist. However, challenges like unequal power distribution (resources and decision-making remain with donors and some aid agencies), rigid siloes that do not correspond to people's lived experience, and fragmented policies (AAP, localization, Centrality of Protection, gender equality, disability inclusion etc.) often hinder efficient and cost-effective implementation.

¹ HPC simplification decisions are determined by the HPC Steering Group, an IASC associated entity, which is currently reviewing and making recommendations on this specific process.

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3. Area-based approaches have started to demonstrate locally led multisectoral coordination relevance, however, they have not yet been properly integrated in (cluster-aligned) coordination architectures and any integration will need to ensure to build on the best of both coordination models in a complementary way.
4. Transitions in humanitarian coordination are often delayed due to weak enforcement and misaligned incentives, while national and local structures and actors struggle with funding issues. Full handovers to governments are challenging in politically complex areas, and clusters sometimes operate in parallel to existing service delivery systems rather than building on these.
5. In mixed settings, coordinating response efforts is complex and leads to fragmentation and confusion between the refugee coordination and humanitarian coordination systems.

Simplification: guiding principles

Simplification must be guided, at all levels, by humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to ensure that affected populations, especially their most vulnerable groups, are protected and that aid is delivered impartially and effectively. Any restructuring should prioritize the needs and rights of civilians in humanitarian crisis, while also recognizing the role of national/local authorities as primary duty bearers and of national/ local actors as first responders.

Recommendations

Whereas the impetus for change is currently driven by acute funding cuts in the sector, the full implications for structural change in the cluster system cannot be entirely overseen. Therefore, these recommendations represent the most informed propositions we can offer at this stage, based on the knowledge currently available.

A flexible, simplified coordination system

1. **At country level:** Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) should decide if and which clusters to activate, and which can be merged based on the prevalence of needs, crisis complexity, and capacity of national/ local responders (authorities and civil society), in consultation with relevant authorities and in line with humanitarian principles. For example, in contexts where acute malnutrition is low, the nutrition cluster might not be needed to be activated. Given that there will be fewer countries with activated clusters, double-hatting at sub-national level (with its safeguards) could be considered in specific circumstances. At country level, where appropriate, co-leadership with local entities (authorities/civil society) should be considered and enabled through adequate resourcing, capacity-building, and risk sharing.
2. **At global level:** simplify the existing system from 11 clusters and 4 Areas of Responsibility (AoR) to 8 clusters: Education Cluster, Food Security Cluster, Health Cluster, Land and Shelter Cluster (Shelter + Camp Coordination and Camp Management + House, Land and Properties), Nutrition Cluster, Protection Cluster, Service Cluster (Emergency Telecommunications + Logistics), and WASH Cluster. Early recovery cluster to transform and link with coordination for development and transition. Agencies involved in existing clusters and AoR to agree on future CLA arrangements, ensuring diverse and equitable representation aligned with expertise, mandates and capacity, to be endorsed by the

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ERC/IASC Principals. AoR leads to consider seconding capacity to Protection Cluster Lead Agency to help transition from separate AoRs to one integrated Protection Cluster.

3. **In mixed settings** (refugee and cluster coordination models):
 - a. Where a humanitarian coordination has been appointed and UNHCR leads a refugee operation, use clusters for coordination where appropriate and make sure a refugee expert works with relevant clusters to ensure refugee issues are addressed in line with implementation of the UNHCR-OCHA Joint Note on mixed settings (2014).
 - b. Develop joint strategies, shared analysis and tools, and coordinated delivery mechanisms.
 - c. Ensure joint appeals with integrated funding frameworks in line with common priorities, strategic engagement in advocacy, policy, and programming for all categories of affected populations.

Accountable and locally led coordination

4. Build on and strengthen **existing national coordination structures and systems** when possible.
5. Build a unified approach to integrate various **people-centered strategies and existing IASC policies into a single, cohesive framework at the national level**, merging working groups and addressing key crosscutting issues like AAP, PSEA, Disability Inclusion, etc. Review accountability tools to support a people-centered approach inclusive of all forms of vulnerability (age, gender, etc.).
6. At local level, develop **community action plans** for prioritization and resource allocation, ensuring two-way communication between affected communities and aid responders with streamlined escalation channels allowing greater **accountability** of HCTs to affected communities.
7. Ensure that, from the onset of a response, **Local and National Actors (L/NAs) co-coordinate or co-lead** humanitarian coordination groups at several levels (clusters, intercluster coordination group, area-based approaches, community-led humanitarian hubs, etc.) wherever feasible and duly upholding humanitarian principles. Additionally, prioritize the representation and leadership roles of Women Led Organizations (WLOs) and Organizations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) in decision-making forums.
8. Prioritize **funding for L/NAs, including for coordination capacity**, by revising access to and governance of pooled funds with increased donor flexibility, ringfenced percentage for overheads and limited number of intermediaries.

Operations-focused coordination

9. **Pooling capacity & common services**: Pool dedicated information management functions, institutionalize access to real-time data and leverage technology for IM and data resources with increased automation, ensuring inter-operability across agencies and implementers and easier end-to-end user experience for all groups of aid implementers.
10. Propose **multisectoral service packages that reflect local realities and promote multi-sectoral cash, particularly multipurpose cash**, where appropriate. Support integrated response planning at area and camp/settlement levels.
11. Co-locate Cluster Coordinators and have them report with dotted lines to HCs (matrix management) to **foster integrated, multisectoral planning and delivery and enhance response readiness**. National Women-Led Organizations (WLO) are encouraged to appoint a representative to be co-located with

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them, ensuring that women's and children's needs, including those related to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are adequately taking into account. This position will require funding. Cluster coordinators, together with the WLO representative, should strengthen inter-cluster coordination and ensure a gendered response.

12. Enable and scale up **area-based coordination models at local and sub-national level** (typically admin level 2-4, i.e., township to district) and link them with, and ensure support from, existing sectoral coordination structures at country level, with clear protocols for information flow, decision making, representation, and escalation upwards (including to HC, HCTs, and ICCGs).

Activation, deactivation and transition

13. **HCs, HCTs and CLAs to include deliberate contextualized transition planning, anchored into HNRPs, with national/local authorities** at the onset of cluster activation to accelerate humanitarian-development coordination with a clear programmatic and resourcing approach. Enhance the predictable leadership and accountability of **local and national actors working on existing systems for transitioning. Utilize/leverage existing humanitarian and development funding to support capacity development.** Require costed transition plans, advocate for flexible, multi-year funding and greater incentives to support mid- to long term transition. Two pathways to consider are: transitioning to nationally owned humanitarian responses and moving towards early recovery phase, based on the type of crisis.
14. Use the **humanitarian coordination reviews in country and the Emergency Directors' Group Annual Review of Operations** to assess/reassess the need to retain in-country clusters and/or feasibility to begin transitioning coordination structures using institutionalized benchmarks.
15. Integrate the agile **activation/deactivation and transition efforts** into the performance metrics for HC and CLA and include them in the Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring (CCPM)- Clusters are time-bound and meant to fill temporary gaps in humanitarian response with the goal of handing over coordination to national and local entities as rapidly and as ethically possible.

Finally, we recommend developing an implementation plan of the recommendations, after review/endorsement by the ERC/IASC Principals, including a costing and cost saving analysis, a feedback mechanism, as well as practical steps to overcome the barriers currently limiting flexibility.

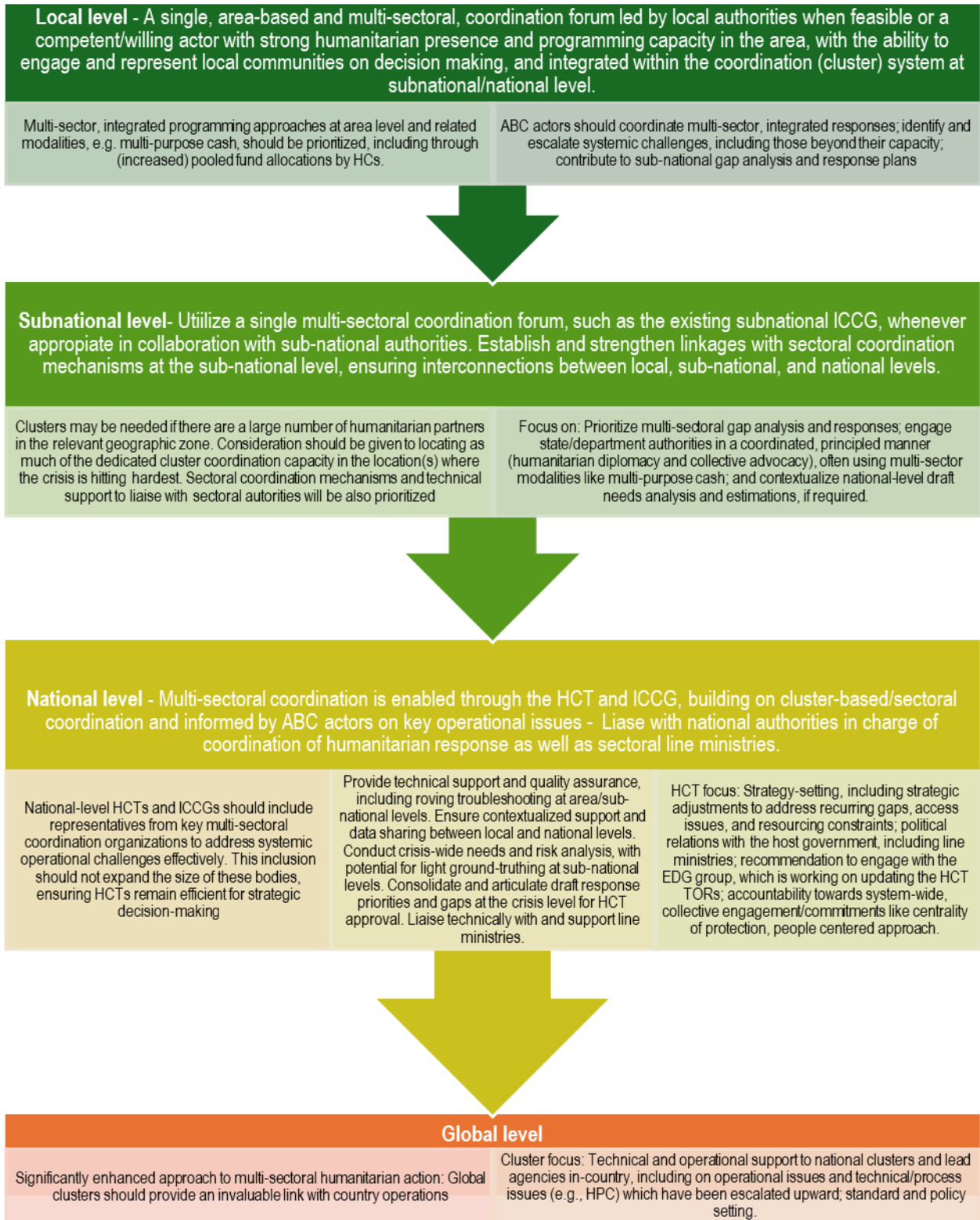
With the information and time available, these recommendations represent, in our view, the best possible balance between ambition and pragmatism, while preserving predictability and accountability at a time of significant uncertainty. These recommendations focus on structure and coordination set-ups, maintaining the current core functions of clusters (supporting service delivery, informing strategic decision-making, planning and strategy development, advocating on behalf of the cluster and affected populations, undertaking contingency planning and preparedness, and monitoring and reporting). Additional recommendations related to process lightening and reduction of bureaucratic overload, developed under other components of the Humanitarian Reset, will complement this piece on cluster simplification. Further consolidation of the clusters is possible, but would likely require a fundamental rethink of the cluster system, potentially including standing it down.

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Other levels for coordination: some sub-regional situations in nature or where the UN is not able to operate, would require specific coordination arrangements and linkages to other levels (national and global for instance)

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Annex 1. Rationale for selecting recommendations of mergers considered during the consultation process.

Mergers proposed during consultations:

1. Common services with Emergency Telecommunications Cluster and Logistics
2. Integrated cluster with Shelter, Camp Coordination and Camp Management and Housing, Land and Property
3. Protection cluster with Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence and Mine Action integrated
4. Early recovery to be transformed
5. Integrated Health and Nutrition cluster
6. Integrated Shelter and WASH Cluster

Some of the criteria used for the proposed mergers:

1. Common partners and participating organizations
2. Similarity in expertise and capacity
3. Same counterparts at Government level (line ministries)
4. Using the same delivery services and/or distribution mechanisms
5. Target population: Clusters that cater to the same population in terms of age, gender, and specific needs
6. Similar complementary objectives and/or related issues
7. Shared resources: Clusters that can benefit from common sources of funding
8. Operational efficiency: can improve their operational efficiency by combining resources/efforts

Rationale for the cluster mergers:

- **ETC and Logistics:** Combining these clusters can streamline operations and reduce duplication of efforts including a faster deployment of resources. The clusters, led by the same CLA, can share resources. It can quickly adjust its strategies and operations based on real-time information and changing circumstances.
- **Shelter, CCCM and HLP:** Combining these clusters improves coordination. It ensures that all aspects of shelter, camp management and housing rights are addressed in a unified manner. The three are interconnected. Effective camp management requires adequate shelter solutions. A unified cluster structure can enhance accountability by streamlining reporting and monitoring processes. The merger will facilitate strategic planning and linkages to long-term solutions
- **Protection cluster:** The AoR are currently strong networks of local and national actors. With a more unified structure, accountability mechanisms can be strengthened, ensuring that all actions and interventions are aligned with the overarching protection goals and standards.
- **Early recovery:** An approach/platform that bring humanitarian and development actors together in a more adaptive approach to early recovery, accommodating the dynamic and evolving needs of post-crisis environments. It will facilitate coordination among various stakeholders, including humanitarian and development agencies, local governments, and affected communities.
- **Health and Nutrition:** These groups often involve different specialized organizations and line ministries. Nutrition is multi-sectoral and links between health and food security systems. Although some partners are common and the distribution mechanisms might be the same, areas of expertise differ; health agencies focus on medical care and nutrition agencies on nutritional needs (including food systems). Merging these clusters could dilute the specific goals and reduce the effectiveness of targeted interventions.
- **Shelter and WASH:** The lead agencies for these clusters typically have distinct areas of expertise. While both clusters may serve vulnerable populations, the specific need, the targeted population, the scope and scale to be addressed are different. The WASH target population goes beyond those that are displaced and/or require a shelter solution.

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Annex 2. Risks related to cluster reform and coordination

Real transformation and change are hampered by recurrent problems even in relation to previously proposed solutions. The main obstacle so far has been the effective implementation of existing policies and approaches.

Operational confusion and rigid models:

Global streamlining can result in rigid models, fragmented efforts, and a lack of coherence at the country level. This contributes to increased complexity in coordination, with unclear roles and responsibilities (e.g., cluster approach, refugee coordination model, area-based coordination).

Mitigation measures:

- Implement adaptable models at the country level avoiding duplication and fitting specific context realities
- Define clear roles and responsibilities at all levels, and foster accountability, to reduce coordination complexity and inefficiencies.
- Integrate approaches like area-based coordination and the cluster system to enhance planning and responses in complementarity of each other, not in competition.
- Ensure adaptability across coordination layers and sectors, considering varying capacities in different programmatic areas.
- Regularly review and update coordination frameworks to maintain clarity and effectiveness.

Accountability

To address challenges related to flexibility, such as tasking by HCs on items not agreed at the HCT level in relation to clusters (dotted reporting lines), limited capacity of HCs to manage their responsibility on cluster coordination, and sensitivities with host governments regarding predictability and accountability, it is essential to:

- Document and communicate HCT agreements.
- Increase support and resources for HCs.
- Engage in continuous dialogue with host governments.
- Develop transparent accountability mechanisms agreed upon with host governments.

Capacities: Limited inclusion of national/local actors in strategic forums can lead to imbalanced partnerships with national/local actors, who may also struggle, due to lack of capacity to manage and utilize funds effectively, risking failure.

Mitigation measures Actively involve local actors in strategic forums, provide assistance to improve their capacity to absorb and manage funds, and advocate for simpler/lighter reporting and compliance requirements from donors.

To mitigate **the risk of losing expertise due** to mergers, which can lead to costly, poor-quality responses and insufficient scale-up efforts, implement the following measures:

- Preserve key clusters: Identify and maintain essential clusters of expertise to ensure continuity and quality in responses.
- Ensure knowledge transfer programs: Establish robust knowledge transfer and retention programs to safeguard critical expertise during mergers.
- Develop strategic plans that prioritize the integration of key expertise areas to prevent gaps in knowledge and capability.
- Establish Learning Loops: where integrated models work well (e.g., area-based set-ups systematically 'registered' and/or mapped in real time and effectively integrated into cluster system), ensure to capture lessons learned that can be replicated elsewhere.

Prematurely deactivating functions can weaken the capacities needed to reduce humanitarian dependence and achieve sustainable recovery. The transition process is at risk when financial responsibilities are not clearly defined.

Mitigation measures include:

- Develop criteria and plans for gradual deactivation to ensure the sustainability of capacities and essential functions.
- Clearly define and communicate financial responsibilities.
- Include strategies for financial sustainability in transition plans.