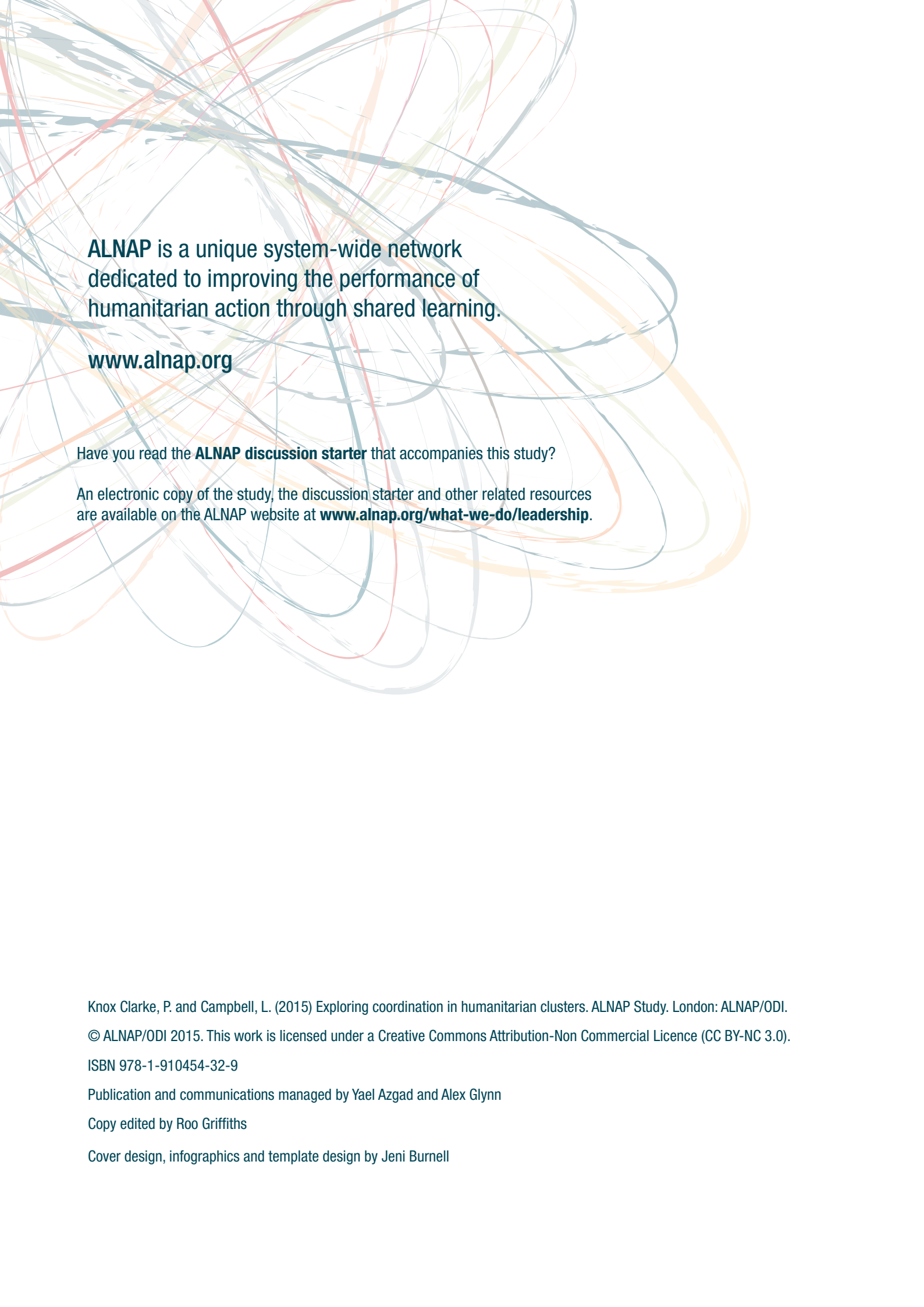


A large, abstract graphic consisting of numerous overlapping, hand-drawn scribbles in various colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, grey) dominates the upper half of the cover. The scribbles are dense and chaotic, creating a sense of complexity and interconnectedness. The bottom of the cover is a solid dark teal color, which the scribbles appear to be resting on or emerging from.

# Exploring Coordination in Humanitarian Clusters

Paul Knox Clarke and Leah Campbell



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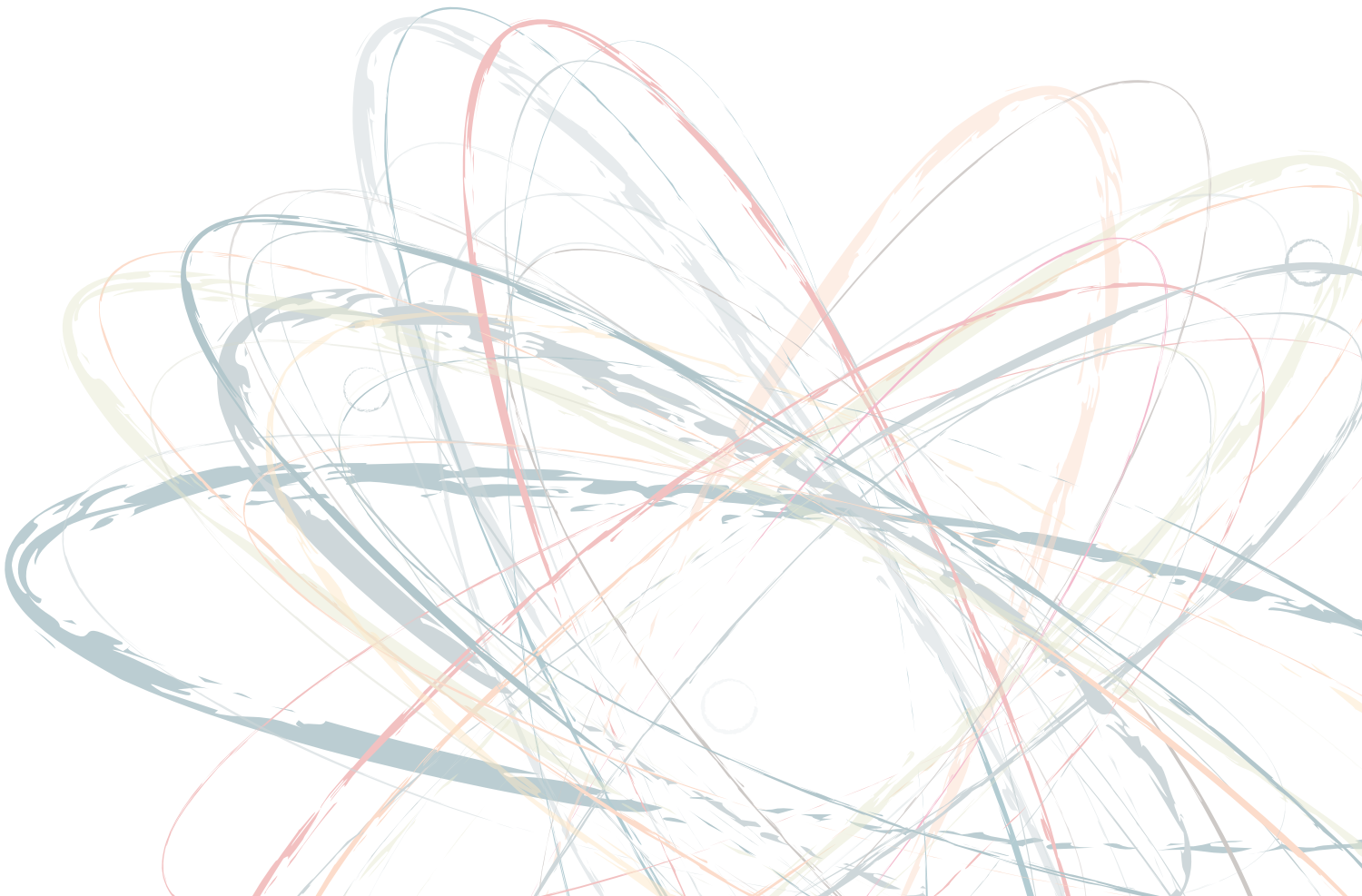
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## List of acronyms

ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CC	Cluster Coordinator
CCCM	Camp Coordination and Camp Management
CLA	Cluster Lead Agency
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT	Humanitarian Coordination Team
HELP	Humanitarian Evaluation and Learning Portal
IASC	Inter Agency Standing Committee
ICCM	Inter-Cluster Coordination Mechanism
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IMO	Information Management Officer
INGO	International NGO
NFI	Non-Food Item
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NNGO	National Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OPS	Online Project System
PRG	Programme/Project Review Group
SAG	Strategic Advisory Group
SRP	Strategic Response Plan
STAIT	Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team
ToR	Terms of Reference
TWiG	Technical Working Group
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

## Executive summary

Coordination is essential to the success of humanitarian response. In most crisis situations, a large number of organisations will be working to provide support in the same area. Under these circumstances, coordination allows all actors to get a better understanding of the situation and to share effective practices. It prevents dangerous gaps in assistance, and helps avoid wasteful duplication.

However, coordination does not happen automatically. In many situations, humanitarian organisations fail to realise the full benefits of working in a coordinated manner. This study attempts to identify the factors that contribute to effective coordination. In doing so, it concentrates on the IASC 'Clusters', a formal humanitarian coordination forum for 'sectors' of the response at the country level.

Using a mixed methods approach combining a literature review, questionnaire and interviews, this study addresses two key questions:

1. What is the optimum level of coordination in the humanitarian Clusters?
2. What are the conditions required to achieve successful Cluster coordination during a humanitarian response?

To address the first question, we first need to understand what is meant by the 'level' of coordination. The term coordination is often used quite loosely in the humanitarian sector, and describes a variety of different kinds of relationship. This can be a problem, as without a common understanding, different actors may have radically different expectations of coordination, while working in the same fora to achieve different things. This paper suggests that, between complete independence and full merger, there are three levels of coordination (see illustration in section 2.1). As organisations move along this spectrum, they generally accept a greater amount of shared accountability, relationships become more formalised, and there is less scope for independent action. These different coordination levels are of course generalised; within each there is a degree of variety, and organisations may work at different levels of coordination for different activities, and at different phases of the response. The three levels are:

**Communication** - Organisations share information with one another, but are otherwise independent, and use the information as they wish. There is generally no expectation or requirement for organisations to act on the basis of the information they receive.

**Alignment** - Organisations retain a high degree of independence but may adjust their activities to create a more effective response on the basis of the activities of other organisations. Adjustments might include accepting common guidance, or changing the nature or location of activities to reduce gaps/duplication. Organisations are working separately but influenced by one another.

**Collaboration** - Coordination at this level is a more explicit, formalised relationship, with actors sharing agreed objectives and priorities, coordinating on multiple things at once. Organisations have less autonomy, and higher mutual expectations.

Our research found that, overwhelmingly, Cluster activities fall at the ‘alignment’ level. To explore this further, we looked at the Cluster’s work regarding joint strategy development and joint assessments – which one would assume would, by their (joint) nature, tend to be at the collaborative end of the spectrum.

However, it seems that in most cases, these activities are not as collaborative as one might think. Rather than creating a single agreed strategy, which all members then implement, Cluster members are in fact planning and initiating their own organisation-specific activities, and then putting these all together to make a common strategy: the strategy is guided by the activities, and not the other way around. In this way, Cluster members have taken a strategic planning model designed at the collaborative level of coordination, and adapted it for use at the alignment level. They retain higher levels of autonomy by ensuring that their agency activities on the ground are the basis of the strategy.

Similarly, while some Clusters are producing joint assessments, this research suggests that these assessments are not often used to actually develop programmes. In general, joint assessments support alignment within the Cluster, by providing an overview of needs across the Cluster. They are not, however, the basis for a single, common, sectoral programme, as one would expect in a collaborative approach to coordination.

In general, when deciding whether and how much to participate in coordinated activities, Cluster members weigh the costs of participation (time, loss of autonomy and of competitive advantage) against the benefits (access to guidance and information, opportunities to build relationships and see the bigger picture, increased legitimacy for activities). This research suggests that, for most Cluster members, the benefits of a looser, ‘alignment’ level of coordination outweigh the costs. However, with some exceptions (such as advocacy) the costs of achieving a collaborative level of coordination are too high. It seems that ‘alignment’ is the best fit for coordination in the Clusters.

The next part of this study looks at the factors that support Clusters to achieve the alignment level of coordination successfully, using a variety of hypotheses. The research finds that effective coordination is more likely under the following circumstances:

- Where Clusters address tasks that members self-identify as common problems, taking steps to balance the needs of different Cluster members;



- Where Clusters address problems that go beyond the capacity of a single organisation to address and which cannot effectively be addressed elsewhere;
- Where there is a link between (well-structured and managed) Cluster discussions and donor actions;
- Where Cluster member organisations embrace a commitment to coordination, have a similar organisational culture and way of doing things and share an overall common goal;
- Where the Cluster receives strong support from the Cluster Lead Agency (CLA), while also ensuring that CLA priorities and activities, including their role as donor, are kept separate from the Cluster;
- Where the Cluster Coordinator (CC) is independent from the CLA;
- Where coordination is well resourced and effectively done at the local or subnational level, and where there is effective communication, clarity on roles and integration of actions between national and subnational levels;
- Where time is taken to develop an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of Cluster members;
- Where there is an effective CC who is not relied on to be a 'silver bullet' but who is clear about their role, is able to develop relationships over time, has strong facilitation and communication skills, is able to be proactive and impartial and has good context and technical knowledge;
- Where strong support is provided to the Cluster from its members and a broader coordination team;
- Where adequate resources are available, including human resource capacity and funds, for coordination and for Cluster members;
- Where clear and effective information management and decision-making processes are in place;
- Where organisations have similar ways of doing things when it comes to frequently encountered operational work; and
- Where Cluster members have developed trusting relationships.

In looking at these aspects of the Clusters, there are a number of other findings worth noting:

- There is no evidence to suggest that any particular phase in the response

is more conducive for effective coordination, though the most important factors supporting coordination may change over time. In the early stages of the response, when plans have not yet been developed and the situation is new and difficult, organisations may find it easier to coordinate because they have not yet established programmes, and so have greater flexibility. In the later stages of the response, organisations may find it easier to coordinate because relationships, trust and common objectives have been developed. There is also no overwhelming evidence from this research to support a shorter-term limited activation period for the Clusters, as currently recommended in IASC guidance.

- Additionally, there is no evidence suggesting that the size of a Cluster has an impact on the quality of coordination – this may be because, if size is an issue, the Cluster adapts by establishing smaller subgroups.
- Overall, Clusters have failed to adequately include national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) in coordination activities. A number of challenges help explain this, including lack of capacity and time on the part of NNGOs, use of complex language and expensive technology by the Clusters, low value given to Cluster participation by national actors and the needs of the Clusters to balance inclusiveness with effectiveness.
- This research did not address whether nationally or internationally led coordination mechanisms were more effective. However, we did find that making contact early on, recognising the importance of government involvement and the effective roles government could play in a Cluster, and sustaining this contact throughout helped to overcome challenges of government participation in/leadership of Clusters.
- The quality of decisions is higher when decision-making is done by a group rather than an individual. Despite common assumptions, group decision-making was not found to be slower than individual decision-making. Based on these findings, the research suggests Clusters should be using group decision-making processes.

Based on the range of topics discussed in the paper, a series of recommendations can be found in Section 5.

## 1. Introduction

The humanitarian ‘system’ comprises a large number of organisations, which often conduct similar activities in support of crisis-affected populations in the same geographical areas. Under these circumstances, there is plenty of opportunity for duplication, disagreement and inefficiency. As such, it is not surprising the issue of coordination among humanitarian actors has received some attention over the years, both on the ground and in research and publication (see, e.g., Currión and Hedlund, n.d.; Lautze et al., 1998; Mcilreavy and Nichols, 2013; Stephenson, 2006; van Brabant, 1999; Webster and Walker, 2009).

One of the most important structures for humanitarian coordination is the humanitarian Cluster. The Clusters were established in 2005 as part of the Humanitarian Reform process, initiated by the Humanitarian Response Review (Adinolfi et al., 2005). They are ‘groups of humanitarian organizations, both UN and non-UN, in each of the main sectors of humanitarian action, e.g. water, health and logistics. They are designated by the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and have clear responsibilities for coordination.’<sup>1</sup>

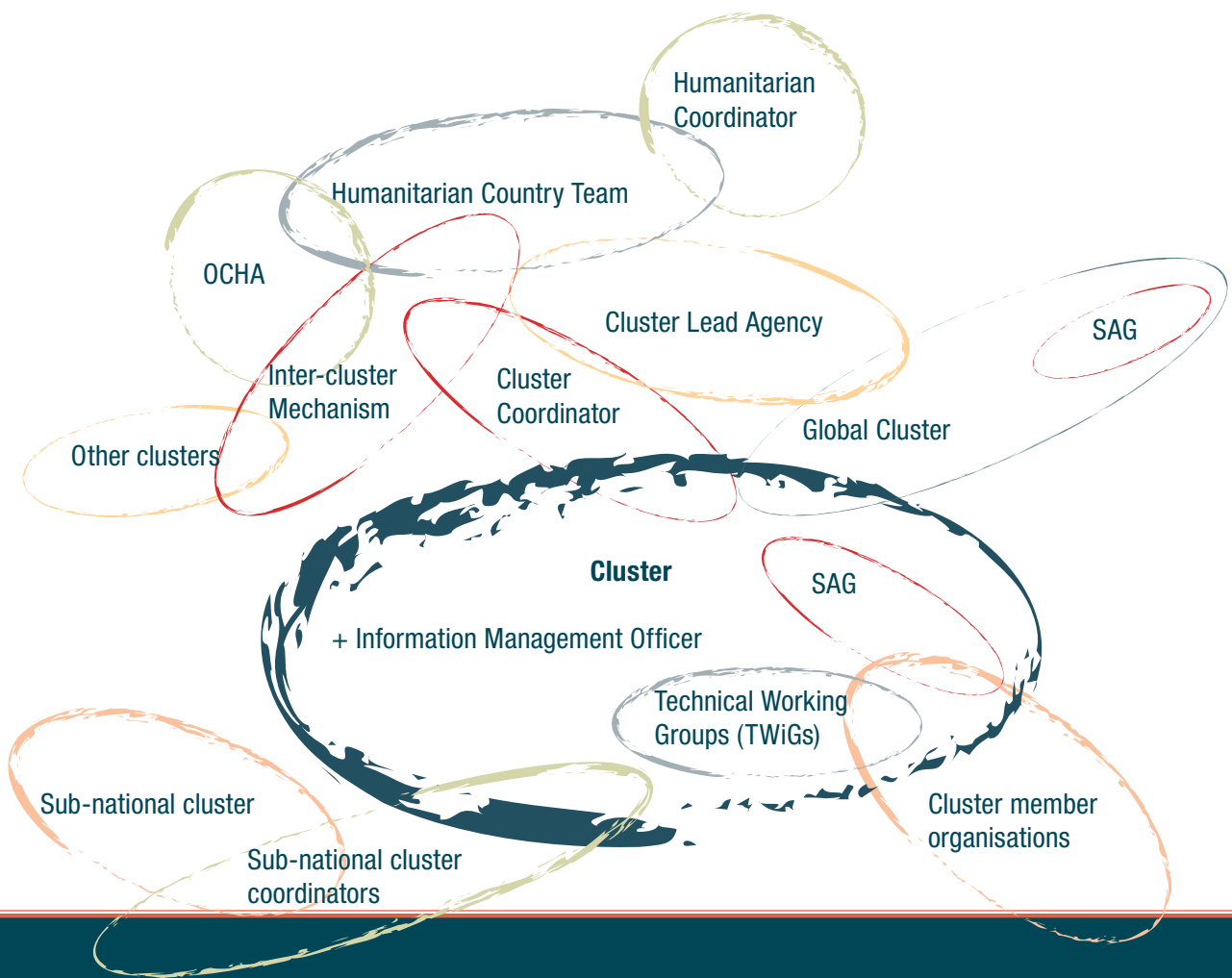
### Box 1: The Clusters and the humanitarian coordination system

The Clusters are one element of the international humanitarian coordination system. Although this paper does not address all of these actors or relationships<sup>2</sup> in depth, it is important to note the various connections Clusters have with other actors (Figure 1: Cluster connections).

- Cluster Coordinator (CC) - individual tasked with facilitating the Cluster in-country
- Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) - IASC-mandated agencies and organisations that take responsibility for activating and supporting in-country Clusters
- Cluster member - any organisation that participates actively in the Cluster
- Global Cluster - led by the CLA, providing support and guidance to country Clusters
- Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) responsible for overall organisation of the humanitarian response, with support from the HCT and Clusters

1 <http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/coordination/Clusters>

2 This paper focuses exclusively on the Clusters to keep the scope manageable. However, ALNAP continues to explore ways to understand other actors in the system, such as HCTs and informal coordination bodies.



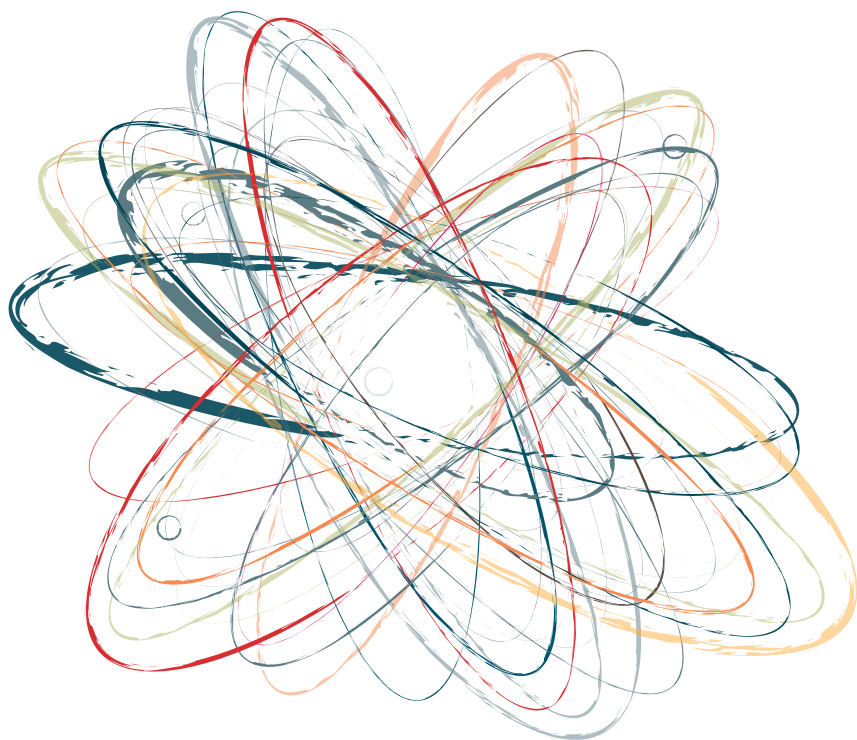
**FIGURE 1:**  
Cluster connections

- Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) - strategic and operational decision-making body comprising the key agencies and organisations providing humanitarian response in-country
- ICCM (Inter-Cluster Coordination Mechanism) - a space for in-country CCs to meet and discuss crosscutting issues between Clusters, facilitated by OCHA
- Information Management Officer (IMO) - supports information management processes in the Cluster
- Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – UN body tasked with facilitating humanitarian coordination
- SAG – Strategic Advisory Group of the Cluster
- TWiG – Technical Working Group of the Cluster used, for example, to discuss approaches relating to a specific technical response activity

A great deal of time and money has gone into the humanitarian Clusters over the past 10 years. Several evaluations have examined how effective they are in achieving their aims (Majewski et al., 2012; Steets et al., 2010, 2014b; Stoddard et al., 2007). The aim of this paper is slightly different. In our research, we have interrogated the aims of the Clusters, as expressed in the literature and by participants, to try to obtain a more concrete sense of what coordination – in a humanitarian context – actually is. We have considered how much coordination is ‘enough’, and whether more coordination is always better. In addition, we have looked at the elements that appear to support effective coordination in the Clusters. The study is structured around two main research questions<sup>3</sup>:

1. What is the optimum level of coordination in the humanitarian Clusters?
2. What are the conditions required to achieve successful Cluster coordination during a humanitarian response?

In answering the second question, the research has sought to address a number of hypotheses, established through an initial literature review. These are presented in Box 2.



---

<sup>3</sup> For more on the development of the research question, see the methodology in Annex A.



## Box 2: Hypotheses

- Coordination will be more successful on tasks that meet individual organisations' needs.
- Coordination will be more successful when the Cluster undertakes tasks that are complex or difficult.
- Coordination will become more effective the longer the coordination body is in place.
- Smaller groups will achieve higher levels of coordination.
- Similar organisations will be able to coordinate activities more effectively.
- A Cluster that operates independently from, though with the strong support of, the CLA will achieve higher levels of coordination.
- Where there are active subnational as well as national Clusters, coordination will be more effective.
- Coordination will be more effective where participating agencies have clear and agreed roles and responsibilities.
- Good facilitation skills on the part of the CC will lead to better coordination in the Cluster.
- Effective information management will lead to better coordination in the Clusters.
- Clear and agreed decision-making processes will lead to better coordination in the Clusters.
- Where Cluster members have common ways of doing things when it comes to frequently encountered operational work (such as assessment, logistics, distributions), they will coordinate better.
- Higher levels of trust within a Cluster will lead to better coordination

This study builds on work already undertaken by ALNAP in the area of leadership and coordination, particularly the 2014 study 'Between Chaos and Control: Rethinking Operational Leadership' (Knox Clarke, 2014) and the literature review 'Who's in Charge Here? A Literature Review of Approaches to Leadership in Humanitarian Operations' (Knox Clarke, 2013a). These

studies aimed to identify the factors that led to the effective creation and implementation of a humanitarian strategy within a single organisation. From there, it was a short step to considering what leads to the successful creation and implementation of strategy within groups of organisations.

The research approach for this study is an adaptive one: questions and hypotheses have been augmented several times, with the result that this paper now addresses a number of topics that were not originally part of the concept.

Research was conducted using a mixed methods approach, which included:

- A literature review examining Cluster evaluations, conducted in two rounds;
- A semi-purposive sample of Clusters/Working Groups that undertook an online questionnaire, whose results were statistically analysed;
- Semi-structured interviews with over 100 Cluster members and CCs.

Within the interviews and questionnaire for this study, we included a number of Working Groups that were functioning as Clusters (carrying out Cluster-like functions, with a very similar membership to that of the Clusters). It is worth noting that not all Working Groups in the humanitarian sector would meet these criteria. Here, we include only Working Groups that, in all ways but name, are functioning as Clusters<sup>4</sup>. In order to maintain anonymity, as well as to enhance readability throughout the paper, we refer to these here as Clusters.

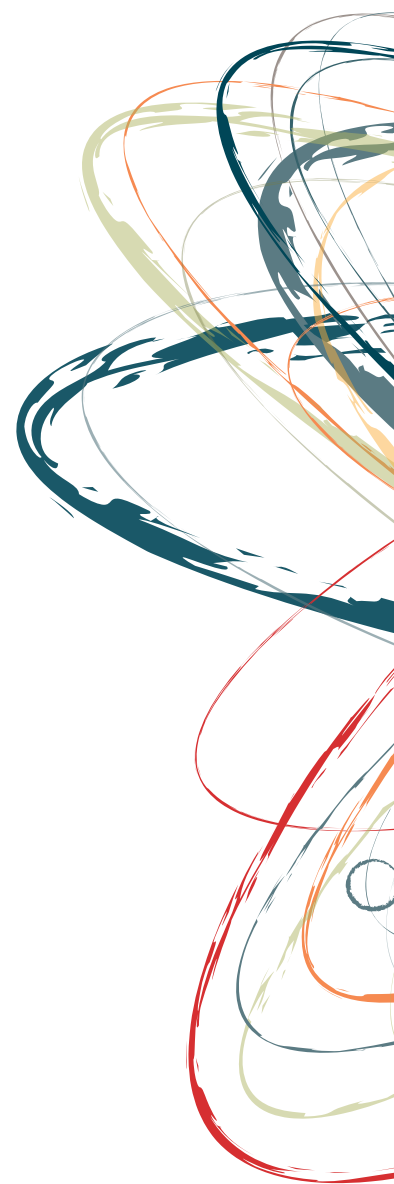
It should also be noted that this research only covers the Clusters, rather than the larger country-level coordination and leadership architecture. This architecture includes the Inter Cluster Coordination Mechanisms (ICCM) and the Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs). While we hope that the paper has wider applicability to a variety of other coordination bodies in the humanitarian system, including HCTs and ICCM, the findings are not necessarily applicable to these other bodies, or to the country level coordination mechanism as a whole

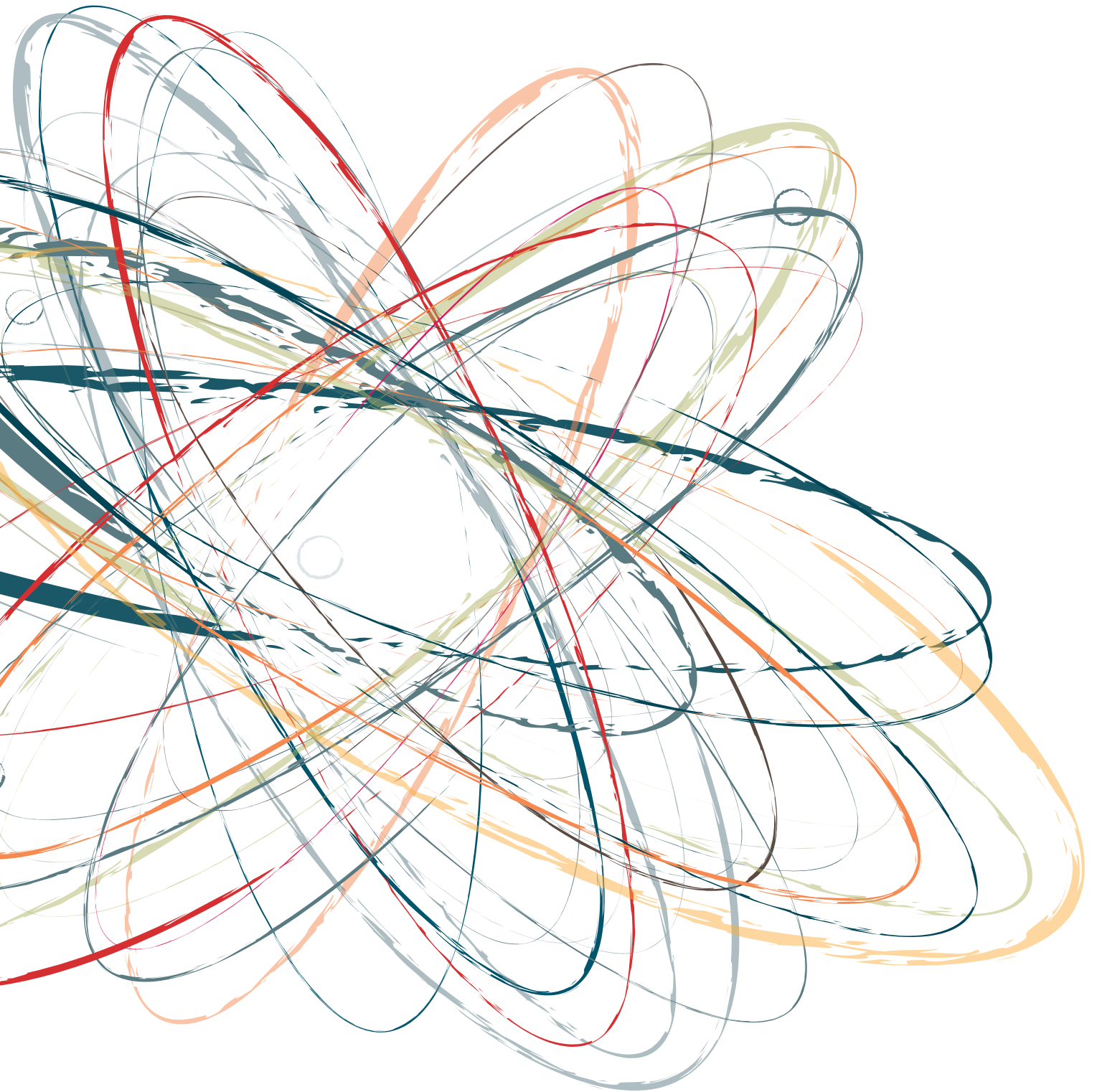
We have anonymised quotes from interviewees by replacing the following:

- The name of a Cluster (e.g. nutrition Cluster) with (Cluster);
- The name of a sector (e.g. education) with (sector);
- The name of a country (e.g. Pakistan) with (country);
- The name of a lead agency (e.g. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) with (CLA).

---

<sup>4</sup> In addition, a review of the main conclusions of this study finds that results from the 'Working Groups' match results from the 'Clusters'





## 2. What is the optimum level of coordination in the Clusters?

### 2.1 What do we mean by ‘coordination’ in humanitarian action?

- There is a great deal of interest in coordination in humanitarian action, but no consensus about what it actual entails.
- This research presents a spectrum of coordination: independence -> communication -> alignment -> collaboration -> merger.
- The higher the level of coordination, the more the scope for independent action decreases and the amount of formality and shared accountability within the relationship increases.

For full details of the methodology used for this study, please see Annex A. The humanitarian sector comprises a large number of independent organisations, of different natures and sizes, working alongside one another in crises and emergencies to achieve broadly similar objectives. Given this atomised structure, it is not surprising the idea of ‘coordination’ is attractive to many humanitarians and the term widely used: indeed, OCHA, the UN body mandated to coordinate humanitarian action, regularly uses the tagline ‘coordination saves lives’.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the ubiquity of the term, there does not seem to be a single, agreed-on understanding of what humanitarian coordination actually entails. A broadly accepted definition of coordination is ‘the organization of the different elements of a complex body or activity so as to enable them to work together effectively’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015). In the humanitarian sector, this ‘organisation’ appears to have been achieved to varying degrees, in a variety of different ways.

Broadly speaking, one might think of inter-organisational relationships in the sector as lying along a spectrum.<sup>5</sup> At one end of this, organisations – while sharing the same basic goals – act completely independently, without participation in, or constraint by, any form of shared strategy, priorities, structures, resources or procedures. At the other end, organisations formally merge, with any differences of structure, procedure, policies, etc. removed. Both of these extremes are, however, fairly unusual. Between them, one finds a series of different relationships,<sup>6</sup> all of which are sometimes described as

<sup>5</sup> A number of authorities have noted there are a variety of ‘levels’ of humanitarian coordination (see, in particular, Grunewald et al., 2010; Staples, 2011; Steets et al., 2010).

<sup>6</sup> While recognising the difficulty in finding a terminology that can be agreed on, and that words will mean different things to different people, in order to explain our argument we have chosen the terms

“

...there does not seem to be a single, agreed-on understanding of what humanitarian coordination actually entails.

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‘coordination’ but which differ in the degree of shared priorities, commitment of resources and activities undertaken.

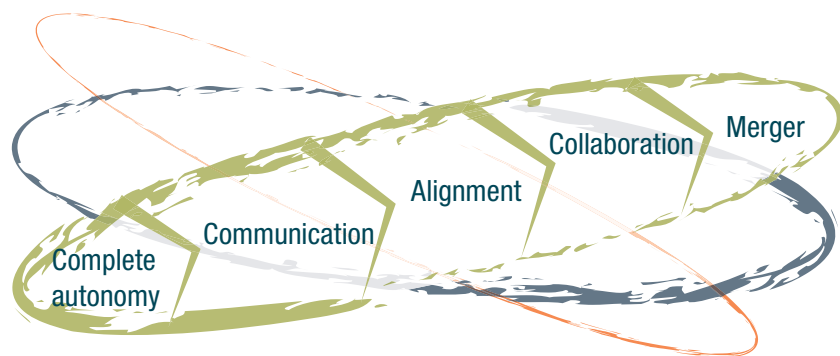


FIGURE 2: Spectrum of coordination

The first of these relationships is **communication**. Here, organisations share key information on the situation and on their response to the situation with one another, and use this information, as they see relevant, to plan and implement their independent activities. There is no expectation that organisations sharing information will necessarily act on the information they receive, and no requirement for the organisation to change its actions in any way. While formal information-sharing mechanisms (such as meetings or online fora) may be put in place, much information-sharing is informal. When formal mechanisms are in place, information-sharing can sometimes include a commitment to share certain information on a regular basis, sometimes through the use of standardised reporting mechanisms. This loose commitment, and the use of standardised approaches, moves the organisations towards the next level of coordination.

This next level can be thought of as **alignment**. This occurs where organisations, while retaining a broad degree of independence, agree to take one another’s activities into account and potentially adjust their own activities in order to create a more effective, multi-agency response. This may entail changing the location of planned activities to prevent gaps or duplications, selecting specific types of activity that complement the activities of other organisations in the same area, or adjusting policies and procedures to reflect common technical standards or best practice. These changes (which might affect the ‘where’, ‘what’ or ‘how’ of the response) lead to organisations working separately, but in such

‘communication’, ‘alignment’ and ‘collaboration’ to describe three types of coordination within the spectrum. In this paper, these terms should be understood as they are defined in the next several paragraphs.



a way that their operations are influenced by those of other agencies or by collective decisions. There are still multiple organisational plans rather than a single plan. Alignment does not, generally, require the organisation to accept a common, interagency set of priorities for the response. Nor does it require sharing of organisational resources. In most cases, the agreement to coordinate in this way is fairly informal. It may be a tacit ‘understanding’ or a more formal agreement, but will generally be non-binding.

Where organisations go beyond alignment to working together on a single common strategy or programme, we might say they are engaging in **collaboration**. This type of work is generally more explicit and formalised; participants will tend to coordinate on all three areas of ‘where, what and when’ at the same time, will share agreed objectives and priorities and will often share resources. While individual projects might still be administratively or financially independent, they are part of a single, agreed common plan.

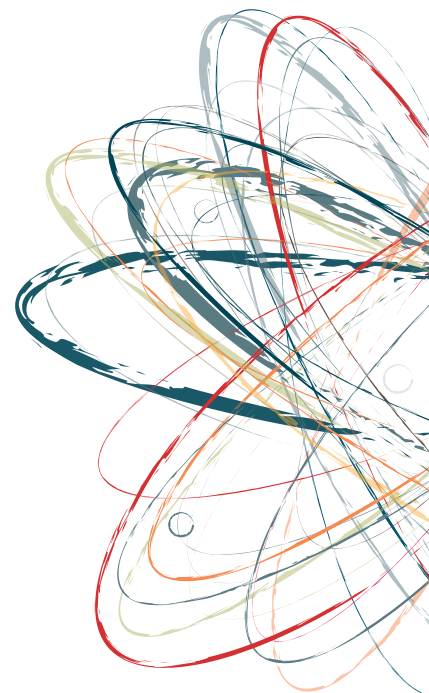
Of course, communication, alignment and collaboration are ‘ideal’ types of coordination relationships, and many examples can be found of coordinated activities that fall somewhere between them. Each of the three categories is, in addition, fairly broad. Take the case of agreeing on common standards or guidelines: these could be quite broadly defined, ‘simple rules’ or quite specific guidelines that organisations all agree to follow (and they are held accountable to some degree if they don’t). In our taxonomy, both of these fall into the category of alignment, but clearly they differ in the amount of autonomy and coordination involved. Finally, we should note that a group of organisations may work in alignment on some issues (such as programme implementation) while working collaboratively on others (such as assessment or advocacy).

Nevertheless, before considering what makes coordination successful, it is useful to recognise there are a variety of different types of ‘coordination’ and that they can be differentiated primarily by the degree to which the organisations involved choose to accept a common approach to (in roughly ascending order) the location of work; technical procedures used in conducting work; prioritising and choosing activities; and control over financial and human resources. The greater the degree of coordination among organisations, the greater the degree of shared accountability, the less the scope for independent action and, generally, the higher the level of formality.

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The greater the degree of coordination among organisations, the greater the degree of shared accountability, the less the scope for independent action and, generally, the higher the level of formality.

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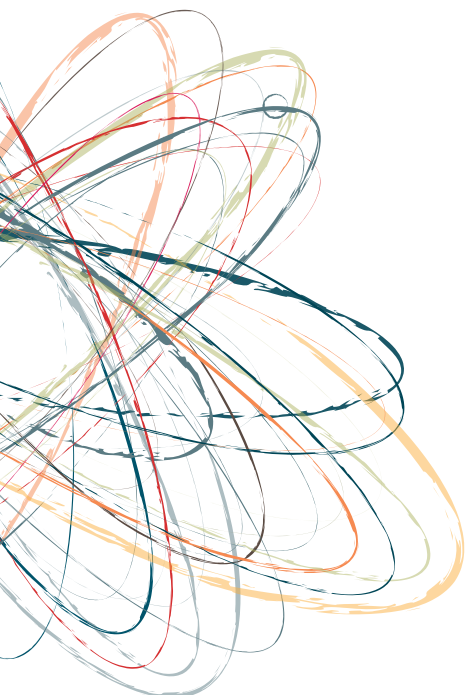
## 2.2 The Clusters and coordination – in theory

- The Clusters are expected to conduct a wide variety of activities, not all of which relate to coordination.
- These activities encompass all levels of coordination: communication, alignment and collaboration.

There are, then, a broad range of activities that might legitimately be considered ‘coordination’. This begs the question of whether there is an optimum level of coordination for the Clusters and, if so, how it can be achieved and considered ‘successful’. What are the Clusters supposed to achieve? Are they successful if they are supporting effective information exchange, or are they successful only to the degree they are driving integrated, collaborative working? When we say the Clusters aim to ‘coordinate’ sectoral activities, what do we actually mean?

Until fairly recently, ‘It [was] hard to pin down exactly how the Cluster approach was [...] intended to work [...] humanitarian actors [held] different opinions concerning its specific objectives’ (Steets et al., 2010:24). Much of this confusion related to the degree to which Clusters were meant to go beyond ‘removing gaps and preventing duplication [to] jointly moving towards commonly agreed Cluster objectives’ (Cosgrave et al., 2007: 3; see also Grunewald et al., 2010): in terms of the model presented above, it was unclear whether they were meant to focus on alignment or whether they were meant also to collaborate.

In 2012, ‘The IASC Principals agreed there is a need to restate and return to the original purpose of Clusters’ (IASC, 2012). The resulting Reference Module outlines the key functions of the Cluster at country level (see Box 3).



### Box 3: Functions of the Clusters

1. **Supporting service delivery** by, inter alia, providing a platform to ensure service delivery is driven by the agreed strategic priorities; developing mechanisms to eliminate duplication of service delivery;
2. **Informing strategic decision-making of the HC/HCT for the humanitarian response by needs assessment;** response gap analysis; activities to address gaps, duplications and obstacles; prioritisation;
3. **Planning and strategy development to develop sectoral plans, objectives and indicators that directly support realisation of the HC/HCT strategic priorities** by, inter alia, applying standards and guidelines; clarifying funding and prioritisation for humanitarian appeals and advocacy;
4. **Advocacy:** identifying advocacy concerns for HC/HCT messaging, and directly undertaking advocacy activities;
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 a high risk of recurring or significant new disaster and where sufficient capacity exists within the Cluster;
7. **Integrating early recovery from the outset of the humanitarian response.**

Source: IASC (2012).

The first point worth noting about this list of functions is that it is fairly long: it is – arguably – unlikely that any single country-level Cluster would be able to effectively conduct all of these activities, at least at the same time.

The second point is that several of these functions (e.g. capacity-building and the integration of early recovery) are not directly related to coordinating the activities of Cluster members: Clusters are doing more than coordinating the response, and, on some occasions, there can be a tension between their coordination functions and these ‘other’ functions (Culbert, 2011; Grunewald et al., 2010).

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The benefit of being part of the Cluster is the benefit of [...] being informed.

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With respect to the degree of coordination expected under this guidance, it is fairly clear that, in addition to the application of standards and guidelines, and activities to prevent gaps and duplication (both of which we have associated with the alignment approach to coordination), there is an intent to create a single Cluster strategy and set of priorities and to ‘ensure that service delivery is driven by agreed strategic priorities’. In addition to supporting broad alignment under a shared (and implicit) set of humanitarian objectives, Clusters are expected to create inter-agency collaboration around a single delivery plan. In support of this, the guidance clarifies the expectation that Cluster members commit ‘to work[ing] cooperatively with other Cluster partners to ensure an optimal and strategic use of available resources’ (IASC, 2012: 15).

## 2.3 The Clusters and coordination – in practice

- Clusters are effectively enabling coordination at the communication and alignment levels, but not, for the most part, at the collaboration level.
- While Clusters do create strategies, these strategies are normally built up from the activities of Cluster members rather than being developed first and then guiding activities: the traditional strategy process is ‘turned on its head’.
- Similarly, joint assessments provide a useful ‘bigger picture’ but are generally not used to guide Cluster members’ decisions about response.

### 2.3.1 How successful are the Clusters in fostering communication and alignment?

The great majority of the evaluations and reports considered as part of this research concur with the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)/World Food Programme (WFP) joint evaluation of the Food Security Cluster, that, ‘First and foremost, most food security coordination fora (along with other Clusters) see themselves as platforms for information exchange, rather than as mechanisms for taking decisions and organising a joint response’ (Steets et al., 2014b: 17). They also tend to support the finding that, while the Food Security Clusters are broadly successful in information exchange, provision of guidance and best practice and preventing duplication, most of them ‘do [...] not reach more ambitious coordination goals’ (p.25) related to joint or common programming.

All of the literature reviewed for this report suggested communicating information was one of the most effective, and most appreciated, functions of the Clusters. Information-sharing produced positive results even where the Cluster was, in other respects, not particularly successful (Vega, 2011). It was also the function that was most conspicuously missing in situations where Clusters were not activated (Humphries, 2013). Interviewees agreed the Clusters were generally fairly effective at information-sharing (if not at all aspects of information management – see section 3.7.1): access to information was the most often-mentioned benefit of Cluster membership, with one Cluster member speaking for many others when he said, ‘The benefit of being part of the Cluster is the benefit of [...] being informed.’

Beyond communication, the Clusters seem for the most part<sup>7</sup> to be enabling alignment through the dissemination of best practice and by supporting discussions around gaps and duplications in the response. These two functions were, after information-sharing, mentioned most often by interviewees as successful elements of the Clusters’ work: ‘If the Clusters didn’t exist, definitely we would all be working on our own. We would still be working because by mandate we would have to respond but I guess there would be a lot of inefficiencies in the way we would be working separately. There would be a lot of duplication.’ The literature broadly supports this conclusion. Country Clusters are often successful at disseminating good practice and standards, at preventing duplication of agency efforts among Cluster participants (Achakzai et al., 2011; Beúnza, 2011; Humphries, 2013; Nesení and Guzha, 2009; Steets et al., 2010, 2014b) and at ensuring response gaps are filled (Jespersen, 2009; Kuitens, 2009).

It may be easier for Clusters to address duplication – at least among the organisations that participate – than it is to fill gaps, because the information that is regularly collected is better at identifying overlaps than it is at identifying gaps: gaps in programming often reflect gaps in information (Steets et al., 2014b). Even where information exists, the gaps may well be a result of an absolute lack of resources rather than of inadequate programming and targeting (Achakzai et al., 2011; Salomons and Dijkzeul, 2008).

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Country Clusters are often successful at disseminating good practice and standards, at preventing duplication of agency efforts among Cluster participants and at ensuring response gaps are filled.

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<sup>7</sup> Although not in all cases – in at least two country Clusters interviewees suggested the Cluster had not been effective in preventing duplication.



### 2.3.2 How successful are the Clusters in supporting collaboration?

And what of collaboration – the design and implementation of joint programming under agreed strategic priorities, implied in the Cluster Reference Module? In an attempt to answer this question, we look in some depth at key ‘collaborative’ activities of the Cluster: joint strategy development, joint assessment and joint advocacy.

#### Joint strategic planning

The Cluster Reference Module (IASC, 2012) suggests the Clusters should perform at least one of the main functions of collaborative coordination: the development of a single agreed strategy and set of priorities that guides the activities of Cluster members. More recent guidance (OCHA, 2014) outlines the process by which this strategy should be developed: broadly, the HC and HCT develop a strategic direction and strategy that guide development of a country-level Strategic Response Plan (SRP); the Clusters provide inputs (‘as needed’), align Cluster objectives with country-level strategic objectives and prioritise the projects of individual agencies for receipt of donor funding. These projects are then approved by the HCT.

There would appear to be broad support among Cluster members for the idea that Clusters should play a role in developing and managing a common response under a common strategy. In the questionnaire conducted for this study, 62% of respondents believed that, in addition to information exchange and strategy development, the Cluster should have a role in overseeing the implementation of strategy. In contrast, only 10% believed the most important function of the Cluster was to allow agencies to share information and the Cluster should concentrate on this.

However, while the formal guidance suggests a situation where the Clusters (as part of the broader IASC coordination mechanism) are supporting a high level of collaborative coordination, the reality appears to be less clear-cut. In general, interviews suggested that, while formal strategy documents are certainly produced, they are not often used to guide joint programming: the suggestion was that implementation (as opposed to development) of a common strategy was often a step too far: ‘The more difficult time is when it gets more into the difficult strategic questions.’ Only a minority of interviewees suggested Cluster strategy directly determined their organisation’s activities. Some interviewees suggested they might make their work ‘a little bit similar’ to the strategy but, ‘We would only follow it if we like it.’ The result was that, ‘Strategy objectives

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...interviews suggested that, while formal strategy documents are certainly produced, they are not often used to guide joint programming...

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for the [...] Cluster are not the same for [...] individual organisations.’ One interviewee told us frankly, ‘I’m not even sure if I’ve read [the strategy].’<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the evaluation of the Food Security Cluster found that, while Clusters had invested a lot of time in strategic planning, Cluster members questioned ‘whether this investment was worthwhile because system-wide strategy documents have little influence on their own decisions’ (Steets et al. 2014a:V).

Interviewees offered a variety of reasons why agencies were not designing their work according to Cluster strategy. Several CCs suggested strategy documents were generally developed by small groups and over limited timeframes, which made broad participation difficult. As a result, Cluster members talked of strategies that had been created ‘behind curtains’ and felt, ‘It’s difficult for [us] to influence these things.’ In some cases, the exclusion of certain organisations occurred at the behest of the government: ‘The NGOs were not involved in the drafting of the [strategy] because the [government] authorities were not enthusiastic about this.’ Where organisations felt they had not been involved in developing the strategy, they were – unsurprisingly – unlikely to ‘fall in’ with the strategic objectives. Conversely, in the interviews, Cluster members that had been involved in developing the strategy appeared much more likely to align their programmes with the strategic objectives.

There were also a number of cases of organisations opting out rather than being left out. ‘I’ve seen that we have received several emails asking for input to develop these documents but honestly I’ve not been very useful on that.’ ‘The partners who attend the meetings agree on the priorities. The problem is that not all [...] partners participate in the strategic planning. This is mainly because they’re not very motivated.’

Interviewees further explained why they may not be motivated to participate in strategy development or to align their operations with the strategy once it has been developed. The first reason related to the timeliness of the strategy. In theory, identification of specific project activities takes place ‘after the strategy has been developed, to ensure that the strategy is built on needs analysis and is unaffected by organizations’ fundraising concerns’ (OCHA, 2014: 13). In many cases, however, the length of the strategy development process meant organisations had launched response activities well before the final strategy was

<sup>8</sup> This appeared to be particularly the case where strategies went beyond immediate, life-saving activities. Where the context required these kinds of activities, there seemed often to be a higher level of alignment between strategy and activities: ‘There hasn’t been a big debate in the Cluster whether these are the right priorities or not. It’s quite commonly shared that these are the most important priorities right now [...] For my agency it hasn’t been difficult to align our priorities to what has been the priorities of the Cluster because it’s life-saving activities and we’re all on the same page.’

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Where organisations felt they had not been involved in developing the strategy, they were – unsurprisingly – unlikely to ‘fall in’ with the strategic objectives.

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Clusters are producing strategy documents and identifying priorities, but in many (perhaps most) cases, Cluster members are not using the strategy or priorities to plan their actions.



completed, and were unlikely to change these activities on the basis of ‘imposed’ priorities: the strategy, in these situations, appeared as ‘an afterthought’. This was perhaps less of a constraint in rapid onset emergencies, where the needs were often more ‘clear-cut’ and strategies were developed quickly, according to a broad and fairly generic model. Here, organisations could easily fit existing projects under the strategic objectives.

A second concern related to the quality of the data on which Cluster strategies were developed. In several cases, Cluster members were aware the SRP or Cluster strategy was based on inaccurate data, so they ignored them when developing their own programmes.

A third, and fairly frequent, constraint to using the Cluster strategy in programme design occurred where an organisation’s mission or methods of operation meant its projects did not fit into a sectoral strategy. In some cases, this was because projects were multi-sectoral and did not easily align with any single Cluster’s objectives. In others, it was because projects were part of existing multi-year strategies or were focused on longer-term approaches to emergency response. As one NNGO interviewee explained,

*‘We look at the community, we try to understand the context of the community, the needs of the community and we design the programme based on those needs [...] [This means] there are certain activities that are [...] not part of the plan that they’re thinking up [...] the Cluster will not support it, because that’s not part of the goal.’*

In other cases, Cluster members paid relatively little attention to the Cluster strategy because donors were prepared to fund activities that fell outside it. Where ‘all humanitarian funding is [...] channelled through th[e] strategy [...] This is the strategy, we have to follow that.’ This may be the case where the majority of funding for a sector comes from pooled funds or through the CLA. However, both circumstances seem to be fairly unusual. In the eight country contexts considered in the joint evaluation of food security coordination mechanisms, pooled funding generally accounted for less than 10% of total funds. And so, as one interviewee said, ‘If donors are not using it, if operational organisations are not using it, then what’s the point?’

It’s a good question. The Clusters are producing strategy documents and identifying priorities, but in many (perhaps most) cases, Cluster members are not using the strategy or priorities to plan their actions. As strategies exist to guide action and resource allocation, the majority of these strategy processes appear to be failing to achieve their main objectives. And as the use of a single,

common plan is a prerequisite for the ‘collaborative’ level of coordination, we can also probably say that, in this aspect at least, the Clusters are failing to achieve the collaborative level of coordination envisaged in the IASC guidance. And yet the Clusters continue to produce strategies, and many (though not all) interviewees think this strategy development is an important activity. As one Cluster member explained, ‘It’s very important that organisations working in (country) see the strategic plan of the Cluster to contribute to the overall impact of (sector).’ This urge to ‘fit the Cluster’ came through again and again in interviews. Cluster participants believe the Cluster, in conjunction with the wider humanitarian coordination architecture, should indeed play a role in setting a common direction for a response, but when the Cluster does provide a common strategy they very often fail to use it.

### How to explain this?

At one level, the SRP and Cluster strategies – while not particularly useful for programme design – are useful for accessing funding. As one Cluster member explained, ‘We may be accessing funds from the local humanitarian donors, but we also make a lot of money from outside, and the sector objectives are more recognised at the national level with various donors.’

But the strategy also has utility beyond fundraising. It seems that, in many cases, the strategy is useful – and appreciated – not because it directs activities but because it reflects them: the activities come first and the strategy is built up from the activities. A classical strategic planning approach for collaborative work would involve the collaborating organisations coming to a common understanding of the situation, then agreeing on a common strategy to address this situation and then allocating specific elements of the strategy to the different organisations to implement. The approach taken by many of the Clusters seems to turn this process on its head: several interviewees explained how Cluster strategy is developed ‘from the bottom up’. ‘When we develop the strategy it has to come from the ground, so it should naturally fit together [with existing activities].’ ‘It totally depends on the inputs received from partners, and then we build up our [...] plan on that.’<sup>9</sup> In effect, the activities of individual agencies, when put together, form the strategy.

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...in many cases, the strategy is useful – and appreciated – not because it directs activities but because it reflects them...

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<sup>9</sup> This ‘bottom-up’ strategy development also helps explain why, in some cases, the Cluster strategy (which has been developed from a combination of existing activities) and the country strategy (which is more ‘top-down’ classic strategy) do not fit together very well: As one experienced interviewee explained, ‘You have the strategic objectives and then the Clusters do their response plans almost irrespective of what’s written in the strategic objectives and nobody’s noticing. The Clusters aren’t forced to make the linkage very specifically between the activities that they’re proposing to do and the strategic objectives.’

In this way, the agencies get a ‘big picture’ of the overall response and priorities, built up organically from the observations, assessments and expertise of organisations responding on the ground. As the response unfolds – and particularly where the Cluster has a monitoring function<sup>10</sup> – agencies are also able to get a picture of the probable direction of future activities. By ‘fitting the Cluster’ (though not, necessarily, following explicit priorities), agencies develop and implement projects that fit better into the overall evolving context. As one CC explained, ‘I think people need that structure to work within, whether they’re starting anew or whether [...] they’re evolving in their own organisation and their programming.’ In this way, it can ‘shape the way they actually approach their own programming’. Another Cluster member suggested that, as a result of strategic planning activities, ‘Nobody’s operating in a vacuum or on their own, and it serves that purpose to know how and where other partners are operating and how they might evolve in their own planning, inter-agency [...] So it’s a reference point for everyone as well.’ Programmes may not be designed to comply with the agreed priorities, but they are ‘shaped [...] to address some of these issues we’ve agreed’. At the same time, the strategy is a ‘flexible document’, and is not directive – it leaves agencies with ‘the autonomy to do what they wish to do under their own strategic projects’.

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...many Clusters have adapted a strategic planning model designed implicitly around collaboration and are now using it more as a tool for alignment...

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In terms of the levels of coordination outlined earlier, it would appear many Clusters have adapted a strategic planning model designed implicitly around collaboration – each organisation playing a clearly determined part of a single, shared plan – and are now using it more as a tool for alignment – paying attention to the activities and plans of others and adapting plans on the basis of this awareness. From this perspective, strategic planning and prioritisation processes are probably more important for activity selection and design than are the strategy documents themselves. As one CC explained, ‘It’s very important also to me that [...] actors are spending enough time, and discussing and agreeing [...] that process brings everybody together. The process gives a sense of ownership, so it reduces the friction among agencies. It increases collaboration, because information is being widely shared.’

Interestingly, where the Clusters are building strategy up from activities, rather than developing activities on the basis of strategy, they are taking an approach to strategic development that is often recommended for situations of complexity (such as emergency operations). Sometimes thought of as ‘strategy created in the rear view mirror’, ‘emergent strategy’ or ‘adaptive strategy’, this approach

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the Cluster has no authority over Cluster Members and so activities which require the Cluster to hold its members to account raise questions about authority and accountability. The type of monitoring envisaged here is conducted less for the purposes of holding agencies to account for outputs, and more for the purposes of seeing how different types of output (including those not provided by Cluster members) affect the situation of crisis affected people.

is based on the impossibility of creating a unified, centralised understanding of a fluid and complex situation, and on the inadvisability of creating long-term plans in an environment that is changing rapidly. Instead, the strategy is built up from the multiple, decentralised observations of many actors, and is created to be flexible and iterative: there is a premium placed on monitoring the context and understanding and replicating ‘what works’ (Mintzberg et al., 2009; Ramalingam, 2013). We should perhaps understand the strategic activities of the Clusters as a successful adaption of the planning process to their complex, rapidly changing environment.<sup>11</sup>

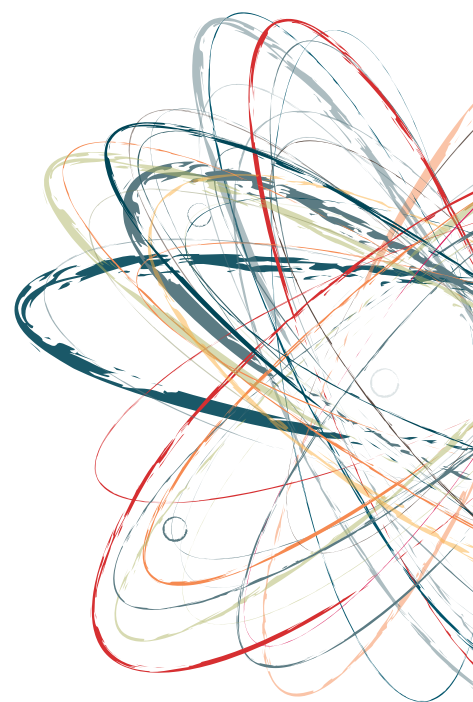
### Joint assessment

As outlined in the discussion of information management (section 3.7.1), the Clusters take a variety of approaches to collecting and analysing assessment information. In some cases, assessment occurs at the ‘communication’ level of coordination: each agency collects its own information independently and shares it in the Cluster. In other cases, Cluster members may align their assessment activities – by, for example, allocating different geographical areas to different agencies or agreeing on a core set of questions. Where Clusters attempt single, joint assessments, we can say the assessment function has become collaborative.

We have already seen that strategy documents are (according to interviews) seldom used to develop programmes. Similarly, many interviewees suggested these joint assessments were not used to guide Cluster members’ decisions about where and how to respond. This was not always the case – joint assessments were more likely to be used in situations where organisations faced access constraints and so were reliant on other (often local) organisations to collect information. More often, however, Cluster members (including CLAs), while participating in joint Cluster assessments, also continued to conduct their own assessments and use their own assessments for decision-making.

The reasons interviewees gave for not using the joint assessments are familiar: they correspond closely to the reasons for not using strategies. Assessment reports often come ‘too late’. Cluster members in the meantime do their own rapid assessments, and have already designed their approach once the Cluster

11 However, we should note that, in the current decision architecture, while this ‘emergent’ or ‘bottom up’ approach is effective in creating a sectoral strategy for the individual Cluster, it is more problematic when it comes to creating a multi-sector strategy for all humanitarian actors. In this report, we have concentrated on the Cluster’s role. However, the Cluster is also a part of a larger coordination mechanism, incorporating inter-Cluster coordination and the Humanitarian Country Team. While the Clusters appear in many cases to have adapted the sectoral strategy process to complex and fluid environments, questions remain around how the larger architecture can best adapt its strategic processes to the complexity of humanitarian response.





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Interviewees felt that, by utilising Cluster joint assessments, they were able to provide information on the ‘overall needs of the Cluster’.  
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assessment is completed. Similarly, Cluster assessments tend to be sector-specific, and so do not meet the needs of organisations planning multi-sectoral programmes; they may also be insufficiently detailed for programme design. Donors may not support the use of Cluster assessments, requiring information in a different format. Or organisations may not trust the data obtained by others, even fellow Cluster members. One Cluster member told us that, only ‘If our own staff are part of the assessment, we would use that data and not do our own assessment.’

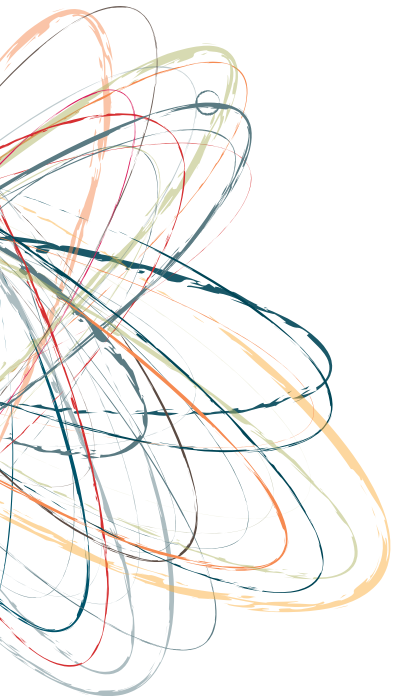
There is, too, an element of preserving autonomy in some of the interviews: many agencies have ‘spent a lot of money developing’ assessment tools and are ‘not prepared to waiver. So if you have large INGOs [international NGOs] with that standpoint, it’s very difficult to get them to work together.’

As with strategy, however, organisations seem to value participating in joint assessments, even when they are not using them for programme design. Interviewees felt that, by utilising Cluster joint assessments, they were able to provide information on the ‘overall needs of the Cluster’, not just the needs to be addressed by a single organisation. Again, agencies clearly recognised the difference between their (often fairly localised) view of a situation and the ‘bigger picture’: ‘The reason we favour joint assessments is (organisation) is not responding to all the needs on the ground [...] if there are number of agencies participating in that assessment that is the best because then we are able to support the community comprehensively, not with a half-baked response.’ They also tended to see the process of working together on assessment as a way of building more coordinated response.

Members also appreciated the power of strength in numbers, in that they were able to use joint assessment data when applying for funding. ‘They insist on evidence-based needs assessment and we use these assessment reports as valid sources of information to justify the applications [...] If we’ve seen an assessment report and there are some needs that we can address within the scope of our programme that is already existing, we use that as the justification to respond.’

### Joint advocacy

One interesting element that emerged from the interviews was the importance of advocacy to many Cluster members. Advocacy was, perhaps, the only area where Clusters regularly engaged in joint collaborative activity. Joint advocacy (particularly in areas such as education and protection, which do not necessarily receive high levels of attention) was seen as being desirable and effective: ‘When





you come with a Cluster and everybody has a consensus about that and you provide a paper on that, that has some gravity.’ A good Cluster will change a government’s policy. How great is that?’ It also decreased the risks to individual agencies in politically fraught situations: ‘It gives us cover when we’re talking about sensitive things.’ In short, collaborative advocacy (unlike collaborative programming) has the potential to offer significant benefits, while decreasing the (political) costs of action to the individual organisation.

Which brings us to the consideration of why organisations engage in the Clusters, and why certain types of coordination may make more rational sense to Cluster members than do others: the consideration of costs and benefits.

## 2.4 The costs and benefits of Cluster coordination

- In most cases, participation in Clusters is not mandatory
- Organisations weigh the costs and benefits of Cluster involvement
- Costs may include time, loss of autonomy and loss of competitive advantage
- The benefits for Cluster members include access to information and ‘the bigger picture’, technical guidance, avoiding costly gaps/duplication and building relationships with other Cluster members

In some countries – notably those where the government chaired or was closely involved in the Cluster mechanism, such as Indonesia, Kenya and the Philippines – it could be difficult for an organisation to achieve permission to work unless it was part of a Cluster. Participation in the Cluster system was, effectively, mandatory, and so considerations of the costs and benefits of various levels of coordination do not really apply.<sup>12</sup> However, at the time of writing, organisations do not always participate fully in Clusters, even where they are expected by government agencies to do so (see, e.g., Beúnza, 2011), and in the majority of situations participation in the Cluster is voluntary. Even where agencies participate, they are not bound in any way to follow the direction laid down by the Cluster. Previous researchers and interviewees have been clear that this voluntary participation reflects the structural reality of the humanitarian system: ‘A Cluster is the sum of parts which are agencies with their differing

<sup>12</sup> Current guidance, which makes it clear that ‘[t]he ideal approach is to support national mechanisms for sectoral coordination’ (IASC, 2014) and proposed changes in the approach of humanitarian agencies, leading to greater national ownership of responses (see Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014) may, over time, make this situation more common.

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Agencies know they get something in return by participating in the Cluster [...] So it's a give and take situation.

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mandates. That's the reality.' 'Clusters at country and sub-national level are not in a position to address fundamental differences among organizations concerning their approaches and intervention logics' (Steets et al., 2010: 51). 'You cannot lead NGOs who are at liberty because of their self-given mandate to reflect civil society, down a path that they do not want to go down.' If participation is voluntary, why do some organisations participate (and some not) in any given situation? And how do participating organisations weigh up the pros and cons of increased coordination in the Cluster?

Several interviewees made the point that the choice to participate in a Cluster is often determined by organisational policy and philosophical orientation: lead agencies do not have a choice as to whether they participate or not; other agencies with strongly held principles related to coordination or independence may participate as a matter of principle even where the costs are high or not participate in situations where they might benefit.

More often, participation in Clusters – and following the general direction that emerges from discussions in the Cluster – is determined by a broad determination of costs and benefits: 'Agencies know they get something in return by participating in the Cluster [...] So it's a give and take situation. They know that being part of the Cluster, there's something they give and something they get in return.'

The costs of coordination most often cited by interviewees included time, loss of competitive advantage and loss of autonomy. Several evaluations, and many interviewees, mentioned the time cost involved in participating in Cluster activities, and particularly the difficulties small organisations operating across several sectors had in participating in multiple Clusters. Importantly, the time cost is not just that incurred by attending meetings: it also relates to time spent preparing information for distribution. At the same time, some interviewees were at pains to underline that there was also a time cost in not participating in the Clusters. Organisations 'can save time on issues that they are facing in the office which they don't realise. When they attend the Cluster meetings once or twice, they will continue to because then they realise the benefits from these types of meetings.' However, time costs are, obviously, a factor for most organisations, and we would expect that they would be more likely to participate where they feel time is being used well.

The loss of competitive advantage comes through 'giving away' information other organisations may use to develop programme proposals or gain funding:

‘It’s a highly competitive sector which is partly why these Cluster meetings are this strange function where they all know they should be working together but deep down they’re thinking, “Those b\*\*\*\*\*s, they took that camp! We wanted that camp. Now I’ve got to tell my boss and find another camp to work.” That’s actually what’s going on. There’s fierce competition for resources, visibility, getting the cool projects people want.’

Some evaluations mentioned that organisations were unhappy to share information, for similar reasons (e.g. Nesení and Guzha, 2009). Perhaps the most significant cost, and the one that appears to underlie many calculations, is that related to autonomy. As noted above, the Clusters are composed of different organisations with different mandates (in the case of the UN) and missions (in the case of NGOs) and different governance structures. Each organisation is accountable to a variety of different stakeholders for its own actions, and so – even if they wanted to – they could not hand over general decision-making authority to the Clusters. And it is fairly clear from many of the interviews that, despite a broad commitment to working cooperatively, they generally do not want to give up this autonomy: ‘We’re not going to change our programming to fit the strategy, because we’re just going to do what we want to do programming-wise anyway! [...] We don’t like being told what to do in general.’

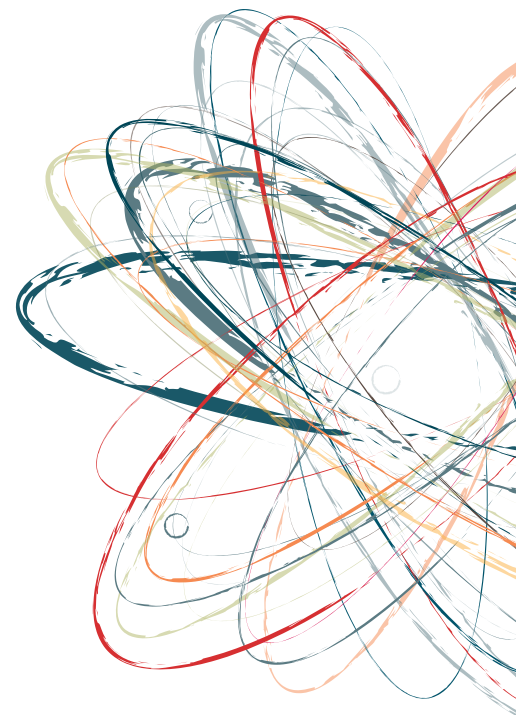
And what of the benefits? We need to consider these from two slightly different (but overlapping) perspectives: those of the organisations involved in the Clusters and those of the people affected by crisis. From the point of view of Cluster members, the main benefits of engaging in the Clusters appear to be the ability of using the Cluster as a ‘one-stop shop’ for information, which saves time in information collection and decision-making; an opportunity to see the ‘big picture’ of the crisis, which can allow for better planning and programme design; access to technical guidance and good practice; increased legitimacy for activities undertaken jointly (particularly funding applications and advocacy); the ability to know about – and so prevent – duplications and overlaps, which can be costly in terms of time and resources; and the opportunity to build relationships and trust with other actors.

It can be hard to measure the effects of all this on the dynamics of the response itself, however (Culbert, 2011), and particularly hard for those affected by a crisis to see the tangible results of coordination or to assess whether the response would have been more effective if the Clusters had not been active: ‘Affected populations [...] did not perceive marked changes in the level and quality of humanitarian response that would correlate with the introduction of the Cluster approach’ (Steets et al., 2010: 55). However, in some cases, communities

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Cluster meetings are this strange function where they all know they should be working together but...There’s fierce competition for resources, visibility, getting the cool projects people want.

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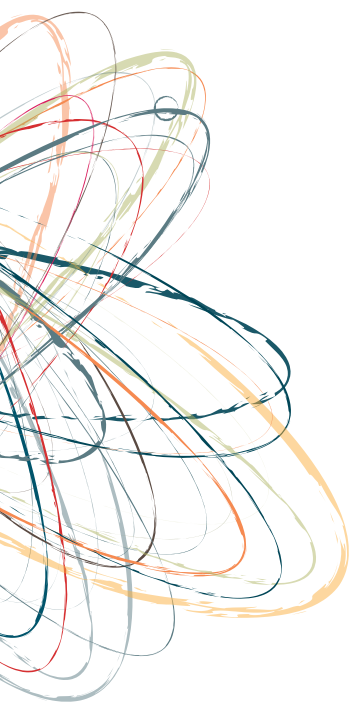
have recognised the benefits of increased coordination, in terms of ensuring consistency and fairness across a response, and preventing multiple assessments (Alexander, 2009; Majewski et al., 2012). Evaluators, meanwhile, have tended to agree that. Overall, the Clusters improve response, by preventing duplication and so increasing coverage and allowing resources to be used more efficiently (Humphries, 2013; Steets et al., 2010, 2014b); decreasing costs through standardisation and economies of scale (Majewski et al., 2012); and supporting better decisions (ibid.).

When assessing whether to participate in coordination mechanisms – and ‘how much’ coordination is appropriate – organisations will weigh these various benefits against the costs of time, loss of advantage and loss of autonomy. Interviewees suggested the ‘optimum level’ of coordination would tend to occur where the benefits of coordination outweighed the costs. Can we say, then, on our spectrum of coordination, where this is most likely to occur?

## 2.5 Conclusion – what is the optimal level of coordination for the Clusters?

- Cluster members are actively participating in Clusters at the communication and alignment levels, but the costs of collaboration generally appear to outweigh the benefits.
- The alignment level of coordination is probably the optimum level of coordination for the Cluster.

In answering this question, we should begin by noting that, in many cases, a large number of agencies do not participate in the Clusters at all (Alexander, 2009; Beúnza, 2011; Majewski et al., 2012). For these agencies, organisational orientation or cost:benefit considerations presumably work against participation: however, although we attempted to interview representatives of agencies not participating in the Clusters, the number of interviews was fairly small and we cannot say with any certainty why they are not participating. Those agencies that do participate are generally enthusiastic about sharing information (the ‘communication’ level of coordination). This requires an agency to spend time, and may involve costs in terms of competitive advantage, but it does not, generally, decrease the autonomy of the organisation. In return, agencies expect to receive information that will allow for more effective and efficient programming, and – where the information exchange is well managed



– they can obtain information more quickly and easily in the Cluster than they would if they tried to get information from a variety of different sources. At the alignment level of coordination, the costs increase. In order to align with other agencies in terms of practices, scope or location of programmes, Cluster members may need to give up more autonomy by operating in a different way from normal, or in a different place from that originally planned. However, it is often worth giving up a certain amount of time and autonomy for the benefits of better coverage, better use of resources, potential access to funding, improved ‘image’ and decreased conflict with other agencies. However, there is a fine balance to be achieved here, and, while literature and interviews tended to suggest the Clusters were fairly successful in addressing alignment issues of gaps and duplication, and in promoting technical good practice, there were also plenty of examples of Cluster members ‘breaking ranks’ and going ahead as planned, rather than adapting their work to align with other Cluster members. In the rest of this study, we consider the factors that tend to support Clusters in more successful coordination, and, in particular, in more successful coordination at the ‘alignment’ level.

What about collaboration? Multiple agencies working together to define their activities according to a single plan and a single set of agreed activities? Both general discussions with interviewees and more specific consideration of joint strategic planning and joint assessments (above) would tend to suggest the costs of Cluster-wide collaboration, particularly in terms of lost autonomy, generally outweigh the benefits (although this may not be the case where these benefits include access to significant funding or government approval to work). There may be a limited number of activities best conducted collaboratively – such as advocacy – and the Cluster may serve as a platform for organisations to meet and then bilaterally design and implement joint activities (Steets et al., 2014b; interviews), but it is probably unrealistic to expect that Clusters will regularly design and implement unified sectoral programming. In the words of one interviewee,

*‘In terms of coordination, I think the current level is enough. I don’t think a higher level is in fact feasible because that might result in too much control and constraint with members of different partners which might not be acceptable. I wouldn’t say we do joint activities now [...] At the moment there’s space for flexibility within individual organisations which I think should be maintained and be respected also.’*

Collaborative programming may be not only unrealistic but also undesirable. As we noted above, in the discussion on strategy, collaborative programming is generally based around a centralised, uniform plan. A joint multi-agency

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...it is probably unrealistic to expect that Clusters will regularly design and implement unified sectoral programming.

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...the alignment model of coordination appears to be a better ‘fit’ for the humanitarian context than the tighter, more centralised, collaboration model.

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plan will generally take some time to create (unless it can be imposed by a single authority, which is not currently likely in most humanitarian contexts).<sup>13</sup> Once created, it will tend to be inflexible and difficult to change. ‘To have [an annual] strategy is really problematic – it’s something we can’t forecast in the long-term: on a monthly basis we can have an idea of strategy.’<sup>14</sup> In contrast, a strategy built around alignment – with autonomous actors responding to local conditions under a broad general framework – is decentralised; as a result decisions can be taken and implemented more quickly.<sup>15</sup> We should stress that not everyone we spoke to agreed with this analysis: some knowledgeable informants advocated strongly for a more centralised, collaborative approach. However, as the majority of informants who discussed this topic felt that the alignment level worked best; as we were unable to find examples of this collaborative approach working; and as what is actually working in many Clusters agrees closely with what we would expect to see working (from a theoretical perspective) in complex environments we would conclude that the alignment model of coordination appears to be a better ‘fit’ for the humanitarian context than the tighter, more centralised, collaboration model. When it comes to coordination, more is not necessarily better. However, we would also note that this alignment approach to coordination has developed naturally, and does not seem to align well with the formal expectations or structure of the IASC coordination system. If the alignment approach is, in fact, the best way for addressing coordination, then it would be helpful for the IASC to align policy to support what is happening in practice.

13 Although this does happen on occasion – interviewees spoke of Philippine government officials very quickly providing the strategy and plan after Typhoon Haiyan.

14 For a good example of this, see Slim (2012): the original Country Assistance Plan for Somalia had taken so long to produce that HCT members were unwilling to go back and review it in the light of a deteriorating situation

15 The debate between tighter, unitary forms of multi-agency response and looser, coordinated forms, has raged for some time in the world of emergency management, although there seems to be broad agreement that looser forms (more like alignment) are more effective: ‘Too often disaster planners and managers assume that centralized control has to be imposed, from the top down, on emergency activities. This image is often summarized in the question: Who is in charge? This involves what has been called ‘the command and control model’ ostensibly taken from the military area. However, research has consistently shown that this is not a good model for disasters [...] co-ordination, not control, is what is required and partly achievable [...] Loosening rather than tightening up the command structure is better for the emergency periods of disasters’ (Quarantelli: 381)



### 3. Which factors support effective coordination in the Clusters?

The previous section considered the meaning of coordination in the context of the Clusters, identified various different levels of coordination and suggested a higher level of coordination was not necessarily better – that Clusters should be aiming, in most cases, for an approach to coordination that balances broad general agreements (e.g. on location or method of assistance) with a fairly high degree of organisational autonomy.

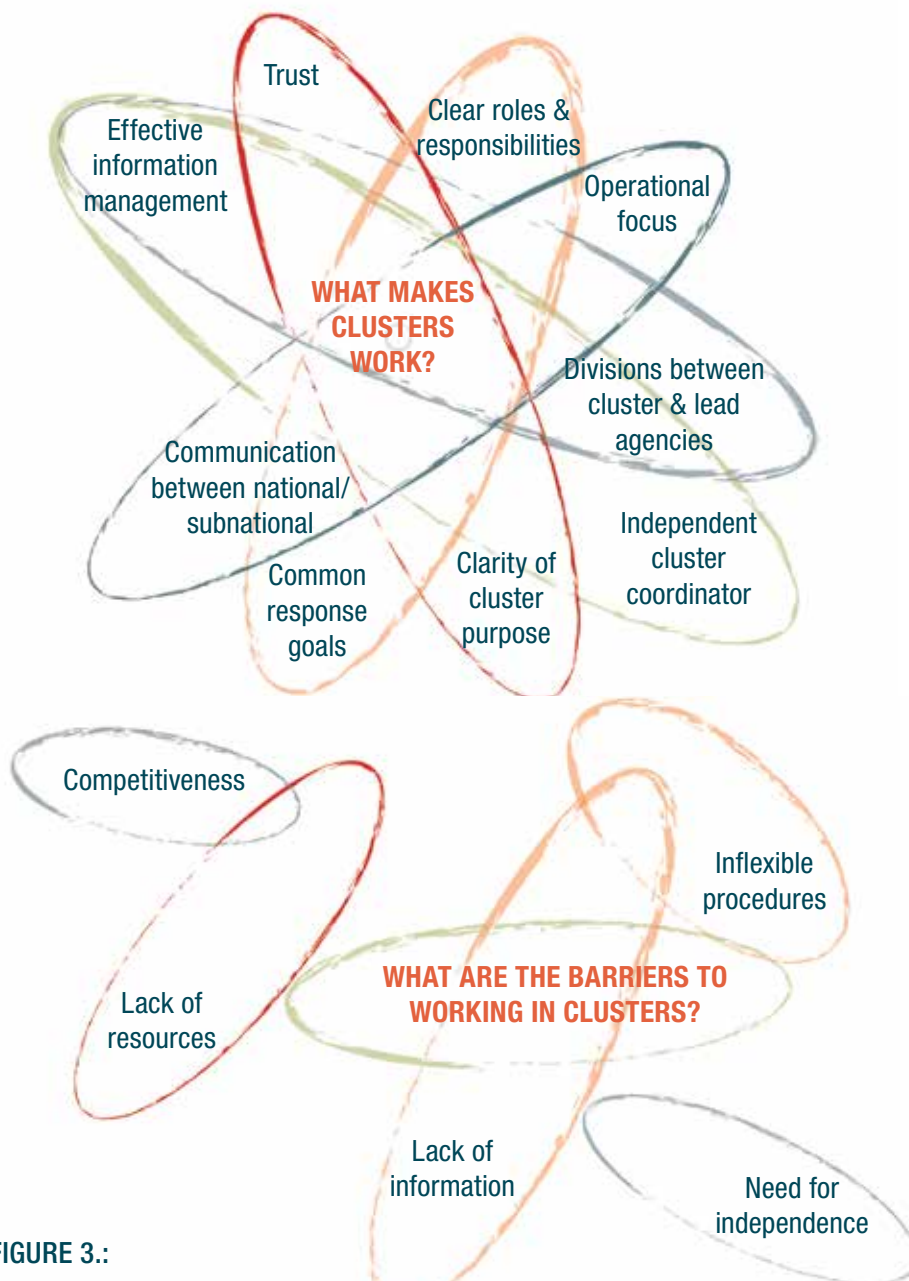


FIGURE 3.:  
What makes Clusters work and what gets in the way?



This section considers the factors that support this level of coordination, and that, more generally, move agencies along the spectrum of coordination – away from entirely autonomous action and towards higher levels of coordination (alignment and above). We group them into:

- Factors related to the nature of the task;
- Factors related to the timing of Cluster activities and deployment;
- Factors related to membership and composition of the Cluster;
- Factors related to leadership and structure of the Cluster
- Factors related to the skills of the CC
- Factors related to resources;
- Factors related to process and procedure in the Cluster; and
- Factors related to trust and interpersonal relationships.

This investigation is based around a series of hypotheses that emerged from the literature review and were expanded through the early interviews conducted for this research.

### 3.1 Factors related to the nature of the task

- Clusters are more successful at achieving higher levels of coordination when activities are designed to meet the needs of members.
- They tend to achieve higher levels of coordination when they address commonly identified ‘external’ problems that cannot be addressed elsewhere and where there is a clear advantage to working together.
- There is potential for Cluster engagement in funding processes and funding allocations to have a positive impact on Cluster coordination, especially where members have some say over how funds are allocated and where funds can be used to address gaps or follow procedures agreed by the Cluster.
- Cluster engagement in funding processes also has risks, such as competition, alienation and side-lining other Cluster functions.
- Clusters have identified a number of effective ways to address these risks, mostly centred around transparency.

As we have noted, the Cluster Reference Module (IASC, 2012; 2014), which serves as a general terms of reference (ToRs) for the Clusters, lists seven key functions and 12 separate activities the Clusters should undertake. Interviewees suggested that, in most cases, Clusters do not have the resources to fully engage with all of these activities, and therefore focus on a smaller number. To a large degree, the selection of activities is determined by the nature of the emergency and of the context. However, the CC and Cluster members also exercise a degree of choice in deciding which activities are prioritised.

As Clusters can (if only to a limited degree) choose the activities they undertake, we wondered whether the choice of activity had any influence on the degree to which the Cluster was successful in coordinating the activities of members. Can Clusters choose to work on activities that will be more likely to lead to effective coordination?

We aimed to test two hypotheses related to the nature of the task:

- *Coordination will be more successful on tasks that meet individual organisations' needs; and*
- *Coordination will be more successful when the Cluster undertakes tasks that are complex or difficult.*

As these hypotheses emerged over the course of the research, they were not addressed in the questionnaire. Interviews and the review of evaluations, however, strongly supported both hypotheses.

### **3.1.1 Meeting members' needs**

The first hypothesis is no more than common sense. Participation in the Cluster is voluntary, and, 'as long as their inclusion on the Cluster provides them with added value, (agencies) will participate' (Kuitens, 2009). Those Clusters that focus primarily on common service delivery, such as the Logistics Cluster, tended to be seen by their members as highly effective at coordination (Majewski et al., 2012). One example of meeting members' needs related to information management (for more, see section 3.7.1). Where Clusters are able to effectively meet the information management needs of their members, the Cluster is valued and Cluster engagement increases.

However, while this hypothesis may be common sense, it is worth discussing here because of the pressures placed on many Clusters to spend a large amount of time on activities that do not appear to meet the operational needs of their

“ Clusters are often expected to provide information and analysis to support activities that take place outside the Cluster. ”

members. Clusters are often expected to provide information and analysis to support activities that take place outside the Cluster – in the HCT; the headquarters of the CLA; the government of the affected state; the IASC Working Group; and OCHA New York.

Several evaluations have noted this ‘extractive’ use of the Clusters: according to the Cluster Approach Evaluation 2, the Clusters were often ‘abstract and not very relevant to concrete activities on the ground; [they] often served to collect information for lead agencies lacking access to the field because of security reasons; or spent a lot of time catering to the requests of OCHA and different financing mechanisms rather than focusing on how to address concrete problems’ (Steets et al., 2010: 34). Four years later, the strategic evaluation of the Food Security Cluster found the ‘heavy system-wide demands for data, reports and inputs to broader processes at predefined moments made it difficult to address the needs of actors at the operational level’ (Steets et al., 2014: 13; see also Polastro et al., 2011; GFSC & FSC CAR, 2014). Many Cluster participants raised this problem of ‘extractive’ information collection, describing how ‘overwhelmed’ they felt by ‘feed[ing] the black hole’ and ‘filling out glossy reports in New York’.

There are no easy answers here: many of these reports are necessary fundraising or advocacy documents, which may have impact and results elsewhere in the system – and the information has to come from somewhere. Experienced CCs, with an understanding of the broader system, are able to identify important requests that come from outside the Cluster, while ‘pushing back’ against requests where the information is less likely to have an impact. At the same time, bodies requesting information from the Clusters can significantly help their cause by making it clear how the information has been (or will be) used to make decisions or to galvanise political support or funding (Boughen and LeTurque, 2009; Culbert, 2011; Kuitens, 2009). They should also, in many cases, be prepared to take ‘raw’ information from Cluster members and conduct their own analysis, rather than expecting Cluster members to collect information according to externally imposed formats.

Beyond this, the understandable interest of Cluster members in tasks that directly benefit them suggests Clusters will be more successful at coordination where they focus on tasks that members self-identify as common problems (Maxwell and Parker, 2012) and where they take active steps to balance the needs of different members.

### 3.1.2 Addressing complex and difficult situations

With regard to the second hypothesis, our research identified numerous examples of organisations coordinating around complex or difficult tasks, such as addressing security and access constraints. Discussing a security concern, one CC explained that, ‘The situation is very complicated in all aspects [...] [and this] made the organisations feel there is a need for specialised coordination.’ In many cases – though not all – when working on these difficult tasks, Cluster members achieved a very high level of coordination, going beyond alignment to something close to joint action – or collaboration, as we term it in this paper.

On closer inspection, many of these complex situations where Clusters were able to achieve a high level of coordination shared a series of characteristics that appear to have made coordination easier to achieve.<sup>16</sup> First, the access constraints or government policies were clearly recognised as common problems, making it easy for organisations to agree on their importance. Addressing these problems met the needs of all members. Second, there was generally no other forum to effectively address these issues. Third, they allowed organisations to focus on common ‘outside’ rather than divisive ‘inside’ problems. Fourth, there was a clear advantage in working as a group to address the problems: no single agency could be ‘singled out’ in retaliation for speaking up, while the problem-solving required the knowledge and experience of a number of organisations; Cluster members did not, individually, have the capacity to address these problems: ‘The benefit is being able to do something in a team, in a partnership, that you wouldn’t be able to do alone, yourself.’

While all four characteristics were found in issues around access and security, they were also found, together or separately, in a series of other situations. Identifying shared service providers is not, in itself, particularly complex or difficult, but does address a common, external problem, and leads to a certain degree of risk-sharing: ‘When we agree on something [...] we agree on it because of the risks [...] If we don’t take on this type of service, we are choosing to deal with the local market and taking the risk.’

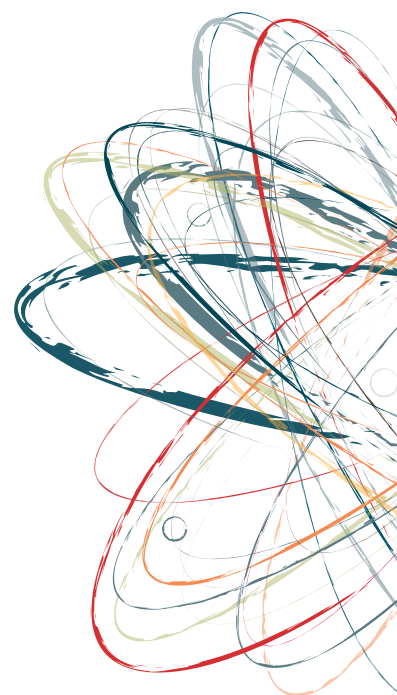
Similarly, the external, common problem of a challenging funding environment allowed organisations to find value in coordination. When resources became scarce, actors began to engage with the Cluster more than previously, when funding had been plentiful, as they recognised the importance of reducing duplication in the new funding context.

<sup>16</sup> Although we should note that the fact of organisations being interested in working together on difficult problems does not mean these problems are easily solved. Sometimes, challenges are too big for any one Cluster to solve: coordination does not necessarily equate to success.

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When resources became scarce, actors began to engage with the Cluster more as they recognised the importance of reducing duplication in the new funding context.

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Another example of a common external problem best dealt with by a group – as noted in the on joint advocacy above (section 2.3.2) – was advocacy around government policy. In such cases, organisations brought an issue to the Cluster, gained support and buy-in from fellow Cluster members and made plans to move forward collectively. As one interviewee explained, ‘If you see it’s an issue for many NGOs, it’s probably an issue that should be tackled as soon as possible. Sometimes, together it’s easier to solve the problem rather than your NGO alone.’

In summary, we can be fairly confident in saying coordination will be more successful where it concentrates on tasks that:

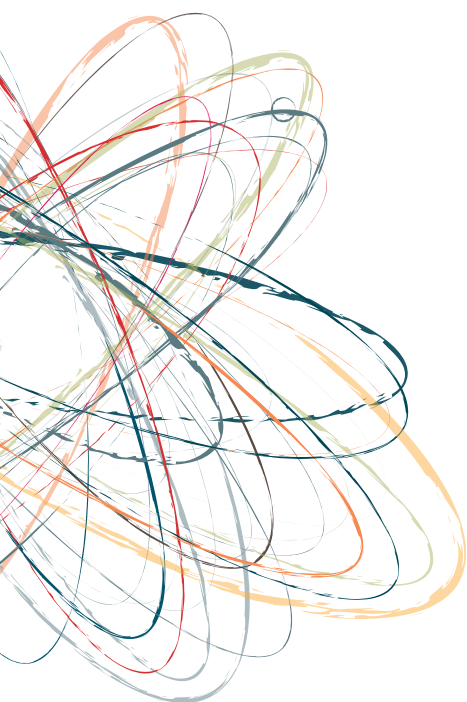
- Address problems felt by the majority of Cluster members;
- Address ‘external’ problems – originating from circumstances or organisations outside the Cluster;
- Clearly go beyond the capacity of a single organisation to address, and so benefit from, the power of the group;
- Cannot be addressed satisfactorily in other fora.

Coordination around these sorts of tasks can become a virtuous cycle, fostering feelings of togetherness that make organisations want to coordinate in the future. ‘members doing very diverse activities [...] the Cluster can pull them together through some kind of common activity’, which can ‘enhance commonalities between organisations and make them feel inclusive’.

### 3.1.3 Money as a motivator: allocating funding in and through Clusters

One task that can have a significant influence on coordination within the Cluster is the allocation of funding to specific priorities or projects. This happens in a variety of ways, and the interviews revealed significant differences from one country to another. As part of the SRP process, the Clusters are meant to create a sectoral strategy and priorities for funding and to identify ‘top priority’ projects for donor funding.<sup>17</sup> While these projects are not guaranteed funding, the prioritisation is (at least in principle) meant to guide donor spending. Where common or pooled funding mechanisms exist, the Clusters are also generally active in deciding which projects should receive these pooled funds. In some situations, significant funding is available through the CLA. Do these activities related to funding allocation support higher levels of coordination, or do they stand in the way?

<sup>17</sup> Funding for these projects may come through direct contact between the agency and donors, or through the fact that priority projects are posted on OCHA’s Online Project System (OPS) site.



The answer is not clear-cut. The opportunity to have a say in funding decisions certainly leads some organisations that might otherwise not do so to participate in the Cluster. Several CCs we spoke to felt Cluster attendance increased around the time of pooled funding decisions, particularly where resources were limited, and one noted that organisations would ‘be part of the coordination just because they wanted to access some funding’. At the same time, a preoccupation with funding discussions might have the opposite effect, and alienate Cluster members. Evaluations have suggested organisations with their own secured funding may avoid participation in the Clusters because of what they see as ‘time-wasting’ funding discussions (Altay and Labonte, 2014; Culbert, 2011). Organisations that fail to access funding through the Clusters may also be dissuaded from participating in the future (Kuitems, 2009).

A more powerful argument for the positive impact of funding tasks on coordination is that, where Cluster members have some say over how money is allocated, they can use it to support programmes that address gaps or that follow procedures agreed by the Cluster. One CC explained that, ‘For finances they receive through the sector (pooled funding), they completely adhere to standards and guidance.’ On the other hand, for those with outside funds, ‘When it comes to approach [...] some of the things we are promoting [...] may be followed or not followed based on the source of funding.’ However, not all interviewees agreed: some felt programmes funded on the basis of Cluster decisions were no more likely to follow Cluster guidelines than other programmes.

Interviewees were clear that the degree to which funding allocation supported coordination was, very largely, determined by the behaviour of donors: ‘It will generate an awful lot of buy-in if everybody knows that donors are listening to the Cluster.’ Some – though by no means all – interviewees felt donors ‘should not allocate resources to any project unless the Cluster has explicitly endorsed it’. In some cases, this appeared to be happening: ‘Whenever partners within the Cluster system are requesting for funding, donors refer them to us, asking if it falls within the strategy, if it falls within the gaps and priorities that the sector has agreed upon, and if it follows the standards.’ In others, it was happening as a result of the new SRP process: ‘Donors will not fund humanitarian action outside of the SRP.’ However, the approach donors took differed greatly from one country to another. Interviewees were as likely to report that, ‘Donors don’t take any notice of the ranking’: in some cases, donors, although ‘well aware of the fact that there’s a Cluster system’, did not ‘alert the Cluster nor the partner who’s outside of the Cluster system that there might actually be overlaps’.

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... where Cluster members have some say over how money is allocated, they can use it to support programmes that address gaps or that follow procedures agreed by the Cluster.

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Where organisations are financially dependent on the CLA, the Cluster can cease to be a venue for cooperation...

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Where donors did listen to the Clusters, and where Clusters prioritised projects that filled gaps or followed standards, there was obviously a good argument that being involved in funding allocation could improve coordination. However, even here the process could inspire competition and diminish trust between agencies, decreasing the ability of the Clusters to support coordination in the long run. ‘We’re all humanitarian agencies and we are all trying to support the community [...] in most instances we have the same donors and we’re competing for resources.’ Common/pooled funding mechanisms in particular were identified as a tension point between large actors (UN agencies, large INGOs) and smaller INGOs/national NGOs. One subnational CC explained, ‘You speak to local NGOs who feel like they are the ones in the field, taking the risk, and reaching out more to the beneficiaries. Then they get second-hand funding. The INGOs have direct access (to funds) more or less is what they think.’ Another CC saw a different balance: ‘Generally, the INGOs get bilateral funding, whereas the NNGOs, to a large extent, rely on the pooled funds.’

An additional set of difficulties was evident where the CLA had significant funding, and was essentially working as the key donor to the sector. Here, again, the potential to receive funding would attract some agencies to the Cluster, while repelling those who had their own funds or did not receive funding. In one of the first interviews conducted for this research, one Cluster member stated frankly, ‘If you’re a (CLA) partner, you go to the Cluster. If you’re not a (CLA) partner, you don’t go.’ Another interviewee explained, ‘When (CLA) is funding those partners, they ensure they’re coming, but some partners are funded outside (CLA) and therefore opt not to attend.’

Where organisations are financially dependent on the CLA, the Cluster can cease to be a venue for cooperation: one evaluation noted that the CLA ‘uses coordination meetings to explain its own positions and decisions to partners, rather than to develop them jointly’ (Steets et al., 2014a: 39). This can lead to a situation where planning is controlled by the CLA, and member agencies are essentially subcontracting – an example of ‘collaborative’ coordination controlled by one powerful organisation. In some extreme circumstances, the inequality of power between CLA and Cluster members can prejudice their neutrality and independence (Steets et al., 2010). It can also decrease the ability of the CC to serve as an ‘honest broker’. As one interviewee explained, ‘If a partner has a problem with the partnership agreement, it’s difficult for them to go to the CC, because the CC is also responsible for the funding agreements.’ Another explained, ‘Sometimes the CC gives you lots of tasks [...] and you have to do it because the (CLA) is your donor.’ The importance of independent CCs is explored further below ( section 3.4.1).



In summary, where the Cluster becomes involved in funding allocation, the impact on the quality of Cluster coordination is mixed. There is obviously great potential for using funding decisions to support projects that are coordinated with one another, rather than disconnected, and potentially overlapping, projects of individual agencies. In addition, the process of making funding decisions can allow agencies and CCs to form a better overall picture of what the agencies are doing, and so build the capacity for future collaboration. On the other hand, funding allocation can lead to competition and can alienate those who do not receive funding and those who have their own funding. In general, it would appear from the interviews conducted for this study that, in order for funding tasks to have a positive (or, at least, to avoid a negative) impact on coordination, there has to be a link between discussions in the Cluster and the actions of the donors, and these discussions have to be well structured and managed. In the course of our interviews, we were told of a variety of ways in which Clusters had structured funding discussions in order to make them more successful. Table 1 presents these approaches.

**TABLE 1: Approaches to mitigate negative impacts of funding in the Cluster**

Challenge	Successful mitigation approaches	Notes
Lack of transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of clear and transparent criteria based on priorities agreed on by wider group</li> <li>• Transparent documentation, process shared with wider group</li> <li>• All Cluster members given some way to participate (i.e. validating decisions made by smaller group)</li> <li>• Two levels of review (initial committee to decide against broader strategic criteria, second committee to investigate technical aspects/quality of proposal)</li> </ul>	In some countries, OCHA provides a scoring card for pooled funding decision-making agreed at the inter-sector level
Conflict of interest – those applying for funding have role in decision <i>OR</i> CLA is applying for funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review group set-up, applicants cannot be members</li> <li>• Review group set-up, applicants can be members but sit out for decision on their organisation's proposal</li> <li>• Rotate membership for each funding round</li> <li>• Transparency (see above)</li> <li>• CC not involved in decision, particularly where they work for CLA</li> <li>• CLA does not apply for pooled funding</li> </ul>	One evaluation suggested the review group should sit outside of the Clusters (Jespersen, 2009)

Challenge (cont')	Successful mitigation approach	Notes
Process is dominated by a few powerful actors (especially UN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make group deliberately representative of each constituency (e.g. 2 UN organisations, 2 INGOs, 2 NNGOs)</li> <li>• Ask wider membership to vote on review group's membership</li> <li>• Rotate membership</li> <li>• Ensure NGOs are not just token representatives, but included in all decision-making</li> </ul>	In some countries, some pooled funds are allocated only to UN agencies (decision made outside of Cluster)
Organisations only engage in funding process, then leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage with donors to use Cluster engagement as criteria for funding, fund priorities</li> <li>• Clearly articulate other benefits of Cluster, particularly for non-traditional actors</li> </ul>	
Funding is limited and not all quality projects can be approved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus is used and, where not possible, voting</li> <li>• Transparency and use of clear criteria</li> <li>• Fostering of health debate</li> </ul>	
There is insufficient time for all members to be involved in these decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting up a specific committee to review proposals together, rather than waiting for comments to come in individually</li> <li>• Set up committee well in advance of funding process</li> <li>• Alternate members appointed to step in if key members not available</li> </ul>	HCTs/OCHA should allow time for this when setting funding cycle deadlines
Proposals may duplicate one another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposals are screened for location and activity at the proposal stage. If two proposals are for the same activity in the same area, or if a project overlaps with something that already exists, the organisations are contacted and the potential duplication is dealt with before any funding is approved</li> </ul>	Interviewees shared several examples of where this was not done appropriately – it should be given priority
This function of the Cluster sours relationships, feeds competition and animosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cluster selects criteria for inclusion, but asks outside body to choose projects based on this criteria</li> <li>• Maintenance of transparency, reducing conflict of interest</li> <li>• Process for Cluster members to air grievances</li> </ul>	

Perhaps the most common theme is that of transparency. The funding allocation processes with the most support from Cluster members appear to be ones that are representative of the Cluster membership and that allow the entire membership to have a say. As one CC explained, 'If I started to appoint people or organisations just because they're normally good with me, that doesn't represent the whole group.' This is a particular risk that CLAs must be cognisant of. 'On one hand, going through a peer review team and broader participation can bring a lot of trust to the lead agency in the process. At the same time, if they don't recognise that they're not just the boss, that this is also about their relationship with other actors, then a lot of good faith can be undermined.'

### 3.2 Factors related to the timing of Cluster activities and deployment

- The study did not find any particular time in the response cycle where coordination is more easily achieved; the level of coordination goes up and down over time in no specific pattern.
- The factors that support higher levels of coordination will vary; in the early stages, the urgency of the task and lack of existing plans may make coordination easier to achieve; over time, relationships between Cluster members become more important in helping them work together.
- Evidence does not suggest a short-term, time-limited approach to Cluster activation is best: there appear to be good arguments for both short-term Clusters and longer-term, 'standing' bodies, and the choice is often dependent on the context.

A second area we considered with relation to the effectiveness of Cluster coordination activities was the timing of the Cluster's work: whether Cluster coordination was easier, or more likely, at a particular phase of the response. We wanted to investigate in particular whether there was a certain time in the response where coordination in the Cluster was most easily achieved, and also to see whether short-term ('crisis-specific') or longer-term ('standing') Clusters were more effective at coordination. In looking at the issue of timing, we were particularly influenced by the Cluster Reference Module (IASC, 2012), which is very clear that Clusters should be a temporary solution and activated and 'stood

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... in the early stages of the response, coordination is driven by factors related to the nature of the task the Cluster is undertaking, whereas in the later stages it is more likely to be driven by the relationships between Cluster members.

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down’ as needed. This guidance appeared to run contrary to our expectations for effective coordination: on the basis of the literature review (e.g. Currión, 2010; Global Education Cluster, 2010; Goyder and James, 2002; Murtaza and Leader, 2011), we expected Coordination would become more effective the longer the coordination body was in place.

In general, the level of coordination in Clusters did appear to change considerably over time, but not according to any clearly discernible pattern: rather, it was constantly shifting up and down. Similarly, it was not possible to say on the basis of the information collected for this research whether coordination worked better in the early stages of a response, or whether it was more effective when the Clusters had been established for a longer period of time. The results of the questionnaire showed no strong correlation between length of time that Cluster members had been involved and the ability of the Cluster to coordinate. Interviews did not reveal a clear pattern of coordination being more effective early or late in the response. However, the interviews did suggest the drivers of coordination do change predictably over time. In general, in the early stages of the response, coordination is driven by factors related to the nature of the task the Cluster is undertaking, whereas in the later stages it is more likely to be driven by the relationships between Cluster members.

In the initial stages of rapid onset emergency, the newness and difficulty of the situation make it easier for organisations to coordinate. Plans are not yet developed, needs are great and there is limited information to work with. At this stage, the benefits of coordination often outweigh the costs. As one interviewee explained, in the first few days, ‘It’s about quick strategy, quick numbers, what do we need, resource mobilisation [...] You don’t have to go and find people to come to Cluster meetings [...] Everybody wants information, everybody needs information and we have that information.’ This dynamic also occurs when there is an acute change in the response: ‘Coordination [...] increases slightly during the time where there is an acute crisis where all the partners get together.’ After the first three months, when organisations have their own plans and funding contracts in place, these factors are no match for the pull of organisational mandate. As an interviewee explained, ‘Coordination works best in the first three months [...] After that primary emergency, if organisations stay and work you will see they have their own mandate.’

In later stages of the response, factors such as the relationships and bonds between actors, trust and transparency and focus on a common objective were more commonly identified as enablers of coordination. Some people felt that, although there may be a great deal of energy and interest in the initial outset of a response, coordination became stronger the longer the response continued.

One Cluster member explained,

*'At the beginning, it can be challenging. You don't really don't know the other organisations, you don't know how they're going to behave. It becomes almost like a Nash Equilibrium<sup>18</sup> [...] where if you're too soft, then maybe you're going to be taken advantage of [...] That trust the later you are in the project cycle, just because you've been with other organisations for longer and you've been working alongside them for longer, it makes it easier to keep going.'*

Given the differences between initial response and later programming, some of the people we interviewed felt Clusters should only be active in the initial phases of an emergency response. As one explained, 'After three months [...] I think Clusters should step back and let local structures manage it [...] The Cluster should be focused on the primary emergency [...] if you're going to remain for another nine months, when are we going to start with recovery? As much as possible we have to try and get people back to normal.' As noted above, this line of thinking is line with IASC's guidance on Cluster coordination, which states that, 'Clusters are supposed to be a temporary coordination solution and the aim should be to either resume or establish national, development-oriented coordination mechanisms as soon as the humanitarian emergency phase ends' (IASC, 2012: 6).

However, the guidance also suggests deactivation can be difficult, and the timing and nature of deactivation will differ from one place to another. As one interviewee put it, 'It's not a black and white issue, that Clusters should do their job and go away.'

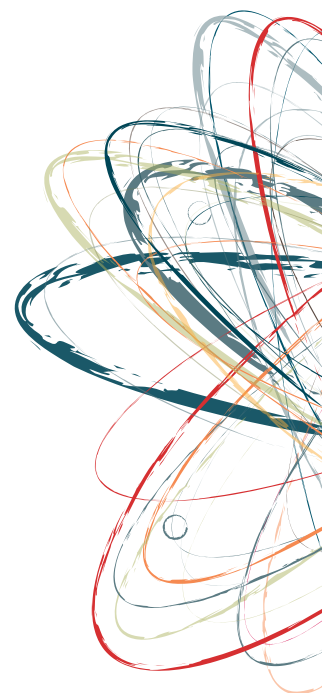
There are certainly operational advantages in activating Clusters only for short periods of time. Short-term, responsive structures, which are not a part of the existing architecture, may be less likely to focus on the needs of external stakeholders (such as UN New York), and so may better meet the immediate needs of their members. They may also be more effective in taking an objective view of the situation, without being too swayed by existing positions and interests. On the other hand, short-term Clusters will always be playing 'catch up': activated only after an emergency occurs, they will tend not to be involved in preparedness activities and will take longer to respond to a crisis (Majewski et al., 2012; Maxwell and Parker, 2012; Nesen and Guzha, 2009). Additionally, if Clusters are activated only for short periods, they will miss out on the coordination advantages of trust, which is generally built up over time (for more on the development of trust, see below, section 3.8) Our interviews suggested,

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Our interviews suggested, more often than not, that Clusters that had time to build relationships were more successful than those that came together suddenly...

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18 Nash Equilibrium is a concept in game theory; for more detail see [www.columbia.edu/~rs328/NashEquilibrium.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/~rs328/NashEquilibrium.pdf)

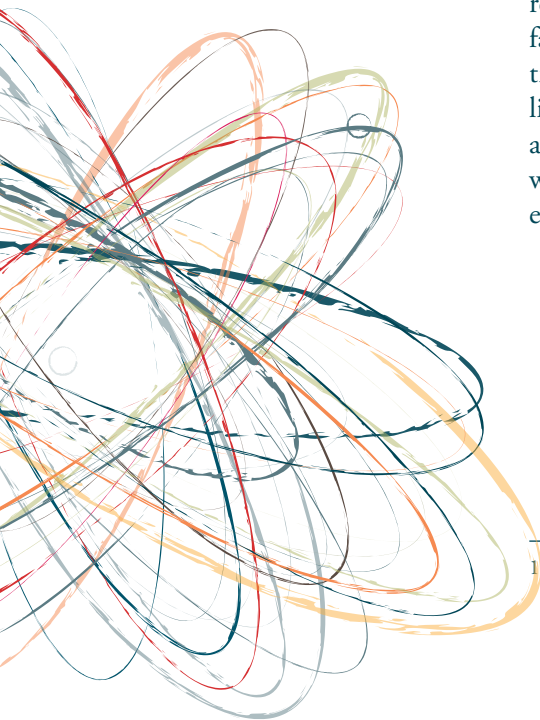


more often than not, that Clusters that had time to build relationships were more successful than those that came together suddenly: as one interviewee noted of pre-existing relationships, ‘That gives you a huge advantage [...] when you want to do something in an emergency situation, because you have an instant rapport.’<sup>19</sup>

Beyond these immediate, practical arguments on the relative strengths of short- and longer-term ‘standing’ Clusters, there is also the difficult issue of the nature of emergencies themselves. The short-term Cluster model suggests the emergency has a clearly demarcated beginning, middle and end. The reality, of course, in many recurring or protracted crises is there is often no clear line between ‘emergency’ coordination and the coordination required for longer-term development activity. As one CC explained, in protracted crises it is necessary to decide what coordination counts as humanitarian and what is just for normal development programming. ‘When you have these chronic, protracted emergencies that come that are cyclical, where do you draw the line [...] and say this is not programme coordination, this is Cluster coordination for emergencies? It’s a very thin line and that has not been clearly defined.’ Another noted that, ‘In terms of a protracted crisis [...] there is a rationale [that] where the conflict has been resolved and things are functioning, there may no longer be a need for an international response [...] I can’t think of too many situations where that happens.’

Overall, then, there was little evidence to suggest that any given time in the response cycle was more appropriate for Cluster coordination: rather, the factors that make Clusters effective in coordination will tend to change over time. Nor did we find overwhelming evidence to support a short-term, time-limited approach to Cluster activation: rather, there appeared to be compelling arguments both for and against this approach, and the majority of interviewees who commented on the matter felt longer-term Clusters tended to be more effective.

<sup>19</sup> Although note that the benefits of longevity can be limited in a rapid onset emergency, where ‘there [are] just too many new international staff who [don’t] know each other, who [don’t] know ways of working that have existed in the Cluster [...] that also contribute[s] to some disagreements’.



### 3.3 Factors related to membership and composition of the Cluster

- The size of the Cluster does not seem to determine the degree of coordination achieved.
- However, Cluster members that share a similar organisational culture and overall common goal and have similar ways of doing things are more able to coordinate effectively.
- Recognising the value of coordination throughout each organisation is also important. This takes more than a high-level commitment; coordination needs to be institutionalised at all levels of the organisation.
- Overall, Clusters are failing to achieve significant NNGO participation.

#### 3.3.1 How many

Based on the literature review conducted for ALNAP's 'Who's in Charge Here?' (Knox Clarke, 2013a), we hypothesised that, in Clusters, smaller groups will achieve higher levels of coordination (see, e.g., Alexander, 2009; Bhattacharjee et al., 2011; Currion, 2010). However, our research did not provide strong evidence to support or refute this hypothesis.

In our questionnaire, we asked respondents to indicate how many organisations participated in their Cluster. We then compared the number of organisations in a Cluster with responses they gave about Cluster effectiveness at achieving joint tasks.<sup>20</sup> The data analysis shows individuals from Clusters with a larger number of member organisations ranked their Cluster as more effective at a statistically significant level.<sup>21</sup> In other words, these results find that larger Clusters are more effective at creating a vision, strategy and common plans for a response than Clusters with fewer members. This result would appear to refute our hypothesis. We also looked at the size of the Cluster in relation to how well member organisations were able to align their own priorities with the Cluster strategy,<sup>22</sup> but here we found no evidence of a correlation.<sup>23</sup>

20 Q6 'How effective is the Cluster in creating a common vision for your sector's humanitarian operations in the country?', Q7 'How effective is the Cluster in identifying common priorities and creating a strategy in order to achieve this vision?' and Q8 'How effective is the Cluster in supporting or implementing common plans for sectoral operation in the country?'

21 In comparing size of the Cluster with responses about the effectiveness of coordination in the Cluster, a nonparametric test linked to the Wilcoxon rank-sum test showed a p-value of less than 0.001 for responses to Q8 as well as Q6 and Q7 combined.

22 Q12.

23 Using a nonparametric test for trend (an extension to the Wilcoxon rank-sum test), the results gave a p-value of 0.411, suggesting that there is not sufficient evidence to support the existence of any trend.



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The diversity of responses in interviews and questionnaire results suggests Cluster size is not consistently important.

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Some of our interviews further supported this response. One member of a particularly large Cluster explained larger Clusters helped smaller organisations feel confident in speaking up, whereas large organisations might dominate a smaller group. Another felt large groups meant a wider variety of topics could be discussed, as the Cluster contains several organisations interested in specific topics that are able to assemble in technical subgroups such as TWiGs.

Later in our questionnaire, we asked respondents to rank eight factors to indicate which were the most important for the Cluster in creating a vision and developing and implementing a strategy.<sup>24</sup> In this question, respondents consistently ranked ‘size and composition of the Cluster’ as the least important statement,<sup>25</sup> suggesting they did not perceive the size of the Cluster to be a significant factor.

In our interviews, however, many people felt size was an important issue – that large groups were harder to work with while smaller groups were more effective. So the interview evidence (as well as the literature quoted above) appears to support our hypothesis. As interviewees explained, ‘the bigger the group, the harder it is to reach that level of consensus easily’. Another noted, ‘We had 50 people attending. It was a bit difficult to have similar opinions and there were a lot of arguments between different agencies.’

However, in several cases the examples people gave in interview were based on assumptions and not actual experience. Interviewees who supported smaller Clusters often came from smaller Clusters, and assumed it would be more difficult to work with more members. As explained to us, ‘There are so few actors that it’s less of a challenge than if we had 50 actors around the table.’ And, ‘Eight to 10 allows everybody to have a say [...] having 40 participants in a Cluster meeting wouldn’t be constructive.’

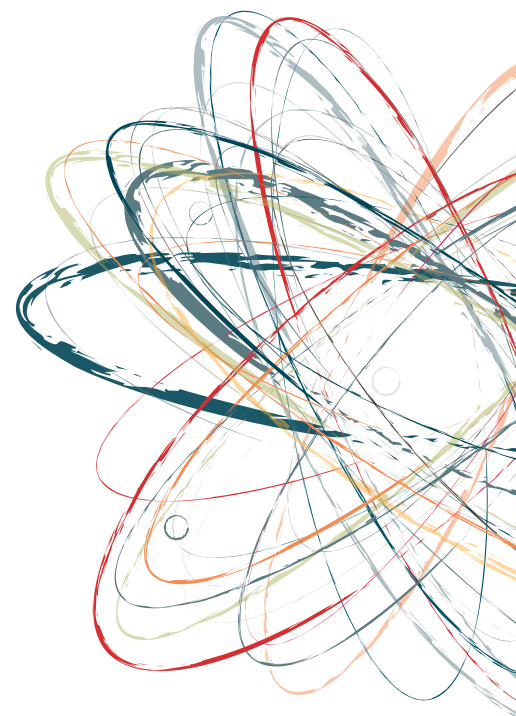
There were also those in interviews who felt the size of the Cluster was not a factor in effective coordination. ‘It depends on the way it is led [...] it doesn’t have to be a very small group in order to be well managed.’ On whether it was easier to take a decision with a smaller group of people, one CC noted, ‘It’s not a matter of it being easy to reach a decision [...] there are some issues that are not necessary to take to them [...] it really depends case by case on the decision at hand.’

<sup>24</sup> Q33.

<sup>25</sup> Of the responses to this question, 48% rated this statement as the least important factor (eighth on a ranking from one to eight). 32% rated it in fifth, sixth or seventh place. Only 8% rated it as the most important factor. No other ranking for any of the eight factors along any of the eight ranking places scored higher than 19% of results in that category, making the eighth place ranking for this statement a striking feature of the data from this question.

The diversity of responses in interviews and questionnaire results suggests Cluster size is not consistently important (although many people – including many who do not have experience of very large Clusters – believe it is).<sup>26</sup>

One potential reason people do not perceive size of the Cluster to be an important factor is that, if size is an issue, the Cluster adapts. Where the Cluster is too large for effective decision-making, Clusters establish smaller subgroups to focus on decision-making around specific issues. One Cluster member explained, ‘The Cluster has quite a high attendance [...] I think that’s why these different sub-Working Groups have come up because the room for discussion in the Cluster is quite limited [...] It’s more realistic to have a discussion with 10-15 people around the table compared with 50 people.’ For some time, CCs have been establishing decision-making groups (‘baby Clusters’, or SAGs) (Grunewald et al., 2010). This approach has been formalised in the latest IASC Cluster guidance, and our research supported this approach. As one interviewee explained, the SAG is able to ‘do a lot of that soul searching and thinking and discussion [...] then get it out to the wider group [that has] [...] to endorse it’. Another Cluster member advised that large Clusters could be effective as long as ‘there is a division of labour, there are roles and responsibilities [...] and there is also an added value by attending a meeting’. The role of SAGs is discussed further below in the section on decision-making (section 3.7.2).



### 3.3.2 Similarities between member organisations

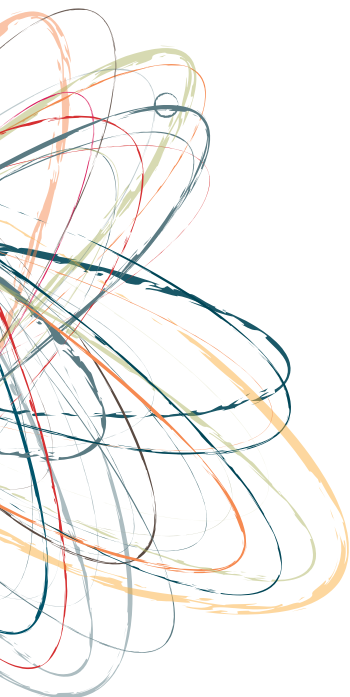
In reviewing the literature on Cluster coordination, we developed the hypothesis that similar organisations will be able to coordinate activities more effectively.

Overall, our research appears to support the acceptance of our hypothesis in this area. To begin to understand why, we must first understand what we mean by ‘similar organisations’.

Initially, our research focused on similarities and relationships at an organisational level. We found that Clusters were made up of organisations that:

- Embrace a commitment to coordination at all levels;
- Have a similar organisational culture;
- Have similar ways of doing things;
- Share an overall common goal/belief in a ‘common good’.

<sup>26</sup> It would be interesting to know to what degree this belief has been conditioned by the experience of Haiti, where extremely large groups were common and CCs did not always have experience in creating decision-making subgroups. In this case, the size of the Cluster does appear to have negatively impacted coordination (Bhattacharjee and Lossio, 2011; Bhattacharjee et al., 2011; Grunewald et al., 2010).



Are more successful in achieving coordinated outcomes than Clusters made up of highly differentiated organisations that each have their own approach and are working towards perhaps similar/related goals but in their own way. These aspects are not so much about how organisations work together in the Cluster and more about the attitudes brought into the Cluster to begin with.

Although many organisations may list coordination in their own strategic vision or commitments, it takes much more for an organisation to truly embrace coordination as a core value. This requires that coordination be institutionalised within an organisation. ‘It’s really about culture, behaviour and management approach,’ explained one interviewee, ‘Having that coherency from your value statement through to the project delivery at a field level.’ Organisations that are able to get across the importance of this commitment to all staff are more effective contributors to coordination efforts in Clusters because of the value given to coordination. Where obstacles arise, making compromises in order for coordination to happen is easier in an environment where acting in a coordinated way is valued just as much as the organisation’s other goals or ways of working. Many interviewees explained their organisations had a ‘policy to participate in all Clusters relevant to our projects’. However, despite this commitment, one interviewee explained that, ‘The coordination system in place, for us right now, is like a secondary or third level of worry.’ In other words, although the organisation values coordination, it values other things more. In this particular case, the Cluster is finding it difficult to get organisations to actively participate and to take decisions on a common standard, highlighting the problems that occur when a commitment to coordination is not given sufficient importance at all levels of an organisation’s response.

Often, organisations that find coordinating in a Cluster easier appear, from the interviews, to share a common organisational culture. Coordination therefore seems to require less loss of autonomy for the organisation. As one interviewee explained, ‘People come from a similar background. There’s a sort of camaraderie that enables organisations to work more closely together.’ One aspect of this includes how open organisations are to sharing information with one another. If, culturally, organisations are transparent and believe in information exchange, they will find it easier to work with others that share their values. When they encounter organisations that prefer to guard their information closely, they view these organisations with suspicion and frustration. Coordination efforts are also helped when organisations have similar ways of doing things – similar processes and procedures. This issue is examined more closely below (section 3.7).

Finally, perhaps the most commonly noted aspect in our interviews was that of participating organisations having shared aims or senses of purpose. While establishing a common/shared goal for the response is one of the key functions of most Clusters (and so might be seen as a consequence, rather than a cause, of effective Cluster coordination), interviewees often mentioned the importance for coordination of participating organisations starting off with similar aims from the moment they entered the Cluster. This sense of common purpose was often described as recognition of the importance of making a difference for affected people or having the most effective sector operations possible in order to address urgent need.

The feeling that everyone wanted to work towards the same aims led to a feeling of cooperative endeavour, and this appeared to influence how likely organisations were to trust one another, to try and overcome obstacles, to listen to someone else's argument – all of which make coordination more possible.

In the words of our interviewees, 'We are all sharing the same vision of supporting the vulnerable community. We are all trying to ensure that we see a positive difference. The same vision enables us to start talking.' Clusters are effective when members 'are focusing on one aim', 'there's a will to work together', 'the needs of the community become the centre', when members are 'ready and anxious to cooperate'. 'Whether you're from the government, NGOs, civil society, INGOs, we share the same vision and mandate [...] the reason why we converge ourselves, the reason why we're collaborating is because we're here to serve the community [...] the Cluster provides that environment.'

In one example shared, a Cluster was significantly underfunded. Focusing on the 'common good', Cluster members were able to 'shift and agree to focus on those activities that really are life-saving'. As the Cluster member explained, 'We're in the field, we know the need and we want to respond to that need. If there are limited resources, I don't think it's just getting the biggest pot for your organisation. I do think there is a desire to meet that need.'

All of which would tend to imply that heterogeneous Clusters – made up of very different organisations, with different cultures, procedures and goals – are less likely to be able to reach higher levels of coordination. This is unfortunate for a variety of reasons – not least because one would expect heterogeneous Clusters to have access to more information, and so to be able to create a better picture of the situation and to identify more effective responses. Happily, however, it would appear that heterogeneity can become an asset, if it is consciously addressed. One CC explained to us how he actively tried to foster alignment where it didn't come naturally by having one-on-one discussions



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with each member beforehand. As he explained, ‘Discussing with them before and trying to get their viewpoint, trying to flush out a few things’ allows organisations to see the bigger picture and find commonalities, which can in turn help to address differences so organisations can ‘move forward’ together. In another context where there is a lot of animosity between different actors in the sector, the CC has tried to act as a bridge between different groups of actors, highlighting places where organisations share a common purpose in order to keep organisations motivated to stay involved in the group and find value, even where there are significant conflicts between member organisations.

### 3.3.3 The inclusion of national NGOs in Clusters

The challenge of ensuring diverse representation in the Clusters is exemplified by a widespread (though not universal) failure to attract national NGOs to the Clusters and include them in Cluster discussions and decision-making. Where both organisational similarities and close personal relationships (more in sections 3.3.2 and 3.8) support close coordination, what is the likelihood that national NGOs will be included?

A number of reviews and evaluations suggest both that the active participation of NNGOs in Clusters has the potential to make the Clusters more effective and that NNGOs are often not participating (Grunewald et al., 2010; Hedlund, 2011; Majewski et al., 2012; Maxwell and Parker, 2012; Sida et al., 2012; Steets et al., 2010).

Interestingly, the recent evaluation of the Food Security Cluster (Steets et al., 2014b) attempted to establish whether there was a correlation between the inclusion of NNGOs in the Cluster and the effectiveness of the Cluster. When compared with questions about Cluster vision and strategy, the results show a statistically relevant correlation, suggesting inclusion of these groups is important to getting these things done well. However, when compared with a question about overall Cluster effectiveness, the results did not show a correlation between adequate representation of these actors and an effective Cluster.<sup>27</sup> This may reflect the fact that many Clusters do not effectively integrate national and local NGOs and yet are able to continue their work (albeit, potentially, at a lower level of quality): sharing information, and preventing gaps and overlaps, may be easier with a smaller, more homogenous group of actors.

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The challenge of ensuring diverse representation in the Clusters is exemplified by a widespread (though not universal) failure to attract national NGOs to the Clusters and include them in Cluster discussions and decision-making.

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<sup>27</sup> The statement, ‘National and local organisations are adequately represented in the coordination mechanism’ was compared to the question, ‘Overall, how effective is the existing food security coordination mechanism?’ using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.2886 indicating a moderate positive correlation. Compared with the statement, ‘Coordination has led to organisations creating a common strategy and common priorities for the food security response’, there was a coefficient of 0.4632 and then 0.4224 for the statement, ‘Coordination has led to a common vision for addressing food security in humanitarian operations.’

The challenges of involving national NGOs in the Cluster include:

- Lack of capacity (and particularly time);
- Exclusionary factors such as language and the use of technology;
- Balancing inclusiveness with effectiveness;
- NNGOs not valuing Cluster participation.

One of the major challenges comes down to capacity. As one interviewee explained, ‘The smaller organisations, you know, their resource levels really exclude them from participating in the meetings.’ Many Clusters faced this challenge, particularly where meetings involved travel, or where local organisations were involved in more than one sector – meaning more than one Cluster. The fact that many Cluster meetings occurred in capital cities, or regional centres, some distance from NNGO offices, also made participation extremely time consuming. One way of decreasing the meeting load on individual NGOs may be to encourage the formation and participation of NNGO networks, which can articulate with the Clusters (Scriven, 2013).

A second, consistent challenge for national actors centred around the language and technologies used in the Clusters. The problem was not only related to the use of English as a working language in many places (Bhattacharjee and Lossio, 2011; Grunewald et al., 2010) but also to the use of a very specific, humanitarian variant of English: ‘A number of these agencies have never operated in this (humanitarian) world. They’re very grassroots and then you’re all sitting there ramming out acronyms left, right and centre. Also there’s a big reliance on being able to use computers. We generally share all our information online [...] that probably excludes a number of agencies.’ Given the importance of technical solutions for information management, it is probably not realistic to expect Clusters not to use these approaches in order to ensure maximum engagement by NNGOs: rather, the emphasis should be on ensuring these organisations – or, potentially, the networks or bodies that represent them – have access to the relevant hardware and software, and training, in their use.

Of course, the concept of ‘national NGO’ covers a very broad range of organisational types – so much so that it is legitimate to ask whether it is a meaningful category at all (Slim, 2012) (Aneja, 2014) While some national NGOs will have a significant impact on the success of emergency response, as a consequence of their size, particular skills or specific knowledge, others will not: many will be fairly small, local organisations with limited resources. The challenge for the Clusters here is to balance the desire for inclusion with the desire for effectiveness ( Achakzai et al., 2011; Culbert, 2011). To a degree, this relies on the Clusters being clear and explicit on their own priorities: as we noted above, the expectations on the Cluster are probably too great, and each Cluster will need to prioritise activities – how important is building the capacity



The fact that many Cluster meetings occurred in capital cities, or regional centres, some distance from NNGO offices, also made participation extremely time consuming.





“ While some national NGOs will have a significant impact on the success of emergency response, as a consequence of their size, particular skills or specific knowledge, others will not: many will be fairly small, local organisations with limited resources. “

of smaller NNGOs? It also relies on Clusters being able to establish criteria for inclusion that recognise the importance of different types of contribution to an effective response. Finally, it may be helpful to establish separate criteria for different ‘levels’ of participation – for inclusion in larger information-sharing, and in smaller decision-making, groups.

National NGOs may also not be aware of Cluster activities, and of the potential of the Clusters to support their activities.<sup>28</sup> One interviewee explained, ‘Engaging with national NGOs isn’t always easy or straightforward [...] national NGOs often have a hard time understanding how to engage, how to find information.’ Or they may be sceptical of the value that Clusters might bring (Maxwell and Parker, 2012)

There were several examples shared with us in interviews where NNGOs appeared to attend Clusters meetings only because their funding arrangements required it. When any organisation is attending the Cluster as a tick-box requirement, this is not effective engagement and is not really any different than not attending at all. However, in some cases attendance can be a first step that allows organisations unfamiliar with the Clusters to see how they might add value for them. National NGOs that ‘are part of this Working Group, I think with time they are more and more participative in this sense. So once you get new actors in the group and the group is meeting and sharing information and they see the added value of sharing this information, the people continue to come and work together.’

Some examples were found in the literature of how Clusters had effectively engaged national actors. In Pakistan, a meeting agenda was shared in advance with Cluster members and the group aimed for consensus decision-making, allowing all partners to be consulted before decisions were taken. Despite these concerted efforts to be inclusive, an evaluation found that, ‘In the end, it was mostly the INGOs and UN agencies that took over the greater part of work.’ This experience highlights an important reminder – that even best efforts to be inclusive cannot take away the difference in capacity and resources between international and national actors. However, it also highlights an important principle – that even if national/local actors cannot be very active in a Cluster, best practice is to keep them informed and involved to the highest degree possible.

<sup>28</sup> The work of the Building a Better Response project (<http://www.buildingabetterresponse.org/>) attempts to address this by improving knowledge of international humanitarian coordination structures, as well as how NGOs can engage.



### 3.3.4 Who represents their organisation?

A final aspect to the composition of the Cluster involves examining who is attending Cluster meetings on behalf of member organisations. What are their job roles, what level of experience do they have, and what authority to make decisions on behalf of their organisation?

In the questionnaire, we asked respondents to indicate to what degree ‘People representing their organisations at Cluster meetings have the authority to make relevant decisions and commit resources without consulting higher authority.’ On average, this statement received fairly low scores<sup>29</sup> and did not appear to show strong correlation with the effectiveness of Cluster joint activities.<sup>30</sup> In other words, this factor was not indicated as a prerequisite of effective Cluster coordination. However, the literature review identified arguments (see, e.g., Alexander, 2009; Goyder and James, 2002) that, in order for a Cluster to work as a decision-making forum, members need to send decision-makers to meetings.

Unfortunately, the questionnaire does not tell us who attends Cluster meetings and what impact this has. For this, we turn to our interview results. Many – though, importantly, not all – see the Clusters as the place for technical staff. As one Cluster member explained, those who attend are ‘mostly technical staff, so they’re not at the level that can make commitments. They know of their agency mandates [...] what initiatives their agencies are likely to support, but in terms of committing agency resources [...] they still have to (consult) their principals.’ This widespread practice of having more technical or programme staff attend Clusters, rather than those in positions of authority, is one explanation for the low importance this area received in the questionnaire. But it might also explain the difficulties Clusters can have in achieving higher levels of coordination: ‘You have technical people in your Cluster, so you don’t usually have decision makers [...] So they come to a meeting [...] and you agree on things. They go back to the office and the country director or programme manager says, “No we’re not going to do this.”’ At the same time, interviewees pointed out that many higher-level decision-makers did not fully understand the technical issues discussed in Cluster meetings.

The surprisingly simple practice of issuing an agenda in advance of the meeting, which outlines any key decisions that need to be made, was highlighted as a best practice in a number of Clusters. In these examples, member organisations choose either to send a more senior member to that Cluster meeting or arm



You have technical people in your Cluster, so you don’t usually have decision makers. They go back to the office and the country director says, “No we’re not going to do this.”



29 An average of 3.39 of a possible 6.

30 Using a Spearman’s rho analysis, this factor received correlation coefficients of 0.26 when compared with Q6, 0.28 when compared with Q7, 0.33 when compared to Q8 and 0.37 when compared with Q12. This result indicates, at best, fairly weak positive correlation between the effectiveness questions and this factor. This was the lowest result of all the questions examined via Spearman’s rho.

the usual technical representative with the organisation's position and limits, so they can accurately participate in decision-making (also see section 3.7.2). As one CC explained, 'If there are decisions being taken, you need to ensure that Cluster partners are aware of what's ahead of them so they send someone who is adequately empowered to make those decisions.' This means Clusters avoid the challenges of postponing decisions from meeting to meeting. In some Clusters that use a SAG for key decision-making, a more senior representative will attend the SAG, while more technical programme staff attend the general Cluster meetings. One Cluster member made the suggestion of a higher-level meeting every six months for country directors, focusing on 'commitment towards coordination' between member organisations. As she explained, 'From time to time, it's good to bring the high-ranking managers and country directors to the table to emphasise the role of coordination.'

### 3.4 Factors related to leadership and structure of the Cluster

#### 3.4.1 The importance of independent Cluster coordination

- The role of the CLA is important, and the Clusters have benefited from the resources CLAs have provided.
- However, it is important for Clusters to maintain independence from the CLA, and for the CLA's interests not to influence decision-making in the Cluster.
- A full-time, dedicated independent CC is important to maintain these divisions.
- The role of 'Provider of Last Resort' appears to be more of an ideal than a practical commitment.

At a country level, accountability for establishing and supporting the Clusters lies with the country representatives of the CLAs. These are organisations that have taken on the responsibility, at a global level, to lead specific Clusters. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), for example, is the CLA for nutrition, so the UNICEF country representative would (in most cases) be responsible for the establishment of the nutrition Cluster in any given country, and would represent the nutrition Cluster on the HCT, as well as representing UNICEF (Humanitarianresponse.info, n.d.). A UNICEF staff member (or a consultant

hired by UNICEF) would also serve as the CC, on either a full-time or a part-time basis. In the latter case, they would ‘double hat’ the CC role with other agency work.

The role of CLA is an important one when it comes to coordination in the Cluster. As the Cluster Approach 2 evaluation found, a clearly designated and accepted CLA is fundamental (Steets et al., 2010). The CLA is accountable for the Cluster, and will generally contribute very significant amounts of funding. As a result, they have a legitimate interest in how the Clusters work. However, where CLAs show too much interest in a Cluster, or are seen to be ‘dominating’ a Cluster, they can alienate other participants.

Within this research, we hypothesised that Clusters would successfully achieve higher levels of coordination where the CLA supported the Cluster, without becoming involved in internal dynamics. The hypothesis was that a Cluster that operates independently from, though with the strong support of, the CLA will achieve higher levels of coordination. Overall, we found the research strongly supported this hypothesis.

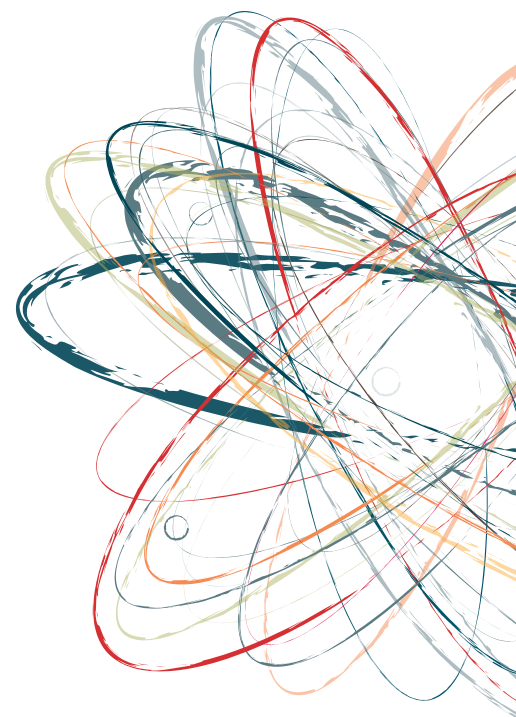
In general, the literature consulted agreed the CC role should be ‘agency-neutral and impartial with regard to the Cluster’ (Maxwell and Parker, 2012: 10; see also Jespersen, 2009; Majewski et al., 2012). The results of the questionnaire used in the evaluation of the Food Security Cluster further confirm the importance of a CLA’s ability to separate its own interests from those of the Cluster when it comes to effective coordination.<sup>31</sup> The great majority of interviewees agreed. Where the line between Cluster interests and those of the CLA were unclear, the CC could be seen as simultaneously ‘coordinator and [...] donor and [...] competition’. This increased the potential for conflict within the Cluster, and decreased the ability of the coordinator to work as a ‘trusted broker’: ‘It’s very difficult to solve any conflicts.’ At the same time, where the CLA was perceived to have too much power over the Cluster, or to use the Cluster to further its own organisational interests, other agencies were less likely to engage actively with the Cluster, and particularly to engage actively in any way that would mean giving up autonomy. Many CCS spoke of the central importance of remaining impartial and not becoming the mouthpiece of the CLA.

<sup>31</sup> The question, ‘Lead agencies distinguish between their own and the coordination mechanism’s interests’ was compared with the question, ‘Overall, how effective is the existing food security coordination mechanism?’ using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.4580 indicating a moderate positive correlation. The question was also compared with two similar questions about vision, strategy and prioritisation and results were statistically similar.

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The role of CLA is an important one when it comes to coordination in the Cluster.

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Nor did a ‘blurred line’ between Cluster and CLA necessarily benefit the CLA. In interviews, CCs explained that their agencies ‘begrudge the fact that they’re the Cluster Lead Agency and they have to fund the CC’ and ‘resent [...] time spent on Cluster coordination’.

However, while it may be better for the CLA and for the Cluster, maintaining a clear separation between the two entities while simultaneously providing support can be extremely difficult. Cluster members will, on occasion, call for the CLA to become more engaged in the Cluster’s business: in some interviews, Cluster members expressed frustration as they felt the CLA should be playing more of an outspoken advocacy role for the sector: ‘We’re often reminded that (CLA) is the global lead of the (Cluster), but it doesn’t feel like they’re using that institutional influence in a way, or as effectively as they could be.’ And members will often tend to believe the CC is biased towards the CLA’s interests where no bias exists (Majewski et al., 2012).

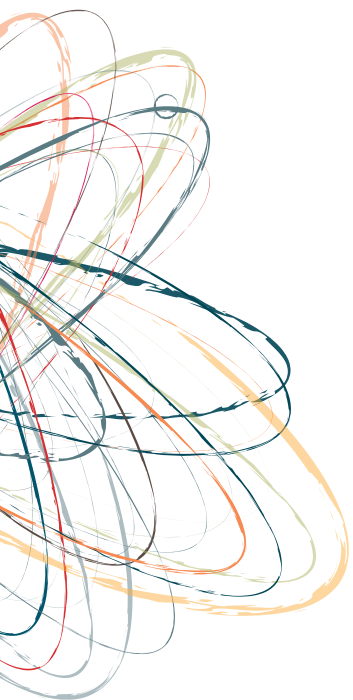
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Many CCs spoke of the central importance of remaining impartial and not becoming the mouthpiece of the CLA.

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One clear way of separating the Cluster from the CLA is to ensure the Cluster has a full-time coordinator who does not participate in any CLA work. Many interviewees agreed with the CC who told us, ‘I think that double hatting is negative and it should be avoided at any cost.’ Some CCs who were also working on CLA tasks felt it was hard to be impartial: ‘To be frank, sometimes I think there are expectations from (CLA) in relation to the Cluster where it’s perceived that I will not be neutral.’ On the other hand, most ‘single-hatted’ Cluster CCs agreed, ‘As a dedicated CC, things are really clear because I’m not involved in any agency-specific activities.’ However, even with a ‘single-hatted’ CC there remains a risk of the CLA maintaining undue influence if the CC’s line manager in the CLA exerts pressure on the CC.

It may not always be possible to fund a full-time coordinator; in some cases it may not be desirable, as the cost of more independence is loss of leverage with the CLA. There are, however, other ways of strengthening the distinction between the CLA and the Cluster. Two particularly important approaches, interviewees said, are to make funding for the Cluster separate from funding for other CLA activities and to ensure CLA staff are present at Cluster meetings to state the CLA position (rather than expecting the CC to represent the CLA). Another approach is co-leadership of a Cluster. In this research, we spoke to only a handful of Clusters where leadership is co-led, so we address this issue only briefly (section 3.5.2). More detailed considerations of Cluster co-leadership can be found in Luff (2015) and NRC (2014).



## Provider of Last Resort?

One key responsibility outlined in guidance for the CLAs is that of ‘Provider of Last Resort’. As explained by IASC’s ‘Operational Guidance on the Concept of “Provider of Last Resort”’ (2008), ‘Where there are critical gaps in humanitarian response, it is the responsibility of Cluster leads to call on all relevant humanitarian partners to address these. If this fails, then depending on the urgency, the CLA as “provider of last resort” may need to commit itself to filling the gap.’

In theory, the concept of Provider of Last Resort is a powerful way of supporting coordination: it serves as an insurance policy should coordinated activities fail and so might – arguably – convince agencies to bring information and concerns to the Cluster.

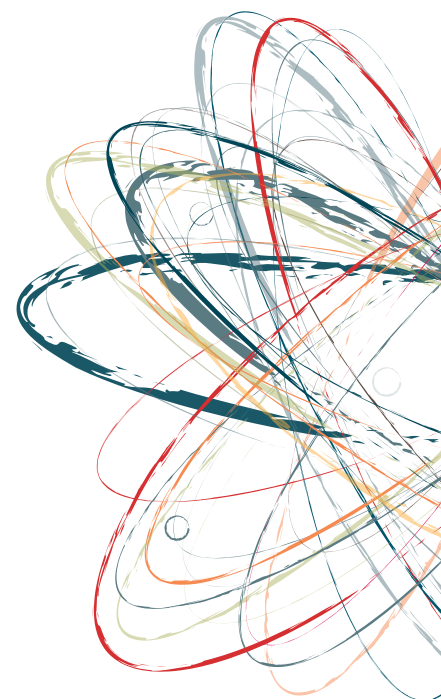
In practice, Provider of Last Resort appears to be more of an ideal than a practical commitment. As the guidance itself recognises, ‘If, however, funds are not forthcoming for these activities, the Cluster lead cannot be expected to implement these activities.’

When we asked interviewees involved in the Clusters at both national and global levels about the concept of Provider of Last Resort, interviewees suggested the idea was essentially meaningless. ‘It’s a great idea but [...] the get out is so huge that practically it doesn’t mean much to me [...] I don’t know of any examples where agencies have said, “Oh we’re last resort, therefore we’re going to use our core funds to deliver to this particular population.”’ ‘It’s been couched also with three caveats: access, funding and consent of the state. Meaning that, funding levels being what they are today, I wonder who would ever be in a position to be provider of last resort absolutely?’ Another interviewee was even blunter: ‘I think the whole concept is nonsense [...] You name a donor who’s going to agree they will fund to the end of the earth every single need. I mean come on, let’s get real.’

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In practice, Provider of Last Resort appears to be more of an ideal than a practical commitment.

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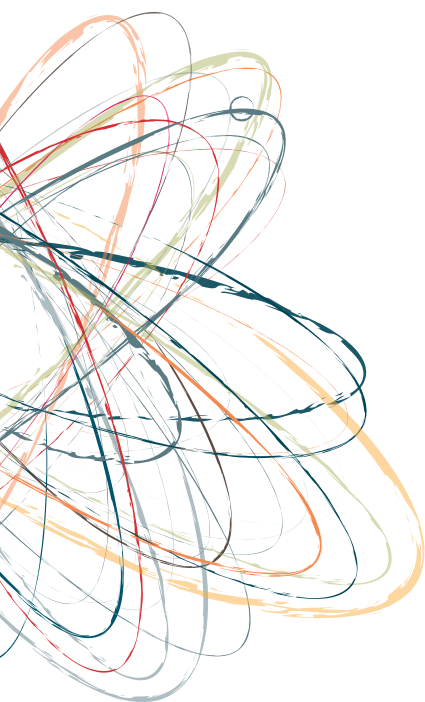
### 3.4.2 Government – leader, participant or outsider?

- There are many potential benefits to government involvement in Clusters, as well as challenges.
- Involvement of governments seems to be more successful where governments lead, rather than merely participate in, Clusters.

The international humanitarian system, which is designed primarily to respond to needs the state cannot or will not address, has historically tended to default to a ‘comprehensive’ model of response designed for ‘direct, large-scale delivery in conditions where the state and national bodies have little or no capacity’ (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014: 27). This model largely ignores the state, and has been criticised for showing ‘a lack of respect for national capacities, customs and sovereignty and an ongoing “tendency for agencies to bypass national authorities and to directly engage at local levels”’ (ALNAP, 2012: 69). The Cluster system was, arguably, designed within this conceptual framework, and as a result it has not always been clear how the Clusters are intended to articulate with government agencies and coordination bodies.

In the past few years, this discussion appears to have moved from how the state can be involved in the Clusters to how the state can lead the Clusters or the Clusters can be subsumed within government-led bodies. IASC guidance on Cluster formation is clear that, ‘An indiscriminate application of [...] Clusters [...] may waste resources and reduce opportunities for governments to exercise their primary responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance to people in need’ (IASC, 2012: 1). Clusters should ‘organize themselves to support or complement existing national response mechanisms rather than create parallel ones’ (IASC, 2011: 2), and CLAs should continue to lead the Clusters only in situations where national authorities’ ability to lead is ‘compromised’, or where ‘there are significant discrepancies between national authorities and the humanitarian actors in terms of the principles and objectives of the humanitarian response’ (ibid.: 3).

Over the course of their history, country-level Clusters have tended to be fairly flexible, and have adapted to the local context more often than is, perhaps, recognised. There are many examples of governments leading coordination mechanisms, or of Clusters adapting to national systems, even before this guidance was issued (e.g. in Chad, El Salvador and Pakistan – see Achakzai et al., 2011; Beúnza, 2011; Salomons and Dijkzeul, 2008). In the Philippines, the





Clusters (under government leadership) have been incorporated into national law, while, ‘In Ethiopia and Kenya, IASC coordination structures effectively adapted to support complex non Cluster government systems’ (Slim, 2012: 13).

Experience of government leadership of the Clusters has been mixed. At best, government leadership of the Clusters (in addition to being consistent with UN Resolution 46/182) can strengthen the accountability and legitimacy of the state, improve coverage, strengthen commitment to agreed policies and ways of working and ensure emergency response is well articulated with longer-term development planning (Saavedra and Knox Clarke, 2015). However, these benefits are not always realised. This research found few examples of effective involvement of government in Clusters when the government does not have a leading role, suggesting that, if governments are to be involved in the Cluster, it should be as the leader and convenor, rather than as a participant. Government leadership, rather than participation, may be a more effective approach for government engagement.

In general, in the relationship between Clusters/coordination mechanisms and government, some fairly consistent challenges seemed to arise. Broadly, these are:

- Lack of knowledge and mistrust of one another;
- Differing attitudes to coordination;
- Political versus humanitarian imperatives;
- Lack of capacity;
- Structural misfits;
- Differences between national and international standards and ways of working.

Governments and humanitarians often have limited knowledge of each other’s capacities,<sup>32</sup> motives and structures, and this lack of knowledge (in many cases fuelled by an inability to speak the same language) can amplify mistrust: ‘Government officials may regard aid agencies as being over-resourced, unaccountable and donor- driven, with overpaid staff. At the same time, international agencies may view governments as corrupt, ineffectual and unhelpfully restrictive’ (Harvey, 2010: 11). Our interviews suggested there is still only a limited understanding of local coordination capacities in many places, and so significant possibility for duplication and competition. At the same time, governments may be reluctant to open their own coordination mechanisms for fear they be ‘undermined by foreign presence’. In one of the

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Governments and humanitarians often have limited knowledge of each other’s capacities, motives and structures.

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<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that the interviews conducted for this research were predominantly with people involved in the international humanitarian system; government voices are not fully represented in the interviews on which this section of the report is based.

contexts we looked at, a great deal of distrust exists between the government and NGOs, to the point where Clusters are operating very much as neutral buffers between the two. This has played out quite differently in each sector. Where it is working well, CCs have actively identified themselves as mediators and made great effort to visibly engage with the various actors, offering the Cluster as a common ground. In some examples shared during interviews, relationships established prior to the crisis response were particularly helpful, but these relationships were not always effective during large-scale emergencies: ‘Government and country partners were very used to having those same partners to talk with [...] All of a sudden all these new people came in [...] many of them had worked together before and they just take coordination [...] that created a lot of disruption.’

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...humanitarians  
and governments  
may have different  
understandings of  
what the role of  
the coordination  
mechanism should be.  
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Additionally, humanitarians and governments may have different understandings of what the role of the coordination mechanism should be. While humanitarians may seek to follow IASC, Cluster or their own organisation’s guidance, governments may understand coordination in a completely different way. As one interviewee explained of one government, they ‘have a very different understanding of coordination. Their understanding of coordination is, “We tell you what we want you to do and then you go and do it” [...] We’re coming from very different perspectives with their perspective a bit more authoritative and ours which is more consultative.’ Another interviewee explained the government ‘had their own interpretation [...] around what a Cluster meant, which was slightly different to what the global [...] Cluster interpreted’.

A further constraint to closer coordination that was noted in the interviews and the literature derived from the political nature of governments. ‘Modern’ humanitarian action arguably developed – in Biafra and Ethiopia – as a response to the actions of the state, and the mistrust of politics goes deep in humanitarian culture. Humanitarians can feel the political imperatives of government outweigh humanitarian imperatives, and coordination is an attempt to ‘control’ humanitarian activity and use it to pursue these political objectives. Governments may also be wary of taking a risk by playing a leading role in the humanitarian response for fear of consequences if the response appears unsuccessful or because to lead the response would be to admit a failure of ongoing development work, as in the case of the cholera response in Zimbabwe (Neseni and Guzha, 2009; see also Hedlund and Knox Clarke, 2011). One interviewee explained the challenge for humanitarians: ‘On one hand we all think, yes, it’s governments’ duty to take care of their people and do their job, but on the other hand we know lots of contexts where government are particularly denying assistance or limiting assistance with a political aim [...] So

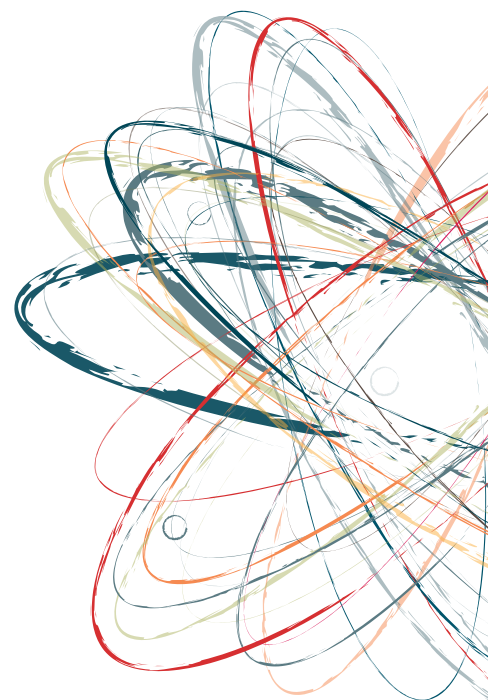
do you want (that) government to be sitting in the Cluster? Probably not.’ Another explained,

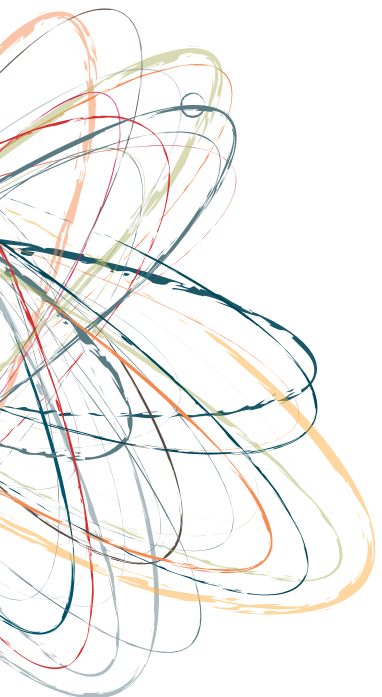
*‘I am [...] concerned at the headlong rush [...] into A, Clusters being co-led by governments and then B, Clusters being taken over by government [...] The reason we are there or we may need to be there is because there is not the appropriate humanitarian space [...] or maybe there are key humanitarian issues that are not properly being addressed.’*

At times, government’s desire to coordinate can outweigh their capacity to do so. Coordination can be a very resource-intensive activity. Although they may want to control response coordination, governments may lack capacity to do so, particularly at subnational levels (Achakzai et al., 2011; Neseeni and Guzha, 2009; Salomons and Dijkzeul, 2008; Sida et al., 2012) This poses challenges for humanitarians seeking to work within existing coordination frameworks when those mechanisms are inadequate to manage the coordination effectively. One capacity issue that came up in several interviews was the rotation of staff within government ministries – relationships and knowledge would be established, but then staff would be promoted or transferred before the next emergency hit (this is, of course, even more of a problem for government staff aiming to build relationships with humanitarians). In some cases, the international system has taken effective steps to support the development of government coordination capacity (Harvey, 2010), and several interviewees shared examples with us of where they had effectively engaged and capacitated local governments to take an active role in coordination. On the other hand, one suggested, ‘I’m not against building the capacities of local governments anywhere [...] should NGOs be doing it? This is my question.’

A further challenge comes when the organisational structure and responsibilities of the Cluster do not fit with the relevant government ministries or bodies. This can be a result of the fact that governments tend to be organised less sectorally than the international humanitarian system (Polastro et al., 2011) – arguably a good thing in itself – and in these cases the Clusters may need to adapt their scope and activities to fit government structures (as occurred in el Salvador – Beúnza, 2011). It may also be the result of unclear responsibilities and structures within government – a factor noted in several evaluations and one that came up in interviews.

Finally, difficulties arise when international standards and priorities conflict with domestic standards and priorities for coordination of response. In Burkina Faso, ‘the government was reluctant to engage in open discussions with shelter partners with regards to their plans for transition and permanent sites; deadlines for relocation were poorly communicated and commitment to standards was





not clear' (Vega, 2011). In Chad, the government's standards were lower than the SPHERE standards of humanitarians. Involvement of the government in the Cluster in this case led to NGOs avoiding the Cluster owing to their distrust of the government (Salomons and Dijkzeul, 2008). In other examples, the government pushed for a higher standard than humanitarians – for example, government did not want to allow temporary shelters in El Salvador (Beúnza, 2011).

While this study was unable to say whether nationally or internationally led coordination arrangements were more effective (the question was not included in the original scope of research, and the answer is likely to be extremely context-specific), the research suggested that, where Clusters had effectively engaged government, they had:

- Recognised the importance of government to an effective response, and ensured Cluster members supported this approach. As one CC explained, 'We service on behalf of the government';
- Made contact early on, pre-emergency if possible, with the relevant government counterparts: 'One of the first things I would do is go to my government counterpart [...] make sure they understand what we're doing and who we are, why we're here';
- Ensured government stayed involved. 'We try and involve the government as much as possible in our activities, in our strategic planning, even in the micro planning project proposal development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. So throughout the project cycle we try to involve the government and we try to give them the leadership positions';
- Been realistic about who needed to be in the room and established connections with all relevant levels of government, including local authorities and district offices;
- Understood the roles government could, and was willing, to play and adapted accordingly. 'It's a transition moment in (country) [...] but they're not there yet. They're not ready to take on that role [coordination]. So we also very much are waiting for a direction.' In Ethiopia, 'Technically empowered regional and zonal governments, and local district and kebele (village) committees proved to be a great strength in Ethiopia's response. With international organisation and NGO support, these parts of the government took responsibility for assessing, planning, coordinating and implementing government response' (Slim, 2012: 13)

### 3.4.3 The importance of connecting national and subnational levels of coordination

- Subnational coordination is important, though in the course of this research we encountered few effective examples.
- Clarity of roles, clear communication, resources and consideration of the local context seem to better enable effective subnational Cluster coordination.
- Ensuring regular personal communication between the national and subnational CCs is especially important.

IASC guidance states that, ‘Humanitarian operations that employ national and sub-national Clusters have been found to be more effective than ones that coordinate through a single national Cluster’ (IASC, 2012: 23). Subnational Clusters are supposed to be better equipped to adapt to local contexts, work with locally based NGOs and government and strengthen accountability to affected people (ibid.).

Throughout our research, the importance of subnational or local Clusters was evident both in the literature and in interviews. Reflecting this, we were curious what impact good subnational Clusters would have on the effectiveness of the Cluster overall, as well as what ‘good’ might mean when it came to the division of roles and responsibilities between national and subnational Clusters and the communication between them. We therefore sought to address the hypothesis that *where there are active subnational Clusters, as well as national ones, coordination will be more effective.*

Evidence from the literature (Culbert, 2011; Jespersen, 2009; Majewski et al., 2012)(Bonsignore, 2013; GFSC & FSAC Afghanistan, 2013; GFSC & FSC CAR, 2014) suggests coordination at local level, in the form of either subnational Clusters or other coordination mechanisms, is important to the success of the Cluster overall. Evaluations and reviews (especially those of the Food Security Cluster) suggest that there are examples of effective sub national coordination, using both NGO focal points and subnational clusters. Our interviews, however, found few examples of well-functioning subnational Clusters. Although many interviewees emphasised the importance of the subnational Cluster, and a desire to improve at this level, most of the examples shared with us highlighted the challenges of coordination on multiple levels



...coordination at local level, in the form of either subnational Clusters or other coordination mechanisms, is important to the success of the Cluster overall.



(rather than the successes): difficulties communicating, isolated actors taking decisions on their own, lack of capacity and actors at all levels not seeing the value of one another. As one Cluster member explained, ‘Most of the heads of agency are in the capital and a lot of decisions are made there without proper consultation of people based in (subnational area). I’ve seen that in other countries as well [...] the decision-making process is often too centralised.’ Another simply called subnational Clusters ‘terrible’.

As we were unable to find enough examples in interviews of successful subnational Clusters – and had not included questions related to the subnational level in the questionnaire – we were unable to collect enough data either to support or to refute the hypothesis.

However, we were able to identify factors that interviewees and the literature tended to suggest were important to the successful functioning of subnational Clusters:<sup>33</sup>

- There is clear and regular communication between national and subnational Clusters.
- There is clarity on roles and responsibilities of national and subnational Clusters.
- Subnational Clusters are integrated – ideally at the design stage – into information management and planning processes.
- Subnational coordination is well resourced.
- Meeting timing, location and frequency take into consideration the local context.
- Minutes of subnational Clusters are reviewed, actioned and endorsed by national level.

The relationship and communications between the national and subnational level is important for effective coordination. The Cluster Approach 2 Evaluation recommended creating clear reporting links between global, national and subnational Clusters to ensure support (Steets et al., 2010). Other evaluations further emphasise this (Hedlund, 2011; Jespersen, 2009). This communication can be achieved in a variety of ways, but among them regular personal contact between national and subnational coordinators appears to be important. The evaluation of the shelter Cluster in Myanmar found national CCs were not visiting subnational Clusters, and subnational coordinators did not participate in discussions at the national level. This communication gap caused problems for the Cluster (Hedlund, 2011). Conversely, in the 2011 Horn of Africa Response, ‘Remote support by telephone and visits by senior staff were designed

<sup>33</sup> It is important to note most of these factors were identified by looking at what has not worked in terms of subnational Clusters.

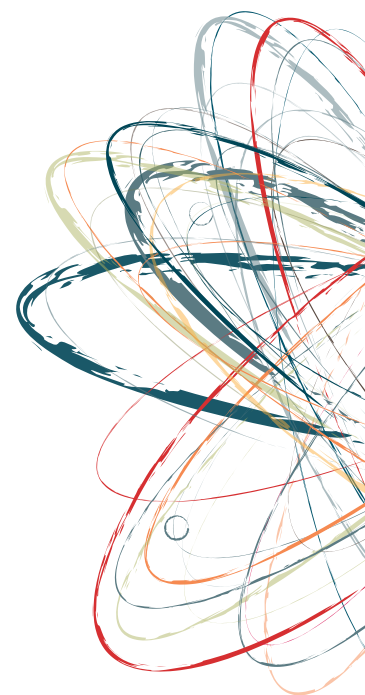


to encourage and advise devolved Cluster strategy making' (Slim, 2012: 13). While this effort had some impact, the management distance between Cluster leads, field operations and other parts of the coordination structure proved to be persistent challenges. In one Cluster we got to know through interviews, all subnational CCs are brought together twice a year 'for a training or workshop', which enhances communication links.

One challenge in particular when considering national and subnational Clusters is that of clear roles and responsibilities. As distance can make it difficult to stay on the same page, it is important that national and subnational Clusters know what they are supposed to do, so they can get on with doing it. The Cluster Approach 2 Evaluation recommended that decision-making procedures between national and subnational Clusters be defined to allow operational decisions to be decentralised (Steets et al., 2010). This recommendation is in line with other evaluations (Majewski et al., 2012), IASC guidance (IASC, 2012) and ALNAP's previous research on operational leadership (Knox Clarke, 2014). Role clarity is particularly important where different agencies take the lead at national and subnational levels. Clarifying roles to allow for decentralised decision-making can help ensure those with the most recent and relevant knowledge about the local context are able to take decisions, and these decisions will be respected throughout other levels of the coordination structure (Majewski et al., 2012).

If subnational Clusters are to be successfully integrated into a coordination system, it is important they be included – ideally from the design stage – in the Cluster's information management and planning systems. As a Cluster IMO explained, 'Some partners at the field level had information the national Cluster didn't have. Conversely, the national Cluster probably had information field-level partners didn't have as well.' In another Cluster, the CC explained that staff at the local level were 'really connected to the issues' and therefore able to provide good information from the implementation site. In one example of good practice shared with us, the strategic planning process begins by subnational Clusters identifying priorities, which are then scaled upwards for input. While this example does highlight the importance of valuing local knowledge, particularly for a context-relevant response, further work needs to be done to ensure communication continues throughout the process and that information isn't only bottom-up while decisions only top-down.

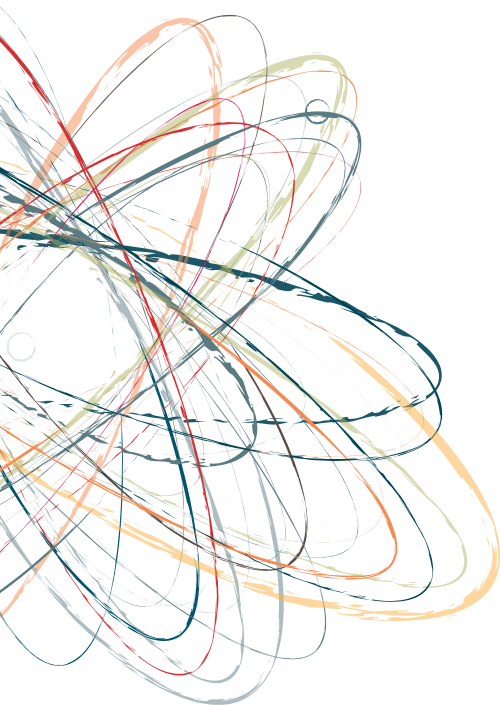
As do all elements of the Cluster system, subnational Clusters require dedicated resources. Staffing support is perhaps particularly important at the subnational level, because Cluster members may have even fewer resources to share with the Cluster, yet many of the main coordination tasks happen at this level (Steets et al., 2010). Many of the interviewees identified double-hatting as one of the main challenges with subnational Cluster coordination.



*'There is no dedicated (Cluster) coordinator in the field, so they are doing this job as extra work from their routine job. Field coordination is extremely weak and it needs a lot of improvement. I can understand because these guys are hard-working and they are doing a lot of things. It's difficult for them to concentrate on programme activities, on their implementation, on expanding grounds, their own things and then on top of that there is a Cluster coordination role.'*

Finally, it is important to consider the location, duration and frequency of meetings at all levels, but particularly at the subnational level, where there is (hopefully) more participation of local organisations and where there is a higher risk of having multiple meetings to attend. In one example we came across, coordination had been divided regionally and the subnational Cluster had to decide between meeting in one of two areas, either of which would have meant several hours' travel for some Cluster members. In this example, the Cluster decided to alternate meeting locations and try to schedule meetings on the same day as other meetings and events to reduce back and forth for Cluster members. In another example, one Cluster member warned of the dangers of having multiple meetings to attend – all for the same Cluster.

*'In (sub-national area), they have the national team, the regional team, (sub-national area) and the coastal areas. Can you imagine the number of meetings? Each one of these coordinators were having their own meetings on their own agendas. It was insane. There were Cluster meetings every day. I kept telling them the people are the same, do you realise the organisations probably have one (sector) team in (subnational) which people will be coming from. I don't think it was a very good decision.'*



### 3.4.4 Clarity around the roles and expectations of Cluster members

- Where Cluster members clearly understand the roles and responsibilities they have in the Cluster, this contributes to the Cluster's effectiveness.
- This underlines the importance of collective responsibility in the Cluster, whereby Cluster members coordinate themselves rather than being coordinated by someone else.
- Cluster members generally develop and understand their roles and responsibilities over time: ToRs and other forms of guidance are of only limited use in this process.

On the basis of the literature review, and of ALNAP research conducted around operational leadership (Knox Clarke, 2013b, 2014), we had hypothesised that *coordination will be more effective where participating agencies have clear and agreed roles and responsibilities*.

Analysing the data from the questionnaire reveals that, where the roles and responsibilities of each Cluster member organisation are clearly understood and respected, the Cluster will be more able to create and implement a strategy, and members more able to prioritise and align their own priorities as individual organisations to that of the Cluster.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the results of the questionnaire conducted as part of the evaluation of the Food Security Cluster show a moderate correlation between the degree to which Cluster members have clear and respected responsibilities and the degree to which the Cluster is able to be effective.

Analysis of interview data suggested the bulk of interviewees who considered the question saw role clarity as contributing to effective coordination. Conversely, where Cluster members did not effectively understand the role they could (and were expected to) play, this led to confusion and inefficiency. One example is found in the Pakistan evaluation: Cluster members were unclear on their role regarding timely information-sharing, which resulted in delays to decision-making. This evaluation recommended that, 'Clear reporting lines [...] and clear roles and responsibilities need to be established' (Achakzai et al., 2011: 16 see also GFSC & Cluster leads FSC Philippines, 2014; GFSC & FSC CAR,

<sup>34</sup> The question, 'The roles and responsibilities of each organisation represented in the Cluster are clear and respected' was compared with questions about effective Cluster strategy and prioritisation (see methodology) using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.56 indicating a moderate positive correlation. The question was also compared with questions about implementing this strategy and aligning organisational priorities with it and results were statistically similar.



Active participation [...] goes beyond attending just the meetings. Active participation is enquiring, engaging and challenging.



2014). A Cluster member we interviewed explained, ‘It was very much a case of, agencies can present themselves and listen to what the (Cluster) had to say, as opposed to really assigning clear roles to specific agencies [...] The responsibility for coordination was very much seen as a Cluster responsibility rather than agencies’ responsibility.’

This comment is telling, because it underlines the collective responsibility inherent in effective operation of the Cluster – the difference between Cluster members coordinating with one another and being coordinated by someone else. A key expectation of Cluster members is that they participate, engage and assume shared leadership functions within the Cluster:<sup>35</sup> The efficient management or functioning of Clusters is the joint responsibility of the Cluster Lead Agency, the Cluster Coordinator, resourcing partners and all Cluster participants at the national and sub-national level’ (IASC, 2012: 19). As one CC put it, ‘Active participation [...] goes beyond attending just the meetings. Active participation is enquiring, engaging and challenging. They guide, come up with ideas, come up with agenda items and challenge the coordination forum. Those are really good members to support and strengthen the coordination mechanism.’

In general then, the interviews, literature and questionnaire tended to support the hypothesis. Where everyone understands and agrees on who is meant to do what, decision-making is a clearer and easier process. Where organisations have been able to negotiate and respect clear roles and live up to expectations, it is possible to enhance the trust within Cluster relationships. However, interviews also suggested that, in many cases, roles and expectations of Cluster members were not clear, and the expectation of joint leadership had not been fully internalised: ‘Cluster partners, including line ministries, international and national NGOs and UN agencies, often lack clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities within the Cluster’ (Boughen and LeTurque, 2009: 8).

When asked to reflect on whether Cluster members knew what was expected of them within the Cluster, one CC noted, ‘Some of them yes, some of them no [...] that’s the kind of confusion we have.’ Part of the confusion can come when there is a lack of consistency as to which individual attends the Cluster meetings on behalf of their organisation. In Pakistan, some Cluster members felt Cluster meetings were ineffective where different individuals attended each meeting. Few of the Clusters had spent time drafting formal ToR or guidelines that

<sup>35</sup> In a related question, we asked Cluster members to identify whether the CC received adequate support from members. The results showed there was a moderate correlation between Clusters where members provided this support and Clusters that are successful in creating a vision and strategy, implementing this strategy and aligning organisational priorities with it. Similarly, the questionnaire results from the Food Security Cluster indicated a moderate correlation between the degree to which the Cluster received support from Cluster members and the effectiveness of coordination.

outlined roles and responsibilities for Cluster members. As one CC explained, ‘We don’t have a piece of paper that says what all the roles and responsibilities of (Cluster member organisations) are.’ For those who had formalised such a document, this often then went untouched and seemed to have been more of a checkbox activity rather than a living document actively guiding membership. ‘Mostly there is a high turnover of staff, and I don’t think people can remember these ToRs. They know that there are ToRs available, and no one even asks for ToRs in any Cluster meetings.’ Many Clusters noted that, once ToRs had been drafted, they were not regularly shared with new members or revised within the Cluster.

For many Clusters, members felt they did understand their role – even if they were unable to articulate it. One CC explained this: ‘Practically, yes they’re clear, but maybe theoretically they are not able to explain if you ask.’

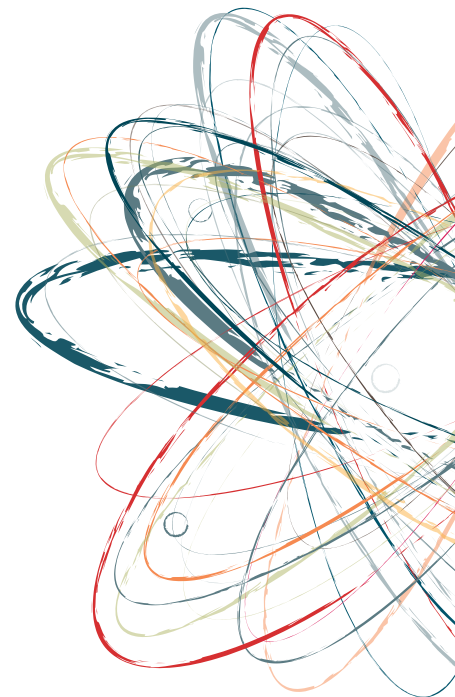
What seemed more common than relying on a formal ToR or guidance document was a culture created within the Cluster whereby over time, members came to understand what was expected of them and what they should expect from others. The same CC elaborated, ‘Some of them have this traditional memory. They’re working with the sector Clusters and they’ve been involved with all these processes [...] Practically they know [...] whenever there is a discussion, when there is a conflict situation, whenever there is a decision to be taken.’

This type of informal expectation-setting seems the most effective in getting organisations to understand their role within the Cluster – but the approach does require some time to develop, as well as consistency of membership. The research did not clarify whether other, faster ways of ensuring clarity around roles and expectations were available to Cluster members. Knudsen (2011) argues, ‘there are no agreed expectations or partnership models for Cluster participants to contribute to results, engage in a predictable way or share responsibility for outcomes’ and proposes establishing a form of ‘upfront’ commitment, where agencies agree on what ‘they will and will not be willing to contribute to a response, how results will be jointly defined and measured’. Since then, the Cluster reference module has clarified Cluster members are expected to, for example, ‘work cooperatively with other Cluster partners to ensure an optimal and strategic use of available resources, including sharing information on organizational resources’ (IASC, 2012: 22) However, this does not appear to be seen as a binding commitment, and formal mechanisms for establishing relative roles and expectations do not seem to have been particularly successful.

“

The CC does matter, and not only because of their facilitation skills.

”



### 3.5 Factors related to the skills of the CC

- An effective CC is important for coordination.
- Effective CCs are clear about their role, have strong technical and context knowledge and have broader support from a coordination team.
- They have 'soft skills' in areas such as facilitation and communication, are proactive, impartial, and able to develop relationships with Cluster members over time.
- Co-leadership of a Cluster is most effective where the co-leads are able to work jointly, rather than sharply dividing responsibilities.

#### 3.5.1 How important is the CC?

ALNAP's study of operational leadership revealed the international humanitarian system tended to place too much importance on the role of the individual (Knox Clarke, 2014). Given this finding, we were interested to explore the role and relative importance of the individual tasked with day-to-day 'leadership' in the Cluster - the CC. Our hypothesis was that *good facilitation skills on the part of the CC will lead to better coordination in the Cluster.*

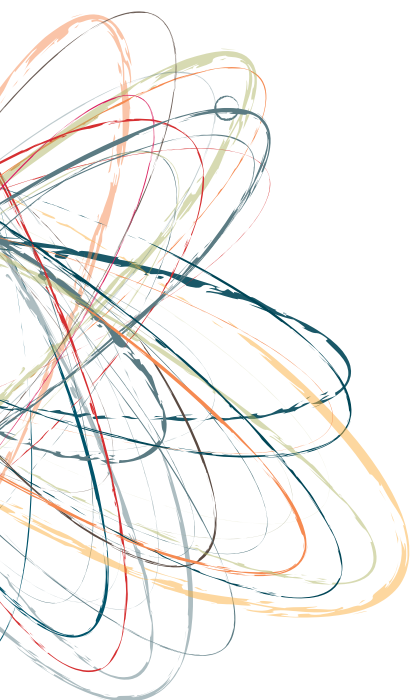
The evidence from our literature review, interviews and questionnaire supported and expanded this hypothesis. The CC does matter, and not only because of their facilitation skills. Interviewees repeatedly cited the importance of their CC. Our questionnaire and the evaluations included in the literature review echoed these results.

The questionnaire showed a fairly high correlation between an effective CC and the Cluster's ability to set and implement a common strategy and prioritisation.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the Food Security Cluster questionnaire indicated a moderate positive correlation between the leadership of the CC and the effectiveness of coordination in the Cluster.<sup>37</sup>

Often, the importance of the CC comes down to the importance of having someone to move things forward and get things done – and particularly to

<sup>36</sup> The question, 'The CC displays effective leadership skills' was compared with questions about effective Cluster strategy and prioritisation (see methodology) using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.57 indicating a fairly high positive correlation. The question was also compared with questions about implementing this strategy and aligning organisational priorities to it and results were statistically similar.

<sup>37</sup> The question, 'The CC displays effective leadership skills' was compared with the question, 'Overall, how effective is the existing food security coordination mechanism?' using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.4761 indicating a moderate positive correlation. The question was also compared with two similar questions about vision, strategy and prioritisation and results were similar.





establish the structures and processes that contribute to effective coordination. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) protection Cluster, for example, the CC was the one to establish clear roles and responsibilities in a ToR, and to set up information management processes. As member organisations lacked capacity, having someone to move these things forward made a significant difference (Culbert, 2011).

One of the ways we can see the importance of the CC role is in cases where a CC has changed, or there has been a gap in the role for some time. One interviewee explained that,

*‘There was a gap in the Cluster lead at the national level for almost one year [...] I remember where the head of (CLA) was assuming the role of the CC [...] She managed to maintain the meetings on a regular basis but she was not dedicating enough time to the coordination, information-sharing, capacity-building [...] Now for me I can see the difference in having a full-time dedicated Cluster lead.’*

It is important to note here that, as with the other factors that contribute to effective coordination, the presence of a skilled coordinator is not a ‘silver bullet’, and we should not place too much emphasis on this factor alone. One CC explained,

*‘A Cluster goes much beyond one person.’ Another noted, “When you have a strong coordinator or facilitator and you don’t have active or engaged members, the chance of success might be in question. At the same time, when you have active, engaging members and not a strong coordinator, then [...] maintaining effective coordination is also going to be difficult [...] To really have a very strong and effective coordination, ideally you need both of them.’*

Previous ALNAP work has discussed the tendency in the humanitarian sector to place too much emphasis on the role of the ‘heroic individual’ (Knox Clarke, 2013b), and throughout this research we found examples of Clusters where too much emphasis was placed on the CC – by headquarters, by Cluster members and even by the CC themselves. This is problematic because, more often than not, a Cluster outlives any particular individual in the CC role. As one CC soon to leave her role explained, ‘Once I leave, the (next) person is going to come along and will not automatically have the relationship that someone who was here for two years had. That will take time.’

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... the presence of a skilled coordinator is not a ‘silver bullet’...

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### 3.5.2 What makes an effective CC?

Through the interviews we were able to explore the role of the CC in more detail. We found a CC is most successful in getting a Cluster to agree and implement aligned activities when:

- They are clear about their role.
- They have ‘soft skills’ – relationship-building, facilitation, team-building.
- They actively use their strong communication skills.
- They are seen as proactive and impartial, and thus able to play the role of mediator.
- They have support from a broader coordination team (information managers, subnational CCs, co-leads, etc.) and Cluster members.
- They are able to develop relationships with Cluster members over time (therefore do not rotate frequently).
- They have strong technical and context knowledge.

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Interviewees noted the importance of a CC who can ‘make people understand each other’, encourage ‘openness’, ‘be facilitative’, ‘genuinely talk and listen’ and truly ‘deal with people’....

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In some Clusters we spoke to, CCs actively discussed their role with the Cluster membership. One CC explained that, ‘If you look at a ToR, it doesn’t make explicit all of the different products and processes that, as a CC, and with your Cluster, you get pulled into.’ He suggested it was important to talk about these products with Cluster members. Another CC noted he also shared his work plan with Cluster members. ‘They have also my annual work plan, which I initially drafted, shared to all of them, reviewed and endorsed by all of them. So they monitor my performance by my annual work plan for the Cluster and I monitor their performance through their project plan. So it is like a mutual accountability responsibility and supportive environment.’

Interviewees noted the importance of a CC who can ‘make people understand each other’, encourage ‘openness’, ‘be facilitative’, ‘genuinely talk and listen’ and truly ‘deal with people’. As one CC explained,

*‘I think not enough emphasis sometimes is put on the soft skills [...] The number one trick of Cluster coordination is getting people to like you and trust you as a person [...] then all the stuff that no one really wants to do, which is the boring side of coordination, they’ll be willing to do it [...] You can help navigate other organisations’ relationships with each other because maybe organisation A doesn’t really like organisation B but they both trust the person in the middle and think, “Okay there must be something to this if the person we both likes seems to like both of us” [...]*

When you turn up as CC, there is no team. You have a bunch of people who all choose whether they come to meetings weekly, fortnightly or once a year. They can choose whether or not to submit their projects in the SRP or not. They don't have to [...] You go in and form your own team. To form your own team you have to be a person that's willing to spend an awful lot of time with people and you have to be willing to do things for partners which you don't think is your number one priority but it's theirs.'

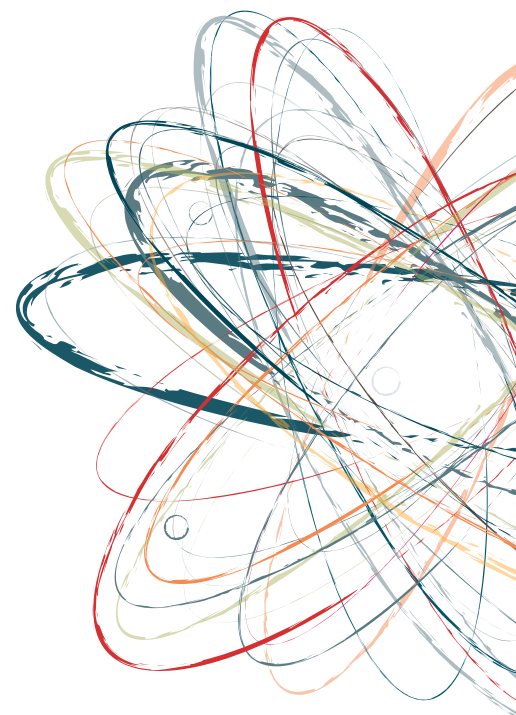
The importance of good communication cannot be overemphasised – and good communication takes skill. 'Putting things in Dropbox and sending people a link is not the same as socialising about information and standards. That really takes people being [...] active and the Cluster representatives going out to the Cluster membership and really working with them in situ, so particularly on site, or where they're undertaking activities to provide technical guidance and coordination input.'

CCs who are able to gain the trust of their members through showing their impartiality are better equipped to encourage trusting relationships among their members. 'People do that for you because they trust that you've got their back, they trust that you speak for them, they trust that you're really fighting for their organisation and fighting for the broader response.' In this way, CCs encourage all Cluster members to have 'equal chance to present and contribute'. Another CC described his role as 'like a buffer', 'deflecting animosity' between Cluster members who disagree.

Almost all of the CCs we spoke to mentioned the importance of their IMOs, and frequently referred to themselves as the 'coordination team'. One explained,

*'To be able to coordinate [...] you have to be a small team with different types of expertise. You need to have an information officer, somebody experienced in processing data, somebody who takes care of the administrative issues, making sure that everybody receives the email, the mailing list. They're small things but they're important still.'*

Where a Cluster is co-led by two organisations, the relationship and mutual support co-leads can offer one another is very important. Two very different cases come to mind here. In one Cluster, co-leads worked jointly – each knew what one another was doing; they took meetings together and divided work as it made sense at the time. Although this Cluster faced difficulties, the co-leads were proactive and responsive to Cluster members as a team. In the other Cluster, responsibilities were sharply divided. The NGO co-lead dealt mostly with NGO Cluster members; the UN agency co-lead dealt with the UN side



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‘You may have all the technical skills and expertise but you don’t have the right personality and this will affect the Cluster performance. At the same time, you may also have a good personality and the wrong skills [...] If the coordinator has one at the expense of the other, then the Cluster suffers.’

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of things. They met infrequently, were unclear on who was doing what and the results showed this. Interviewees we spoke to from the first Cluster felt supported and praised both co-leads. Interviewees from the second Cluster expressed confusion and frustration about what was going on in the Cluster. While the co-leads in the second Cluster were both working hard for their Cluster, they were working separately, and this really made an impact on how effective the Cluster was able to be, particularly on how it affected the culture and relationship dynamics within the Cluster. Overall, the experiences of some Clusters (notably the Food Security Clusters) suggest that co-leadership by an NGO is a ‘best practice’ as it increases the trust of NGO members in the Cluster (GFSC & FSAC Afghanistan, 2013; GFSC & FSC CAR, 2014; Reid & Stibbe, 2010).

The Cluster Approach 2 Evaluation found that, ‘The use of short-term global coordinators creates turn-over problems and they often lack relevant knowledge about the local context’ (Steets et al., 2010: 14). Evaluations consulted for this study echo these findings,<sup>38</sup> as did interviewees: ‘What, in my opinion, injures the Cluster system is the high rotation [...] If you change coordinator as you change shirts, that hinders things because that person doesn’t know what was before.’

Finally, effective coordinators had strong technical knowledge of the sector they were coordinating, as well as an excellent understanding of the local context. Often, the best knowledge of place will come from locally recruited staff who may, however, lack knowledge of the international system and require support.<sup>39</sup> However, an evaluation of the Food Security Cluster found that experienced coordinators deployed to CC roles ‘tended to have a better understanding of system-wide processes, requirements and timelines, enabling them to cope more easily with the demands. They also tended to have a clearer understanding of their own roles and the operational priorities of coordination, resulting in a clearer focus on the needs of Cluster partners’.<sup>40</sup>

Various interviewees we spoke to felt one or two of these factors may be more important than others, but one CC in particular summed up our overall finding best, which is that all of these factors are important and a good CC needs a balance of them all. ‘You may have all the technical skills and expertise but you don’t have the right personality and this will affect the Cluster performance. At the same time, you may also have a good personality and the wrong skills [...] If the coordinator has one at the expense of the other, then the Cluster suffers.’ Of course, it can be hard to find individuals who have this complete set of

38 (Culbert, 2011; Young, Khattak, Bengali, & Elmi, 2007)

39 (Alexander, 2009b; Beúnza, 2011)

40 (Steets et al., 2014b)

skills, and one interviewee argued forcefully that lead agencies should invest in professionalisation of the coordinator role: “You should not be running a Cluster [...] if you’ve not got [...] a specific qualification for coordination management on disaster [...] for this you need to go to school, you need to learn it. You cannot lead people without this kind of knowledge.’

### 3.6 Factors related to resources

- Clusters cannot be effective without adequate funding and human resource capacity.
- Resources are also important for Cluster members, as full participation in the Cluster requires staff time.

In order to function at all, let alone function well, Clusters need resources. There are two key ‘inputs’ to Clusters, which we explore in turn below: people and money.

#### 3.6.1 Human resource capacity

One of the crucial requirements for a successful Cluster is adequate resources, particularly ensuring there are enough human resources allocated to the coordination team. Where the Cluster lacks capacity, it is ‘essentially dead on arrival’ (Salomons and Dijkzeul, 2008: 121). In at least one evaluation, an increase in human resource capacity was identified as a key factor improving the performance of a ‘weak’ Cluster (Culbert, 2011). As noted elsewhere in this paper, it is particularly important to secure adequate staffing for the information management function and for subnational Clusters. In the interviews, we found several examples of under-resourced Clusters facing difficulty. When a CC is alone, without a broader coordination team including information managers and administrative support, huge strains are placed on them. One CC explained, ‘I’ve been on my own for most of the year [...] I don’t have a lot of time to develop the things I’d like to develop.’ Cluster members had requested technical guidance but the CC was unable to provide it, ‘because we just don’t have the capacity’. Another interviewee believed a lack of capacity within the Cluster was the reason globally available tools had not yet been updated to the country context. Yet another Cluster member described the coordination team as ‘very friendly people and they want to help us, but I feel they are overloaded [...] they were giving us just general information, not detailed information’.

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...it is particularly important to secure adequate staffing for the information management function and for subnational Clusters.

Part of the trouble here is undoubtedly the very broad ToR of the Clusters: where staffing is scarce, it would make sense for Clusters to define their activities more tightly. However, the finding is also important in the context of recent STAIT recommendations to ‘consider the balance’ between resources used for coordination and those used for operations – that is, to consider providing fewer resources for coordination (Moumtzis, 2014). While the recommendation relates specifically to ‘Level 3’ responses, where a lot of staffing has been deployed to coordination, this is not the case in ‘smaller’ emergencies, and organisations should ideally not see coordination and programmes as an either/or choice.

In fact, one interesting element that came out of interviews was the relationship between the staffing required for Cluster coordination and the staffing available to Cluster members. Where members had limited numbers of staff, where these staff lacked skills or knowledge or where there was rapid turnover of staff among member agencies, the demands on CCs and IMOs increased: the Clusters appear, in effect, to have been providing common services the agencies could not support themselves.

### 3.6.2 Financial resources

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Clusters are affected not only by resource constraints directly but also by constraints on participating agencies.

In general, donors and CLAs have made significant amounts of funding available to support the Cluster system, and this funding appears to have made an important contribution to success to date. However, CLAs have at some points found it hard to secure funding from donors for coordination. One CLA representative explained to us, ‘We get a little bit frustrated talking to donors who say, “Sorry, can’t really provide any funding this time around.” [...] It seems so starkly obviously but subject to the scale of the disaster and the nature of the disaster, obviously there’s a minimum level of coordination service that means you’re actually going to be effective.’ Resource constraints for coordination have also been noted in other research on Cluster coordination (NRC, 2014).

The Clusters are affected not only by resource constraints directly but also by constraints on participating agencies. Where organisations are underfunded, they may not be able to coordinate their activities because they lack funding to fill gaps or train staff in guidance. As one evaluation notes, ‘Good coordination makes use of the available capacity, yet it does not necessarily create capacity [...] whilst the Cluster may meet its coordination accountabilities, this may not necessarily result in sufficient support if the overall capacity on the ground is insufficient for the magnitude of the emergency’ (Achakzai et al., 2011: 21). Not everyone we interviewed agreed, although some suggested good Cluster coordination could actually lead to increased funding, by raising the profile of the sector.

### 3.7 Factors related to process and procedure in the Clusters

In addition to who participates, how the Cluster is led and structured and what the Cluster does, the processes a Cluster uses (in other words, how the Cluster works) plays a crucial role in how effectively organisations are able to coordinate with one another in the Cluster.

Although some interviewees warned against creating formal procedures and ‘formal structures, cogs that irrationally work together in a machine’, this research identified two areas in particular where clear processes do help improve coordination – information management and decision-making. When working with lots of different organisations that may not know one another well and have their own ways of doing things, establishing some common understanding about how information will be gathered/analysed/used and what the process is for making decisions goes a long way towards creating a successful Cluster.

#### 3.7.1 Information management processes

- Information management is a very important Cluster function – but needs improvement.
- Collecting information is only one of six core information management functions.
- Clusters often focus primarily on information collection: they should also attempt to conduct the minimum necessary activities in the other core information management functions.

IASC guidance on the Clusters makes it clear ‘information management and analysis (are) key’ to success (IASC, 2012: 9). Given this statement, we aimed to address the hypothesis *that effective information management will lead to better coordination in the Clusters*. The research suggests this is in fact the case, and also that many Clusters could benefit from improving elements of their information management systems.

While most respondents to the questionnaire expected the Clusters to go beyond information-sharing,<sup>41</sup> they also saw information collection and analysis

<sup>41</sup> Only 10.4% of respondents agreed with the statement, ‘The most important function of the Cluster is to





...many Clusters could benefit from improving elements of their information management systems.



as a fundamental requirement for other activities – explaining, in interviews, that good information was a ‘foundational issue’ and a ‘gold standard’ that ‘gives you power’ and enables an effective response. The importance of information management is noted in several evaluations (Altay and Labonte, 2014; Kuitems, 2009; Steets et al., 2014b), and the results of the questionnaire suggested a positive correlation between the quality of information management and the Cluster’s ability to effectively develop and implement sectoral strategy.<sup>42</sup>

The Cluster Approach 2 evaluation in 2010 concluded that ‘information management and institutional memory remain a serious problem’ for the Clusters (Steets et al., 2010: 47). Four years later, the global Food Security Cluster evaluations found ‘wide variations in [...] capacity for coordination and information management’ (Steets et al., 2014: 1). The information-sharing role of the Clusters is widely appreciated, and there are many examples of good practice. At the same time, however, a number of interviewees felt information management was ‘neglected’, ‘a problem’ and ‘a struggle’, both in their own Clusters and across the Cluster system as a whole.

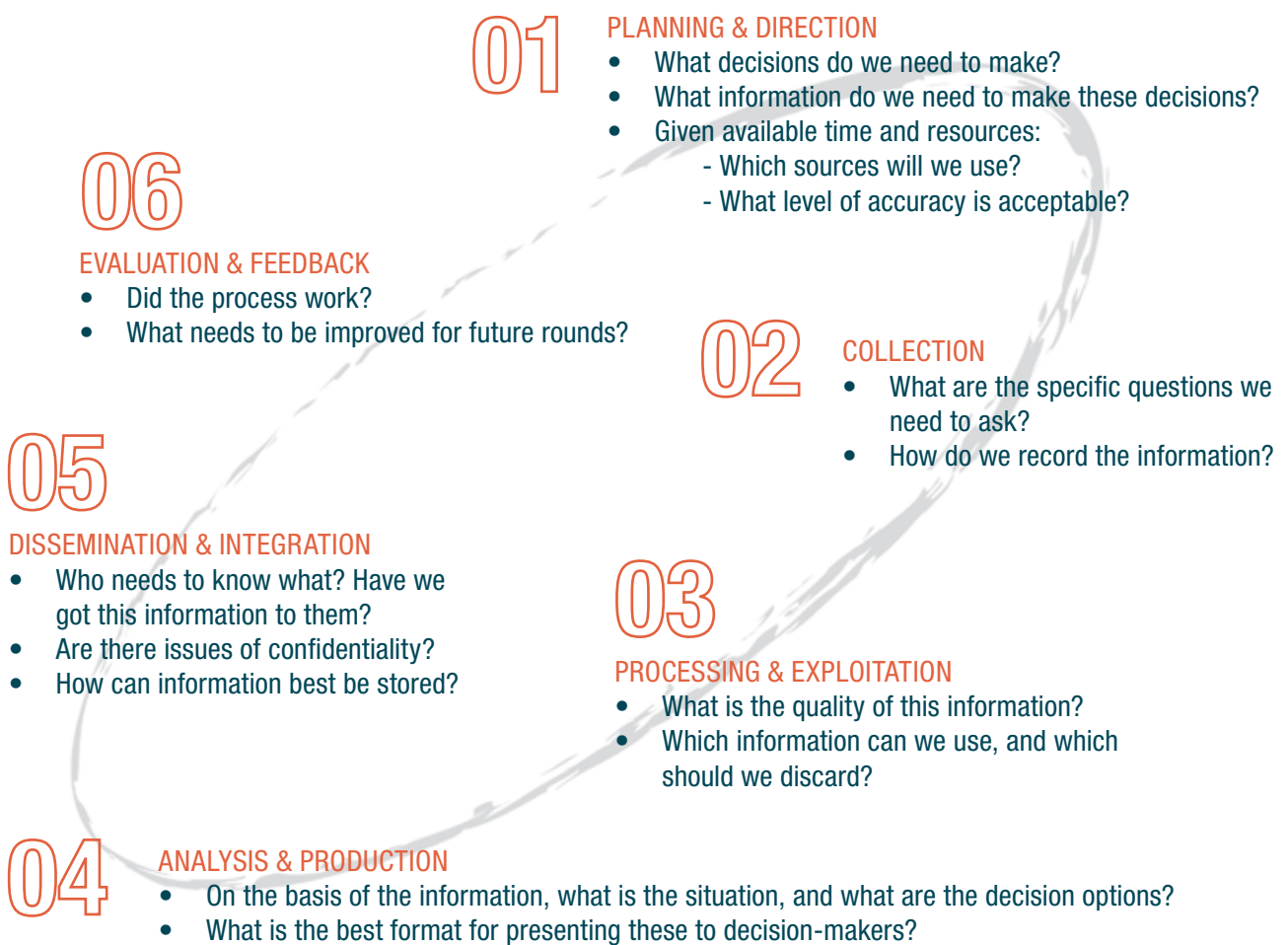
We have noted previously (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014) the tendency of humanitarians to concentrate on the collection of information to the exclusion of other important elements of the information management process. Many Clusters appear to share this tendency, ‘focus[sing] on gathering and compiling data and information, while they put less emphasis on analysis, interpretation and dissemination’ (Steets et al., 2014: 31) and experiencing difficulties in using information as a result of ‘[poor] accessibility, formatting inconsistency and storage media misalignment’ (Altay and Labonte, 2014: 3). As these evaluations suggest, there is more to effective information management than simply collecting information. In fact, the international standard on emergency management (ISO 22320) suggests any operational information process should be composed of six discrete functions: planning and direction; collection; processing and exploitation; analysis and production; dissemination and integration; and evaluation and feedback (see Figure X below). Recent guidance from OCHA emphasises the importance of considering many of these elements, particularly dissemination and storage (Verity et al., 2014).

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allow agencies to share information, and the Cluster should concentrate on this.’

42 The question, ‘In the Cluster, we are clear on the information that is required for effective humanitarian programming in our sector’, demonstrated a Spearman rank correlation of 0.49 with the combined scores of the questions, ‘How effective is the Cluster in creating a common vision for your sector’s humanitarian operations in the country?’ and ‘How effective is the Cluster in identifying common priorities and creating a strategy in order to achieve this vision?’ The same question demonstrated a Spearman rank correlation of 0.49 with the question, ‘How effective is the Cluster in supporting or implementing common plans for sectoral operation in the country?’ The correlations for the question, ‘We follow clear procedures for collecting and analysing as much of this information as possible’ were 0.53 and 0.48, respectively.

**FIGURE 4:**  
Information management process



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...there is more to effective information management than simply collecting information.

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An overarching message for the Clusters, then, is that they should, within the limits of their resources, attempt to ensure they are conducting the minimum necessary activities in all of these areas of information management, from collection to dissemination. Each area poses specific challenges – and these recurring challenges, and approaches that individual Clusters have taken to addressing them, make up the rest of this section.

At the core of the first area of information management (planning and direction) is the identification of the core information set that will be required for effective decision-making. One reason this is difficult for Clusters is that ‘information’ is seen as a catch-all category, and Cluster members are expecting – and using – several different types of information to make different types of decisions: there is ‘a huge demand for a wide variety of [information] products’ (Verity et al., 2014: 14). Interviews with Cluster participants suggested they benefited from at least seven (partially overlapping) sets of information as a result of their membership of the Clusters:

- Information on the current emergency situation and requirements of the affected population;
- Information on the location and nature of activities conducted to respond to the emergency situation, including any gaps or overlaps in response;
- Information on the progress and results of response activities;
- Forecasting: potential trends in the evolution of the situation; how the ‘big picture’ would develop;
- Information on techniques and best practices related to the technical aspect of the Cluster’s work (water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) guidance; shelter standards);
- Problems encountered by other agencies in the implementation of their responses, and particularly common problems (often related to access or security): these might often become the basis of joint advocacy work;
- Information on local contacts and resources that could be used to facilitate the response.

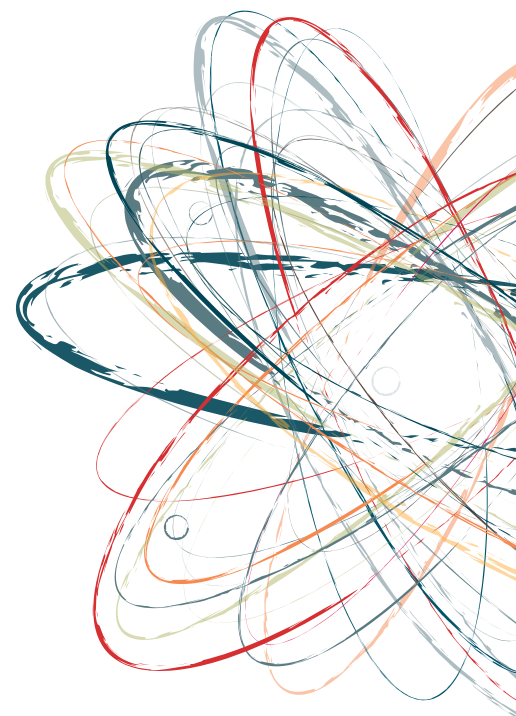
Much of this information might be shared informally, on the margins of the Cluster meetings. The challenge for CCs and IMO was to determine which elements should be the focus of formal Cluster activities, and how much time to allocate to each. Recent guidance from OCHA (Verity, 2013) suggests a range of different information products that can be developed to meet a variety of these different information needs.

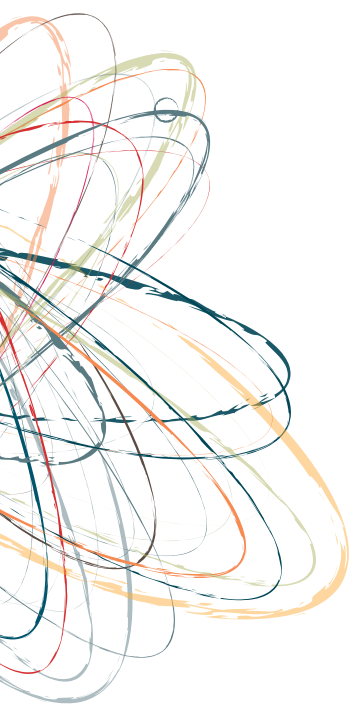
When it comes to the second step, the collection of information, one key constraint – the reluctance of some organisations to share information – has already been noted. While not universal, the desire to keep information

from ‘competitor’ organisations was mentioned by several interviewees, and is highlighted in a variety of evaluations and studies (Achakzai et al., 2011; Alexander, 2009; Beúnza, 2011). While this constraint is probably inherent in the structure of the humanitarian system, and cannot easily be overcome, it can be mitigated to some extent by ensuring regular contact between the CC and the staff of participating agencies (Alexander, 2009; Verity et al., 2014). As one interviewee explained, the trust required to share information ‘really takes people being [...] active and the Cluster representatives going out to the Cluster membership and really working with them in situ’. The importance of trust in the Cluster is further explored below (section 3.8).

A second constraint is, of course, the difficulty of collecting information in emergency contexts, where time is short and access to affected populations may be problematic. Experts have noted a tendency for humanitarian assessments to concentrate on the collection of ‘large scale, resource intensive, field data’ (ACAPS, 2012: 13; see also Altay and Labonte, 2014), despite the difficulties this implies. A better approach might be to concentrate initial information collection on the collation of secondary sources, supplemented by very limited ‘ground-truthing’ in the field, with an increased emphasis on collecting continuous, monitoring information over a longer period to better understand the situation as it develops (ACAPS, 2012; Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014). Interviewees suggested secondary sources could serve as the basis for (assessment of) information, but that – as with any other information type – it was important to treat them with caution and ensure they were checked for quality (at the processing stage) before inclusion in analysis. There was less ambivalence about the importance of ongoing information collection, and at least one evaluation pointed to the importance of continuous monitoring for ensuring the Cluster was effective (Achakzai et al., 2011). Unfortunately, several reviews and evaluations suggested this form of information collection was still relatively unusual (Boughen and LeTurque, 2009; Maxwell and Parker, 2012; Steets et al., 2014b).

The third constraint – and one that exercises many people involved in the Cluster system – is that of the format in which information is collected. However, this is not solely (or even mainly) a problem of the collection stage: the problem spills over into the processing and analysis stages as well. ‘All too often, different actors used different measurements and definitions in data collection and analysis’ (Altay and Labonte, 2014: 13); it is common for Cluster members to collect similar (but not the same) sets of information in very different formats, using different methods – which makes quality control and analysis extremely difficult (Achakzai et al., 2011; Beúnza, 2011; Kuitens, 2009).





One of the most commonly used information management tools in the Cluster is the 3W/4W format (standing for Who? What? Where? And When?) This format is helpful in preventing gaps and duplications in response as it addresses the nature of response activities but does not cover all of the other information exchanged in the Cluster. There is general agreement that it would be impossible to develop a single, broad information collection format that would be applicable in all contexts (ACAPS, 2012; Steets et al., 2010).<sup>43</sup> The information collected will depend on which of the information types outlined above the Cluster prioritises; the nature of the emergency; and the availability of different types of information. In fact, interviews for this study suggested the process of agreeing on the information that was required by the Cluster helped build a common purpose and understanding of what the Cluster was for, and so made coordination more effective.

In almost all cases, however, the Cluster will be involved in collecting and analysing some form of information on humanitarian needs and response (broadly speaking, assessment and monitoring information). Clusters have developed a wide variety of approaches to collecting and analysing data. In some cases, as we saw in Section 3.7.1, Clusters have developed a single information collection tool, which (to greater or lesser degrees) Cluster members use to allow for common assessments or monitoring. Where this is the case, it is much easier for the Cluster, or for the CLA, to conduct analysis. In other cases, a single agency conducts assessment and analysis, with the support – and on behalf – of all Cluster members. In some countries, while each Cluster member conducts analysis according to its own format, Clusters – often through TWiGs – give advice to the agencies on the design of their information collection tools, and in doing so support some limited harmonisation of tools. In several cases, Cluster members collect information according to their own datasets, and the CC (or IMO) then works with them bilaterally to evaluate the quality of the information, synthesise it and produce a single analysis. Finally, some Clusters use their regular meetings to critique one another's reports and discuss the broader implications of the various information sets.

This research was not able to identify which approach is most effective. To a degree, this probably depends on the degree of coordination the Cluster aims to achieve. Where the objective is primarily communication, a process of discussion allowing each agency to draw its own conclusions is sufficient. Where the Cluster aims to support alignment or collaboration, a commonly agreed information set will be required, and this will probably mean agencies giving up their autonomy by using an agreed common format.

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<sup>43</sup> Although the global Food Security Cluster has developed an online information management tool that aims to 'make data collection, processing and response analysis globally standardised while being flexible enough to adapt to different country contexts' (Ferrand, n.d.).

What is important (and came out through the interviews) is that processing and analysis are extremely time-intensive activities. Where evaluations noted that analysis of information had been weak (Neseni and Guzha, 2009; Vega, 2011), this was invariably a result of insufficient resources being devoted to analysis. If Clusters rely on member agencies to conduct these activities, Cluster members will need to appoint skilled staff to do so. Alternatively, if members expect the Cluster team to process and analyse a number of different sets of data, the Cluster will normally need additional resources to do so.

A second concern around joint analysis is that common formats should not systematically exclude certain types of information. In several cases, researchers note overreliance on rigid information collection formats prevents the Clusters from being able to include certain types of information in their analysis, particularly information coming from outside sources and sensory or experiential data (Altay and Labonte, 2014; Maxwell and Parker, 2012).

Moving from the analysis phase to the dissemination and communication of information (within the Cluster), evaluations and – to a lesser degree – interviewees were clear that using meetings (particularly where they were not well facilitated) ‘as the primary means for sharing information [...] is inefficient and ineffective’ (Steets et al., 2014: 48; see also Altay and Labonte, 2014; Kuitens, 2009; Majewski et al., 2012). Some Clusters have had success using online platforms for information exchange (Altay and Labonte, 2014; Kuitens, 2009): a trend that is becoming increasingly common, and that is supported by OCHA guidance (Verity et al., 2014). These online platforms can go some way, also, towards addressing problems of information storage. On the downside, they may not be accessible to national actors: local NGOs and local government. Clusters also appear to have been particularly successful in using maps to communicate large amounts of geo-referenced information (Altay and Labonte, 2014; Kuitens, 2009; Steets et al., 2014b; Vega, 2011). Interestingly (but perhaps not surprisingly), evaluations and interviewees were virtually silent on the communication of information to groups outside the Cluster, and particularly on the communication of information to people affected by the crisis – although these ‘public communications’ are a key element of information management in emergencies (Quarantelli, 1988).

An important issue that emerges from this research is the necessity for Clusters to clarify their own information needs and to consciously design information processes that efficiently meet these. Local design can be based on generic guidance, but in (almost) all cases the guidance will need to be adapted to fit the local situation. Interviewees spoke approvingly of adaptations made by country Clusters to the 4W process to make it more useful for their needs (by, e.g., including forecasts for the next three months in their 4W matrix). At the same time, there is a real danger in the proliferation of very different information



collection, analysis and storage systems that cannot ‘speak to’ one another, that prevent higher-level aggregation of data and that are not easily accessible to newly arrived staff or to organisations with limited technical capacity. This tension between the local and context-specific and the global and generic is one that occurs in many areas of humanitarian action: the challenge for the Clusters is to find an appropriate balance.

### 3.7.2.1 Decision-making processes

- Having a clear and agreed process for decision-making is more important than who makes the decision.
- Clusters are using three main decision-making models: individual (using consultation), small group (such as a SAG) and whole group.
- This research finds that decisions made by the group are of higher quality than decisions made by an individual. Group decisions do not appear to be any slower than individual decisions.

Given the importance of clear decision-making processes for operational leadership teams identified in ALNAP’s ‘Beyond Chaos and Control’ study (Knox Clarke, 2014), we sought to identify how relevant this factor would be for Cluster coordination. Our hypothesis was that *Clear and agreed decision-making processes will lead to better coordination in the Clusters*. The assumption behind this was that clear and agreed decision-making processes would lead to better-quality, and more timely, decisions, which would lead in turn to improved coordination.

The research broadly supported this hypothesis: Clusters work best when members are clear about the decision-making process, whichever decision-making model is used.

The Cluster Approach 2 evaluation (Steets et al., 2010) noted a lack of centralised guidance, or at least a lack of knowledge about existing guidance, when it comes to leadership and decision-making within Clusters. To a degree, IASC responded to this by recommending small, representative steering committees or SAGs take responsibility for developing and adjusting the strategic framework of the Cluster.<sup>44</sup> The Reference Module makes it clear these groups should consult the broader Cluster, but does not say how these groups should make decisions (by consensus or majority). It is probably not possible or desirable to identify one decision-making approach that will be effective for

<sup>44</sup> Recommendation 29, Final Summary and Action Points, IASC Principals Meeting, 13 December 2011, in IASC (2012).

all groups in all contexts. At the same time, the lack of prescriptive guidance (at least until fairly recently) appears to have had two effects. The first – which we consider below – is to lead to a wide variety of decision-making approaches between Clusters. The second is to contribute to some confusion within Clusters as to how decisions are, or should be, made.

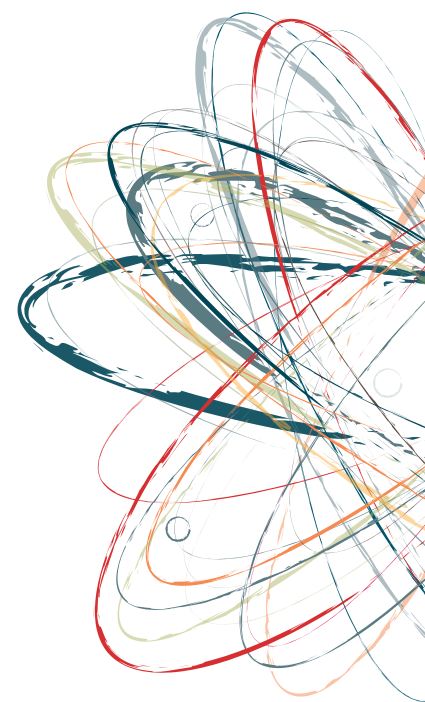
Interviewees explained that this confusion was sometimes compounded by the fact that different sorts of decisions within the Cluster are made in different ways: some decisions will be made by the CC, some by the whole group. This can be effective when it is clear which methods are used for what, but can otherwise be confusing. One interviewee described the negative effects this had on the Cluster: ‘I think there also needs to be clarity on how decisions are made [...] it’s never clarified where they actually need a consensus before something happens, where you need a majority [...] This is not clear under processes, so the hard questions are not addressed.’ A number of other interviewees made similar points: ‘A lot of processes around decision-making [...] weren’t formalised. So a lot of those coordination meetings had a tendency to oscillate around decisions.’

The questionnaire conducted as part of this research supported these interview findings, indicating a moderately positive correlation between Clusters with clear and agreed decision-making processes and Clusters that are effectively working together.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.7.2.2 Models for decision-making in Clusters

As noted above, the literature and interviews revealed that the Clusters were using a wide range of decision-making structures and processes. Interviewees thought this was, in general, a good thing: ‘Some flexibility to be modified for local conditions, that’s really important. It’s not a cookie cutter sort of approach. That won’t work.’ As a result, it is not really possible to say which model of decision-making is the ‘best’. Below, we lay out some of the models, and some of the benefits and challenges they entail.

<sup>45</sup> In the main/initial questionnaire, the question, ‘In the Cluster, we follow a clear and agreed process for making decisions’ was compared with questions about effective Cluster strategy and prioritisation (see methodology) using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.54 indicating a moderate positive significant positive correlation. The question was also compared with questions about implementing this strategy and aligning organisational priorities with it and results were statistically similar. In addition, in the Food Security Cluster questionnaire, the question, ‘The coordination mechanism has a clear and agreed process for making decisions’ was compared with the question, ‘Overall, how effective is the existing food security coordination mechanism?’ using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.5076 indicating a moderate positive significant positive correlation. The question was also compared with two similar questions about vision, strategy and prioritisation and results were statistically similar.



### *Decision-making by the whole Cluster*

The literature suggests some Clusters are effectively including the entire Cluster in decision-making.<sup>46</sup> ‘All partners were always involved in decision-making at Cluster level’ noted the Somalia nutrition Cluster evaluation (Matunga, 2013: 5), although it is not clear how this was accomplished with a group of 150 members. As explained by one CC, ‘We normally don’t take any decisions on ourselves [...] we like to have the partnership of the Cluster because that’s what the Cluster is for.’ Another CC noted, ‘We always try to get the members’ agreement, because the Cluster is for the organisations [...] it’s not a one man show.’

There are certainly some advantages in all parties participating in decisions: decisions benefit from a wider set of information, and the process can build support for the final outcome. However, the logistics can be daunting. In one of the countries we looked at, the situation moved ‘really, really quickly’, which made it difficult to get many organisations together to take decisions as a group. Another CC noted, ‘We don’t open certain discussions to the big group because we have 1,100 people on our mailing list [...] Opening up that wide leads to people sharing all kinds of resources which are totally irrelevant and we frankly don’t have the resources to go through them.’ Additionally, as one Cluster member pointed out to us, organisations may not all have the relevant understanding or expertise to be helpful in a particular situation.

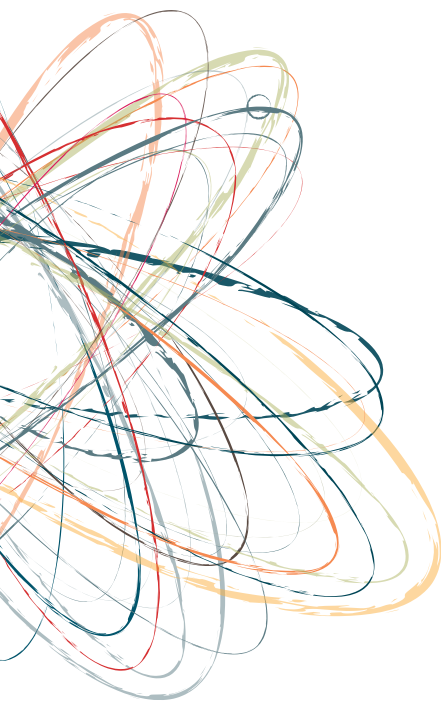
Where the group is very large, one might expect decision-making to be slow (although see the last paragraph in this section below). In these circumstances, using a majority vote (rather than attempting consensus) can speed up the decision process: ‘We get to agree, all parties, all NGOs. We discuss it and discuss the effects [...] then we get to vote for it and make a decision.’

### *Small-group decision-making*

As noted above, IASC guidance suggests decisions should be taken ‘by a manageable number of partners’ (IASC, 2012: 12). For this purpose, a SAG or similar small group of key Cluster members is recommended to provide strategic decision-making for the Cluster.<sup>47</sup> A similar group is recommended when Clusters organise pooled funding, often called a Programme/Project Review Group (PRG). The Reference Module suggests the group be composed of 15 persons or fewer, and in practice the size of these groups seems to vary; some find it easier to restrict the number of members; others pointed out a

46 25.4% of respondents in the questionnaire indicated their Cluster used whole group decision-making.

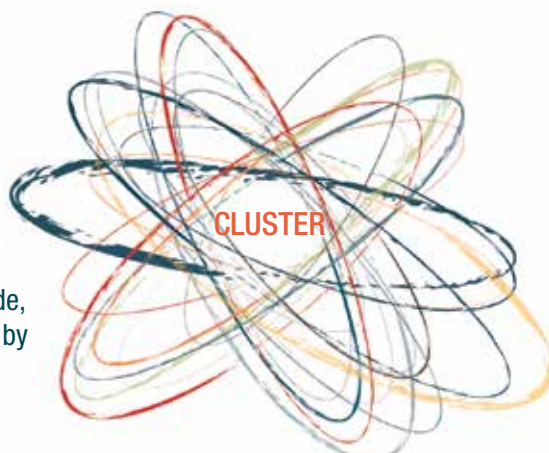
47 Only 10.1% of respondents in the questionnaire indicated their Cluster used a small subgroup to make decisions.



**FIGURE 5:**  
Decision making process

01

**Whole Group:** Decisions are made, either by majority or consensus, by the whole cluster membership.



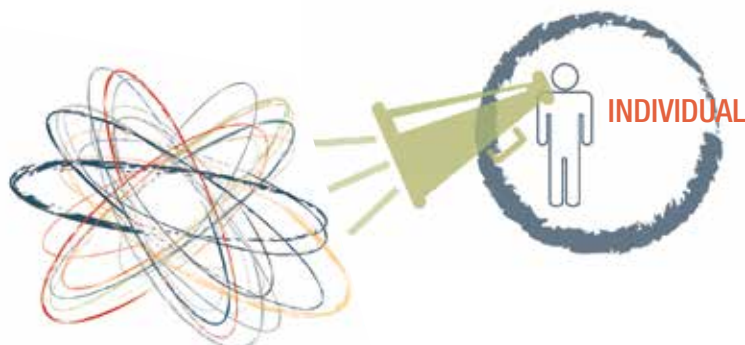
02

**Small Group:** Decisions are made in a small group, such as the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG).



03

**Individual:** An individual (often a Cluster Coordinator) makes important decisions, usually after consulting others within the Cluster.



larger group could sometimes work better so long as everyone had something useful to contribute. Many of the Clusters we researched used a SAG, and it often had a role in making decisions beyond strategy and work plan.

There is no formal system-wide guidance on how SAGs or other subgroups are constituted:<sup>48</sup> ‘We asked OCHA what was the process for the setup [...] and they said, “Just do it whatever way you want.” I would rather have someone say, “You have to have two national partners, a UN partner, two internationals, that’s the minimum.”’ Some SAGs are permanent, some are standing bodies with a rotating membership and others appear to be constituted on a case-by-case, decision-by-decision basis. In many cases, members are elected: ‘It’s our intention to elect a SAG. I emphasise elect, we don’t appoint. We give people the opportunity to candidate themselves [...] and we give all the members of (Cluster) the opportunity to vote for those candidates. We strongly believe that is the only way in order to ensure a certain level of representatively of the group.’ Interviews suggested Cluster members generally trusted elected SAGs with rotating membership more than SAGs where members were appointed from the same (normally large) agencies, and that it was important to attempt to have representation from NNGOs, even though this had proved challenging in practice in some cases. Elected, representative SAGs were ‘respected and accepted by the rest of the Cluster partners, enabl[ing] us to do a quick planning and a quick response’.

The relationship between the SAG and the larger group also differed. In some cases the SAG made decisions by itself, in others it would consult more broadly within the Cluster and in others it provided decision options and recommendations: ‘If the SAG deliberates on it, whatever decisions we make as a SAG, they’re not binding until and unless they are endorsed by the Cluster membership.’ In general, Cluster members appeared more likely to accept SAG decisions where there had been some degree of input from the broader group. It is also important to note that, for a SAG to function effectively, the CLA must be comfortable to allow the group to make decisions without constantly overruling it. One CC explained, ‘I think the question [...] is how much authority are Cluster leads willing to cede to the Cluster. In countries with agencies that outsource it and see the Cluster as an independent thing, and then it runs as the CLA becomes just another Cluster member, I think it all works much better.’

<sup>48</sup> Some guidance is available through global Clusters, although the interviews we conducted did not suggest these were being used in many cases.

### *Individual decision-making*

In many cases, the CC is the main decision-maker in the Cluster, taking decisions entirely alone (2.8% of those responding to the questionnaire) or after consulting a larger group (53.5% of those responding to the questionnaire).

In general, interviewees felt this approach lacked transparency and reduced trust in decisions, particularly where the CC was not perceived as being particularly independent of the CLA. Even where the CC consulted prior to making decisions, there was a feeling that this consultation could easily be swayed by larger (often UN) agencies and the CLA: 'Because it is a UN mechanism, it gets driven by decision-makers from the UN system.'

One of the most interesting findings of the research concerned the speed and quality of decisions. Interviewees suggested individual decision-making might be quicker in an emergency situation than decisions made by groups. However, this did not appear to be the case. When we correlated questionnaire responses related to the way decisions were made with responses on the speed and the quality of decisions, decisions made by individuals (alone or with consultation of others) were seen as being of the lowest quality and decisions made by the whole group as being of the highest quality.<sup>49</sup> We further tested this result with an ordinal logistic regression model that showed the quality of decisions is significantly different when we consider who makes the decisions.<sup>50</sup>

While groups made better decisions, they did not take any longer to do so. When we considered the correlation between decision-making approach and speed of decisions, decisions by individuals and groups produced fairly similar distributions of scores to those made alone. We further studied this using the same ordinal logistic model as for quality of decisions, and again found this test was in line with these results.<sup>51</sup>

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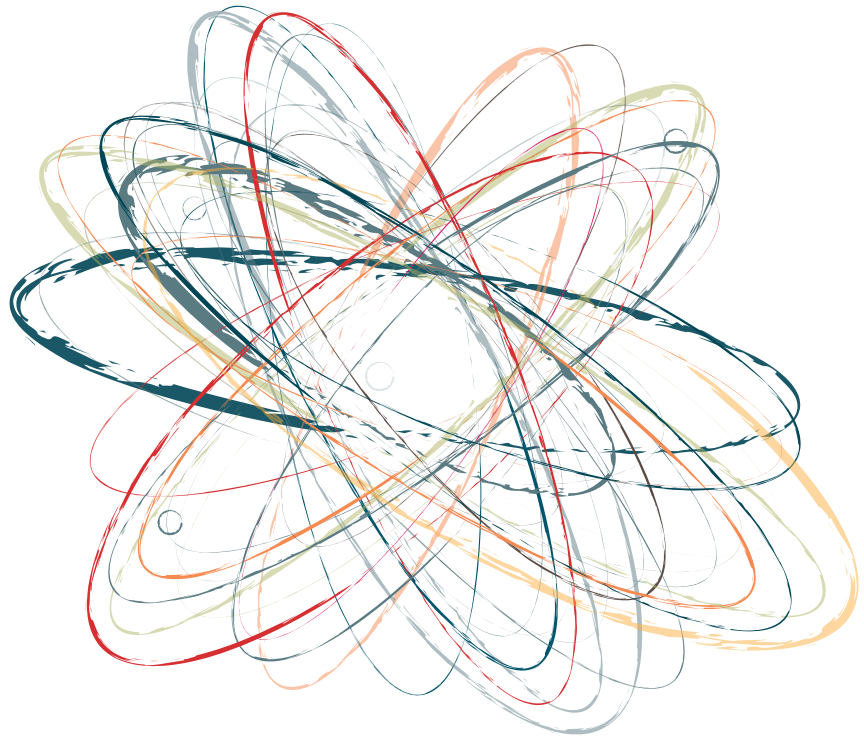
49 To further explain, the median score for the quality of decisions made by individuals is 4 and the mean is approximately 4 as well. For decisions made by the whole group, however, the median score for quality is 5, with the mean approximately 4.7. The sample size for decision-making in a small subgroup (e.g. a SAG) was too small to include in the statistical analysis.

50 In the ordinal logistic regression model used, using a predictor of how decisions were made (individual, small group, whole group or other) with 'individual' as the reference category as it had the largest number of responses, quality of decisions taken by a small group received a p-value of  $p=0.081$  and decisions taken by whole group and by 'other' both received a p-value of  $p<0.001$ , indicating a significant difference between the various ways of making decisions.

51 In the ordinal logistic regression model used, similarly using the same predictors and reference category as for quality, speed of decisions taken by a small group received a p-value of  $p=0.0765$  and decisions taken by the whole group received a p-value of  $p=0.012$  and by 'other' received a p-value of  $p=0.025$ , indicating a significant difference between individual and group decision-making when it came to speed.



All of which suggests individuals (even when consulting others in the Cluster) do not make decisions better than groups; nor do they make them appreciably quicker. Given the drawbacks in terms of accountability, transparency and potential support associated with individual decision-making, it would appear to make sense to spread the decision load whenever possible.



### 3.7.3 Factors related to operating standards and procedures

- When organisations share common approaches to operational activities such as assessment, logistics and distribution, they are more able to coordinate effectively.
- Cluster Members have recognised this and taken steps to align their approaches by creating guidance for how to approach these activities.
- These efforts are most effective where Clusters seek to establish ‘simple rules’ rather than complex guidance, where members have ownership over the process and where actors have pre-existing familiarity with global standards.

As outlined in Section 1, common standards and procedures can be an important outcome of coordination activities: agencies work together to produce common ways of working that allow them to align their programmes. However, for this research, we also hypothesised that common standards and procedures would be an important determinant of successful coordination – that, in fact, the relationship between coordination and common procedures is circular – they support a higher level of coordination, which allows the creation of more common approaches, which in turn leads to higher levels of coordination. As a result, we hypothesised that, *where Cluster member organisations have common ways of doing things when it comes to frequently encountered operational work (such as assessment, logistics, distributions), they will coordinate better.*

The research supported the hypothesis. The results of the questionnaire suggest similarities in operational work processes do help a Cluster work together well, particularly in creating and following a strategy and allowing prioritisation.<sup>52</sup> Interviewees suggested a number of ways in which common operational approaches helped improve coordination: first, they allowed more direct comparison of programmes, especially important where organisations are trying to ensure coverage and reduce gaps. If several organisations are all supposed to be implementing a similar sort of programme, but they are each doing it

52 The question “Most of the organisations represented in the Cluster share clear, simple procedures for commonly encountered operational situations (assessment, logistics, security, distributions, etc.)” was compared to questions about effective Cluster strategy and prioritisation (see methodology) using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.56 indicating a moderate positive correlation. The question was also compared to questions about implementing this strategy and aligning organisational priorities to it and results were statistically similar.

in very different ways, lack of comparability makes it difficult to understand what the gaps in coverage are. Second, shared guidelines increased trust in the professionalism of other agencies: not all organisations will ‘have the capacity to develop a very good guideline’ on their own, but if they are using a common, agreed guideline, they are probably following good practice. Third, the presence of minimum standards in outputs or ways of working afforded them a ‘stronger voice’ in advocating to government and also looked good when reporting to donors. ‘Having the approval and green light from the Cluster helps in our reporting and showing donors we’re following some largely agreed standards.’ Cluster members especially appreciated this function of the Cluster where international guidance, for example, needed adapting to the context or where a new approach was being used and organisations did not have their own guidance to fall back on.

Interviewees also noted value in the time spent trying to align approaches. Even if the end result was not a 100% agreement and rollout of one way of doing something, the discussions leading to that goal were noted to be of significant value – in both relationship-building and shaping the direction of each organisation’s response plans.

However, while this standardisation of procedure brought benefits, including better coordination, it was by no means easy to achieve. As many interviewees told us, ‘We have our own policies.’ One Cluster member explained, ‘Especially on behalf of some of the larger NGOs there’s probably a little bit of arrogance that there’s no way we would change our methodology [...] People should harmonise to what we are doing.’ One CC described the frustration of trying to get organisations with different specialist mandates to agree on a common distribution package.

*‘We have this problem whereas international NGOs, their focus in life is their headquarters’ mandate [...] It’s difficult to get them to programme the same NFIs [non-food items] and commodities using the same assessment and vulnerability criteria [...] It took me four months to get them to agree to a minimum standard NFI basket and still they insisted on having supplementary baskets for their individual programming. So I had to agree to that.’*

Evaluations also note these difficulties (Altay and Labonte, 2014; Matunga, 2013). A further challenge to the use of common procedures and standards is the fear among agencies that, if they do not use their own ways of doing things, they will lose their distinctiveness as an organisation: ‘If everything is completely standardised, it would be difficult to be seen.’

Despite these challenges, many Clusters have been instrumental in allowing members to successfully align their standards and procedures. This alignment appears to have been more successful where Clusters have supported:

- ‘Simple rules’ rather than complex guidance;
- Integration of common standards into existing organisational approaches;
- Ownership of the process;
- Consistency, aided by familiarity with global standards.

In several cases, Clusters in the study were establishing fairly broad, flexible agreements about, for example, how shelters would be designed or what NFIs would be distributed – in other words, creating ‘simple rules’. In complex environments, simple rules ‘provide some minimal boundaries or limits to individual action, which ensures everyone in the group is working according to good practice while allowing each individual a high degree of flexibility and initiative within these boundaries’ (Knox Clarke, 2014).<sup>53</sup> It appeared Clusters that adopted ‘simple rules’ rather than more defined common processes were more likely to succeed in their goal of harmonising approaches. This makes sense – the less organisations must change and the more independent they can remain, the easier it will be to get them to sign on. The simple rules approach also allows organisations with different funding levels or expertise to come together and work in a harmonised way – using the same basic principles, but adapting them to individual circumstances. In the Pakistan shelter Cluster, for example, 10 simple rules were established. Each organisation worked on its own, very different, programmes, but ensured it worked to these 10 principles (Jespersen, 2009). The approach was well received by Cluster members and crisis-affected people.

Simple rules allow an organisation to align around fundamental principles while maintaining the bulk of its own guidance: it does not feel the organisation is being ‘taken over’. Where Clusters were establishing more formalised, strict guidance or standards, interviewees told us they were more likely to be followed where their organisations were able to ‘adapt’ those guidelines and fit them into existing organisational guidance. One interviewee summarised, ‘The good thing about it is it’s not something that’s cut in stone. All NGOs are not the same but the general idea is it helps us in terms of setting the benchmark.’

Similarly, Cluster members we spoke to felt it was a lot easier to take on board guidance they had had a role in developing – as opposed to guidance that was seen as imposed onto the Cluster ‘top-down’. Where organisations are able to get involved in developing the guidance, they seem to find the end product far more valuable. Often, these discussions occur in a TWiG. As with SAGs,

<sup>53</sup> For more on the simple rules approach, see Eisenhardt and Sull (2001); Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998).

interviewees were clear on the importance of having a transparent and open approach to establishing a TWIG. Another way of allowing the organisation to retain control and some ownership over changes to procedures and standards was to present new guidelines as part of learning or peer review activities. This made it clear adoption was voluntary, and gave the organisation space to consider how the new guidance might improve on what they already had.

### 3.8 Factors relating to trust and interpersonal relationships

- Trust between Cluster members supports coordination in a number of ways: in particular, it supports information exchange and reduces competition.
- Some Clusters have established a ‘culture of trust’; others have been influenced by personalities and personal relationships.
- Trust and relationships are more likely where organisations have worked together for some time.

Based on the literature review (Cosgrave et al., 2007; Steets et al., 2014b; Stephenson and Schnitzer, 2006), we hypothesised that *higher levels of trust within a Cluster will lead to better coordination*. We found convincing support for this hypothesis in the interviews and the questionnaire.

Interviewees often brought trust to explain how they were able to overcome obstacles to working together in the Cluster: ‘After building trust, which is a process, it becomes easy for you to compromise, to give in certain things, to surrender certain things and reach a point of agreement’; ‘Without trust, nothing can happen [...] Without trust, there’s no way the Cluster can move.’ Concretely, interviewees described situations where relationships and trust that had been built up in the Cluster had influenced their take-up of common sector guidelines or led to the establishment of a joint programme between several organisations.

In addition, the results of the questionnaire show that, for Clusters where there is a high level of trust among members, working together to identify and implement a strategy and common prioritisation is more successful.<sup>54</sup>

Trust appeared to support coordination in a variety of ways. Interviewees suggested that, when you were able to trust that other agencies would not

<sup>54</sup> The question, ‘There is generally a high degree of trust between Cluster members (as individuals)’ was compared with questions about effective Cluster strategy and prioritisation (see methodology) using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, resulting in a score of 0.49 indicating a moderate positive correlation. The question was also compared with questions about implementing this strategy and aligning organisational priorities to it and results were statistically similar.

use information you provided in competition against you, it became easier to share information. Similarly, when other organisations in the Cluster behaved predictably (by, e.g., following through on agreements) it became easier to agree and act on common positions.

Given the importance of trust to effective coordination, how might Clusters and CCs go about creating trust? Some Clusters – quite a small number – appeared to exhibit a ‘culture of trust’, in which individuals or organisations joining the Cluster would fairly quickly come to trust the CC and the other members: ‘When [participants] trust that this venue brings a lot of expertise and is dedicated and is transparent and doesn’t have any conflict of interest and its sole objective is to streamline and coordinate the activities, they are in a better position to come to the venue to discuss and to accept what is decided.’ As this quote suggests, this appeared to be most likely to happen where some of the other factors considered in this research were in place – in particular where decision-making processes were predictable and transparent, the roles of individual agencies were clear and the Cluster was seen as being independent from the CLA.<sup>55</sup> In addition, interviewees suggested trust would be built quickly where members used each other’s work, recognised each other’s contributions and followed through on commitments with action. In this sense, the creation of trust appears to be a virtuous circle – and one the CC can, to a degree, influence.

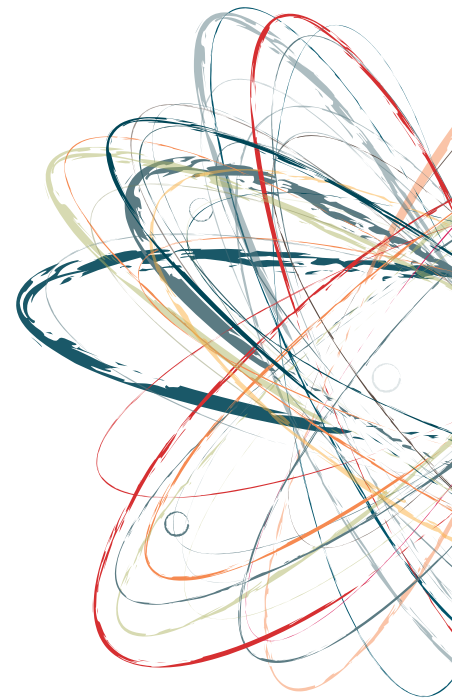
But in many cases the factors contributing to trust appeared to be beyond the influence of the CC. Interviewees spoke of the importance of personalities and personal relationships: ‘When two of the (sector) organisations have a good working relationship, it’s because the people get on and work well together and like each other. When they don’t get on, it’s often personality-driven, people don’t like each other.’ The literature also provided a number of examples of effective coordination based on good relationships between individuals (Beúnza, 2011; Knudsen, 2011; Maxwell and Parker, 2012; Nesení and Guzha, 2009). The importance of pre-existing relationships to inter-organisational coordination in emergencies has also been noted in the field of civil defence and incident command (Avolio, 2007; Buck et al., 2006; Moynihan, 2009; T’Hart, 2010), who suggest these forms of relationship are best built up over time, through experience of working together and through joint training exercises.

In the Clusters, we found relationships and trust did appear more likely to occur if members had been together for some time: ‘It’s something that builds

<sup>55</sup> These findings would support those from other sectors, where ‘swift trust’ has been created (Meyerson et al., 1996). The authors of the research into swift trust also suggest it is more likely to occur where agencies recognise their interdependence, and where they trust the contractor (or, in this case, the CC) to bring together a group of experts, and so to effectively guarantee the expertise of other members of the group.



...for Clusters where there is a high level of trust among members, working together to identify and implement a strategy and common prioritisation is more successful.

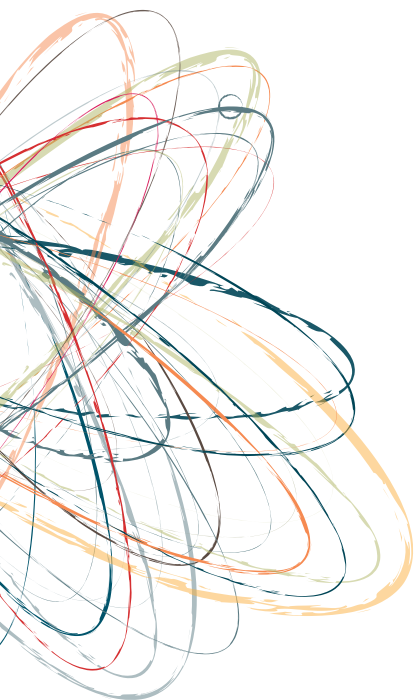




over a period of time, it's not overnight [...] I see a level of trust between agencies who have been in the group for a long time.' 'It really depends on the relationships already built over the years since the rollout of the Cluster here. People know everybody, it's the same circle so it's easy to communicate and to follow.' However, while these sorts of relationships may occur in fairly 'stable' contexts of chronic or recurrent emergencies, current guidance and past experience suggest we would be unwise to rely on this approach to building trust in all cases. Current guidance (which, as mentioned above, sees the Cluster as a temporary solution) does not support the idea of a 'standing' Cluster, and one cannot rely on these relationships in rapid-onset or large-scale emergencies, where 'You get a lot of people that are transitory in nature in their roles' and who won't stay around for long enough to build strong relationships.

In some cases, where the same group of people move from one emergency to another, they bring pre-existing relationships with them. Interviewees described how, 'At a certain point you know half of the people because you've worked with them in other places. So that also helps break this uncertainty and reassures you', and explained that, 'The (sector) is very small and a tightly knit group with good rapport. A lot of existing relationships have already been built [...] People know each other very well.' As in the world of civil defence, this process can be supported through joint training of sectoral specialists, who are likely to be involved in the Clusters. The evaluation of the global logistics Cluster noted that Cluster members 'consistently reference the purpose and value' of a training simulation 'as building relationships that become useful in the field' (Majewski et al., 2012: 51).

Trust, then, appears to be a vital element of successful coordination, and both the actions of the CC and the provision of sectoral training can contribute to its development in the Clusters. However, it remains the case that international humanitarian operations, built around the insertion of groups of outside experts into a complex and pressurised situation for limited periods of time, are not easy conditions in which to put the elements of trust-building in place.



## 4. Conclusion – what do we know about coordination in the Clusters?

This research set out to answer two questions: *What is the optimum level of coordination in the humanitarian Clusters? And: What are the conditions required to achieve successful Cluster coordination during a humanitarian response?*

We started with the assumption that the ‘ideal’ of coordination was for disparate organisations to come together to work on a single common plan, using the same approaches, ideally under a single leadership structure – a form we have called, in this paper, ‘collaborative coordination’.

However, our research suggested this form of coordination was extremely rare in humanitarian action. It appears that, for most organisations in most contexts, the costs of this type of coordination outweigh the benefits. Instead, humanitarian organisations have, with greater or lesser degrees of success, pursued a form of collaboration we have termed ‘alignment’. They have maintained a fairly high degree of organisational distinctiveness and autonomy, conducting separate programmes under – effectively – separate leadership structures, but have worked with one another to try and ensure these programmes complement one another, follow the same basic principles and cover sectoral and geographical gaps and overlaps.

This approach to coordination allows increased effectiveness and efficiency, while also aligning with the structural realities of an atomised humanitarian system. It may also – arguably – represent a successful adaptation to a complex, rapidly changing environment, where a decentralised approach to strategy development and implementation allows greater speed and flexibility than a more monolithic, centralised approach.

However, it seems – at least to the authors – as if the Cluster system was originally designed to support a higher, ‘collaborative’ level of coordination, and has subsequently been informally adapted to support this ‘alignment’ approach. It would be useful for IASC to clarify ‘how much’ coordination the Clusters are expected to achieve. If the aim is to foster alignment, some structural and procedural changes might be required to allow this to happen more effectively.<sup>56</sup>

Turning to the conditions required to support effective coordination in the Clusters: we began with a series of factors that we hypothesised would lead to better coordination. The research provided support to the majority of these

“

...humanitarian organisations have, with greater or lesser degrees of success, pursued a form of collaboration we have termed ‘alignment’.

”

<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, on the basis of this research it is not possible to say what would be needed if the aim is to achieve the collaboration level, as we did not find any Clusters that had successfully achieved this level of coordination across the spectrum of their activities. It is possible, however, that this was a result of the lack of a representative sample of Clusters for interview, and that collaboration is occurring beyond this group.

hypotheses – coordination is more effective in the Clusters where:

- Tasks meet individual organisations’ needs;
- The Cluster operates independently from the CLA;
- Participating agencies have clear and agreed roles and responsibilities;
- Effective information management systems are in place;
- Clear and agreed decision-making processes are in place;
- Cluster member organisations have common standards and procedures for frequently encountered operational work (such as assessment, logistics, distributions);
- There are high levels of trust.

“

... organisations with similar cultures do appear to be more likely to be able to coordinate effectively. However, heterogeneous groups can also coordinate effectively – although it takes more work.

”

In two cases, our hypotheses were shown to be inadequate, or oversimplified. We found organisations were not necessarily more interested in coordinating around complex tasks, but rather around tasks that are of interest to all members; that allow members to focus on problems outside the group itself; and that are clearly better addressed as a group; and where there is no alternative forum.

Similarly, we found it is not just the facilitation skills of the coordinator that matter, but also technical competence and sectoral knowledge.

For two other (important) hypotheses, the results were more nuanced. We assumed *Coordination will become more effective the longer the coordination body is in place*, but found coordination could occur effectively in new Clusters as well as in older Clusters (disproving the hypothesis). However, the factors that supported coordination early in the life of the Cluster differed from those that supported coordination when the Cluster had been in place for longer.

We also hypothesised that *Similar organisations will be able to coordinate activities more effectively*. This does appear to be the case most of the time: organisations with similar cultures do appear to be more likely to be able to coordinate effectively. However, heterogeneous groups can also coordinate effectively – although it takes more work.

While we had assumed that *Smaller groups will achieve higher levels of coordination*, we did not find any strong evidence to support this. Larger Clusters had addressed the problem of size through a series of organisational arrangements, and so size alone did not seem to affect Cluster performance as a coordination body.

And while we hypothesised that *Coordination will be more effective where there*

*are active subnational Clusters*, we were not able to find enough situations where subnational Clusters were in place and working to support or refute the proposition. We were, however, able to identify some factors that would make subnational Clusters more effective, on the continued assumption that this would improve coordination as a whole.

In addition, the research identified a number of factors that are of interest but the initial hypotheses had not addressed. Resources, unsurprisingly, matter: effective Clusters are almost invariably well resourced (although it is not clear that the opposite is true). Where Clusters become involved in funding allocation, the ability to coordinate other activities can be compromised, unless measures are put in place to address the competition that often arises around discussions on funding. The relationship between Clusters and government structures has still not been, in most cases, addressed effectively. Effective coordination can occur where the government leads the Cluster, but government involvement is less consistent and has less effect where the government is a participant. Finally, it was striking how important the process of meeting in the Clusters was seen to be by many interviewees, irrespective of the 'hard' outputs. This process allowed participants to see the 'big picture' of the response, and this was felt to have real value in programme design and implementation.

Overall, it was clear there is no single factor, or single combination of factors, that can guarantee coordination will occur successfully. Different Clusters had found different paths to success. There appear to be two main reasons for this.

The first is that many of these success factors overlap, so a Cluster can achieve the same result through a different combination of actions. For example, trust underlies much of the work of the more successful Clusters – but this trust can be achieved as a result of working together over time or (to a degree) as a result of having similar procedures, so organisations behave in the ways others expect (Meyerson et al., 1996). So a focus on aligning procedures can partially substitute for longer-term relationships.

The second reason has to do with the heterogeneity of the Clusters. Clusters are expected to undertake a broad range of activities, in very different contexts. As a result, they can be quite different in form and function from one another. What works to coordinate capacity-building in a situation of protracted crises will not necessarily be the same as what works to coordinate assessment activities in a rapid-onset emergency.

This heterogeneity underscores another important point about the Clusters.

“ Clusters have, for some time, been fairly effective at adapting to their context. ”

While the system has often been criticised for being monolithic and inflexible, our research suggested the opposite was in fact the case: the Clusters have, for some time, been fairly effective at adapting to their context – establishing relationships with the state; changing and redesigning information management systems; and establishing a wide variety of internal structures and processes. The challenge here might be less one of creating a more flexible system and more one of capturing successes and models to build on good practice and prevent too much heterogeneity.

Capturing good practice and building on success is, of course, a recipe for incremental change rather than radical transformation. Is this the correct approach to take towards the Clusters? Or would it make more sense to replace the system with something entirely different? This research tends to concur with previous work, which is, typically, broadly favourable: ‘Clusters are perceived, in general terms, to justify the significant investment that has been made in them [...] there remains little opposition to working through these structures, and interviews for this study support this view’ (ALNAP, 2012: 62; see also Steets et al., 2010). The majority of evaluations and articles considered for this report (16 of 25) were positive,<sup>57</sup> and several note that, where Clusters did not exist, coordination was less effective until Clusters, or Cluster-like structures, were put in place (Majewski et al., 2012; Maxwell and Parker, 2012; Vega, 2011).<sup>58</sup> The Clusters are not perfect, and their performance varies significantly from one situation to another. However, many Clusters have demonstrated flexibility and considerable success in supporting the alignment of members’ activities. And no better models appear, to date, to have presented themselves. In the next section, then, we assume that the basic Cluster approach will be retained for the foreseeable future, and consider how Cluster performance, in the area of coordination, might be improved.

<sup>57</sup> Four more were neutral on the effectiveness of the Cluster.

<sup>58</sup> At a recent ALNAP meeting, we conducted a ‘straw poll’ of around 100 participants on how effective they thought the IASC coordination system was. While by no means a representative sample, the result was around 2.5 out of 5 – neither particularly good nor particularly bad but suggesting ample room for improvement.

## 5. Recommendations and next steps

Based on the research and conclusions above, we propose a series of recommendations, based largely on existing best practice and aimed at improving the ability of the Clusters to support coordinated humanitarian action.

1. The Cluster system appears to have been designed to provide a level of coordination that may be neither feasible nor desirable in humanitarian contexts. IASC may wish to further *clarify the degree of coordination the Clusters are expected to achieve*. Individual Clusters should also clarify their approach to coordination – broadly, is this ‘bottom-up’ (building up coordinated action from the discrete actions of members) or ‘top-down’ (expecting that members design their activities in the basis of an agreed common strategy)?
2. Analysis and strategy developed ‘from the bottom up’ can be successful only where information is received from all areas and populations in need of emergency assistance. To the degree that Clusters aim to ‘build up’ a common picture and strategy from the aggregated information and activities of Cluster members, *Clusters should ensure their membership contains organisations operating in all areas affected by the crisis and obtains information on all vulnerable population groups within these areas*. This might be achieved by determining ‘lead agencies’ for specific geographical areas (as some Clusters already do).
3. Similarly, Clusters can successfully develop emergency strategies only if they are aware of the effects of programmes and interventions on the course of the emergency. *Clusters should give more attention to monitoring the situation, and the effects of relief activities on this situation*.
4. Currently, Clusters are expected to fulfil a large range of activities. *Clusters should agree among themselves which of these activities are priorities*, to allow the most effective use of time and resources. In doing so, Clusters might find it useful to recognise that effective coordination is more likely when tasks meet the needs of all members; are better done by a group than an individual agency; cannot be done in another forum; and address external, rather than internal, issues.
5. Clusters will inevitably be requested to provide information and support to non-operational activities, which are not of obvious or direct benefit to all participants in the Clusters. *External actors should minimise these requests; explain the way information provided by the Cluster has*



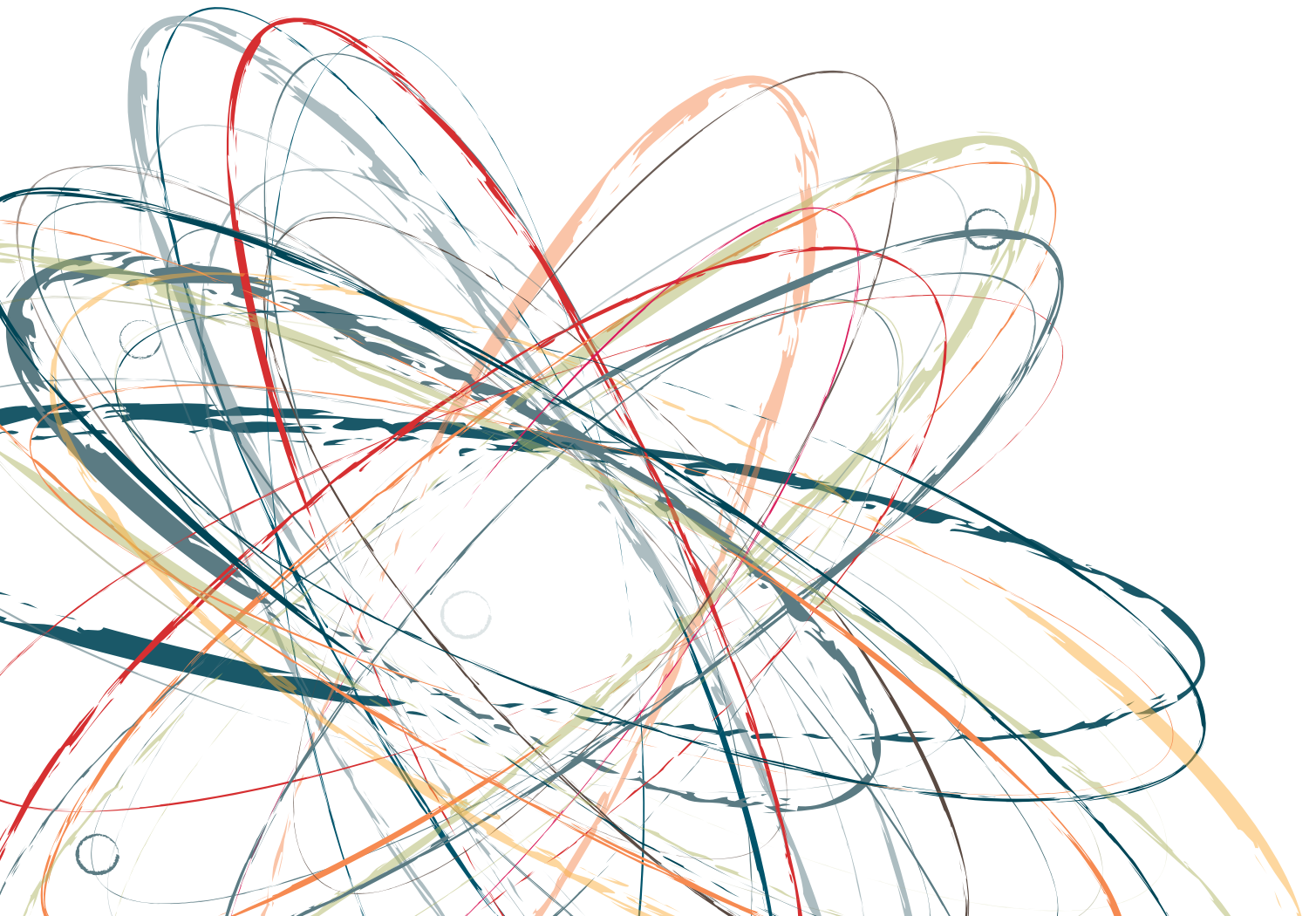
*been used and the effects that it has had; and be prepared to provide additional resources* for information collection and analysis where required.

6. *Clusters should aim to have clear criteria for membership.* These will be influenced by the context and by the priorities agreed by the Cluster (see Recommendation 3 above). Clusters may wish to be explicit about the expectations of members, particularly around joint ownership of the Cluster: How can members demonstrate joint ownership? Clusters might also consider ‘tiered’ membership, with different expectations for members that participate in larger meetings and members that participate in the SAG.
7. The inclusion of national NGOs in coordination mechanisms can significantly improve the quality of information and of situation analysis available to Cluster members. As NNGOs are more likely to remain in place for the long term, Clusters built around NNGOs are also more likely to develop the relationships of trust that underpin successful coordination relationships. At the same time, there are many constraints to national NGO participation, including the location of meetings, language and access to computers and the Internet. Cultural differences may make it harder to establish agreed procedures and ways of working. Many NNGOs will not have significant operational capacity. *The criteria for membership of the Cluster (above) should consider these issues, with a view to determining how national and local civil society organisations can best be represented in the Clusters.* Clusters may find it useful to work with NNGO networks as a way of better articulating with national NGOs, and may need to provide national NGO representatives access to computers, software and training.
8. There appears to be, currently, an unresolved tension between the desire for Clusters to be ‘short-term’ solutions to situations where government mechanisms are unable to coordinate effectively and the finding that Clusters are more likely to establish trust between members (and to support rapid response) where they are longer-term, standing bodies. Some Clusters appear to remain established in parallel with government bodies for too long, effectively duplicating government functions; others appear to close too soon, without handing over effectively to the state. Where the state has some coordination capacity, and is not seen to compromise on humanitarian values and principles, *further consideration should go into establishing long-term, standing mechanisms under the leadership of government actors.* This is a priority area, and one where more research into the experience of successful Clusters/coordination bodies is required.

9. Clusters are, in many cases, stronger at the national level than at the field level, and links between subnational Clusters and national Clusters are often weak. When establishing Clusters or similar coordination structures, *subnational Clusters should be built into information management and other systems from the start*. More radically, it may be worth considering coordination systems that are scalable and built up from the field, rather than built down from the capital. In this structure – similar to that used in many Incident Command/Emergency Management Systems (Howitt and Leonard, 2009), the primary unit of coordination would be at the field level and sectoral coordination bodies would be only enabled where the geographical spread of the emergency required it.
10. Clusters are more effective at supporting coordination *where the Cluster CLA plays an ‘arm’s-length’ role*. At the least, this should entail funding the Cluster from a separate budget line, ensuring CLA staff attend Cluster meetings (and not expecting the CC to represent the CLA) and ensuring decisions are made by a group representative of the broader Cluster membership.
11. The research suggests decisions made by groups are no slower than those made by individuals. They are also of better quality, and more likely to be supported by the group. With this in mind, *all Clusters should ensure decision-making involves the Cluster membership, either as a whole group or by establishing decision-making bodies that are representative of participating agencies*, that are chosen by participating agencies and that consult participating agencies where possible.
12. Information management processes lie at the heart of the work of the Cluster. Currently, *Clusters are attempting to manage up to seven discrete types of information. Clusters should clarify which types of information are most important for their members. They should ensure their information management processes address (and are resourced to support) all phases of information management, not just information collection*. There is significant information management expertise and experience within the Clusters, and this, again, is an area where further analysis of experience and lessons learnt could be very profitable.
13. Clusters are more effective where their members have similar approaches (procedures) to the provision of emergency support services. The research suggests *Clusters should focus on establishing fairly broad, ‘simple rules’, developed on the basis of existing organisational guidance*, which participating organisations can adopt voluntarily.



14. Cluster members highly value the 'providing a bigger picture' function, but it can be accomplished only when Clusters have a complete understanding of needs and resources on the ground. *Donors in particular can support this process by ensuring that, where funding is given outside of Cluster/ pooled funding mechanisms, Clusters are made aware of these activities.*



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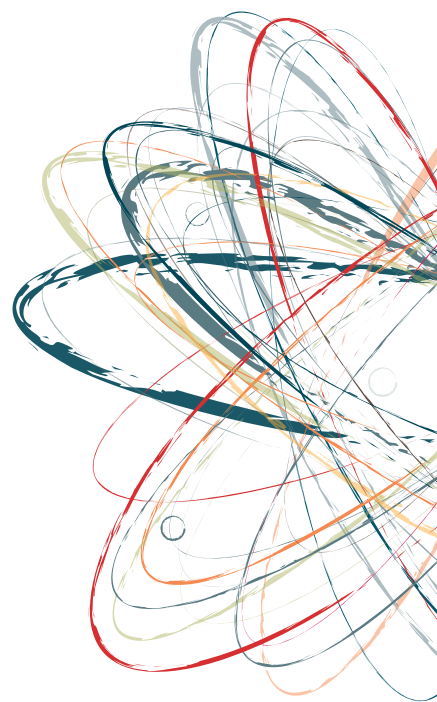
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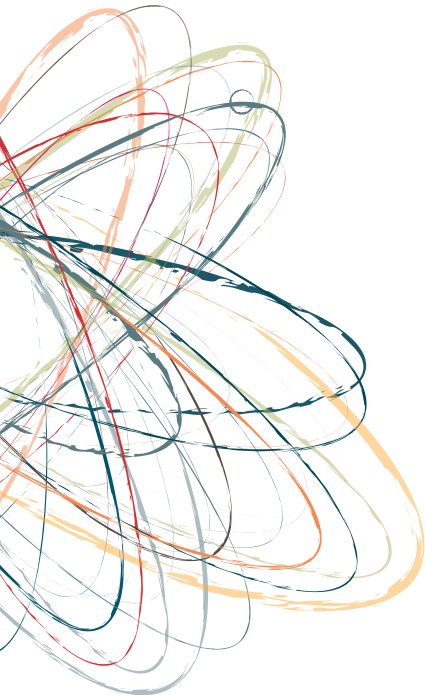
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## Annex A: Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach to address the research questions:

1. What is the optimum level of coordination in the humanitarian Clusters?
  2. What are the conditions required to achieve successful Cluster coordination during a humanitarian response?
- The first research question emerged during the research process itself. We had initially assumed Clusters should be aiming for as much coordination as possible – that is, in the language used in this paper, that the ‘collaboration’ level was the optimum level of coordination. The survey questionnaire was designed on this assumption. However, after initiating the research, we discovered this might be an incorrect assumption, so introduced the question of the ‘optimum level’ of coordination into the interviews and the review of evaluations.

In answering the second question, the research sought to address a number of hypotheses:

- *Coordination will be more successful on tasks that meet individual organisations’ needs.*
- *Coordination will be more successful when the Cluster undertakes tasks that are complex or difficult.*
- *Coordination will become more effective the longer the coordination body is in place.*
- *Smaller groups will achieve higher levels of coordination.*
- *Similar organisations will be able to coordinate activities more effectively.*
- *A Cluster that operates independently from, though with the strong support of, the CLA will achieve higher levels of coordination.*
- *Where there are active subnational Clusters, as well as national, coordination will be more effective.*
- *Coordination will be more effective where participating agencies have clear and agreed roles and responsibilities.*
- *Good facilitation skills on the part of the CC will lead to better coordination in the Cluster.*
- *Effective information management will lead to better coordination in the Clusters.*
- *Clear and agreed decision-making processes will lead to better coordination in the Clusters.*
- *Where Cluster member organisations have common ways of doing things when it comes to frequently encountered operational work (such as assessment, logistics, distributions), they will coordinate better.*
- *Higher levels of trust within a Cluster will lead to better coordination*

The majority of these hypotheses were developed as a result of a literature review undertaken in 2013/14. The literature review made use of:

- The ALNAP Evaluative Resource Database (since renamed the HELP, the Humanitarian Evaluation and Learning Portal) using the search terms ‘leadership’ and ‘coordination’;
- Google Scholar, using the search terms ‘humanitarian leadership’; ‘humanitarian coordination’; ‘unified command’; ‘emergency coordination’ (in all cases using the top 100 results by citation, excluding all resources related to military organisation – but not to other civil defence organisations – and excluding all results that were not peer-reviewed);
- ‘Snowballing’: taking recommendations from experts in the humanitarian and emergency management spheres, then taking references from these documents.

The literature review considered only documents written in English.

Further hypotheses, which emerged during the second round of the literature review (the review of evaluations, below) and initial interviews, were added to this list.

The hypotheses were then tested against information gained through:

- A review of evaluations of the humanitarian Clusters;
- Statistical analysis of results of an online questionnaire completed by a semi-purposive sample of members of Clusters/Working Groups;
- Semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of over 100 Cluster members and CCs.

Participants in the questionnaire and interviews came from health, shelter, nutrition, food security, logistics, protection, child protection, WASH, education and camp coordination and camp management (CCCM) Clusters in Afghanistan, Chad, DRC, Haiti, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Turkey, Yemen, Zimbabwe and at Global Cluster headquarters. Additional inputs came from use of data from a Food Security Cluster evaluation exercise that occurred in over 20 additional countries (for more see Annex C).



## Review of evaluations and articles

The literature review used to test the hypotheses concentrated exclusively on evaluations and articles related to the humanitarian Clusters (rather than the broader set of documents related to humanitarian leadership, humanitarian partnerships, coordination groups and bodies that formed the initial literature review).

To identify evaluations, we reviewed the first 150 results of a search for ‘humanitarian Cluster evaluation’ in both Google and Google Scholar, as well as a search on ALNAP’s HELP, where we searched for ‘Cluster’ in the title of all evaluations. Finally, we searched all global Cluster websites using the search function to look for ‘evaluation’. We identified and used:

- Two evaluations of the Cluster approach;
- Three global evaluations (evaluations of specific global Clusters, looking at multiple country case studies);
- Nineteen evaluations of specific Clusters at country level, of which seven were reviewed (note: 15 of the 19 were from the shelter Cluster. To prevent the review overemphasising results from one sectoral Cluster, only three of these – one each from Asia, Africa and Latin America – were considered);
- Three self-assessments of Cluster performance;
- Three peer-reviewed journal articles;
- Four other journal articles (where it was not clear if editorial policy included peer review).

Of the 22 documents, seven had been included in the original literature review.

## Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire was to establish whether there were any statistically significant relationships between the presence of various factors in the Cluster and the ‘effectiveness’ of the Cluster in terms of its ability to develop a vision, establish a common strategy and support the implementation of a common strategy.

The questionnaire was administered between August 2013 and September 2014, and consisted of two versions – an early questionnaire and a main questionnaire. The two questionnaires were quite similar, with only small differences between them, which are outlined below. The full questionnaire (questions and responses) can be found in Annex C: Cluster Questionnaire Questions and Data, which is available as a separate download from [\(LINK\)](#).

In addition to the questionnaires administered by ALNAP, we were able to embed several key questions in a meta-evaluation exercise of the Food Security Clusters in over 30 countries. As this evaluation was occurring at the same time as our research, we took this approach to not overwhelm country Clusters with multiple questionnaires. Given the challenges faced with all of the questionnaire results (more in the constraints section at the end of this Annex), we tended to use the questionnaire only to support evidence found in the interviews and literature review, and have not based any findings or recommendations on questionnaire results alone.



## Who participated?

In an attempt to establish a purposive sample, we contacted over 60 country Clusters with an invitation to participate in the questionnaire. In the end, 24 Clusters participated. For these 24 Clusters, the questionnaire was sent to the entire Cluster membership (contacts provided by the CC) and participants were invited to participate.

We had responses from members of food security, protection, WASH, shelter, CCCM, education, health, telecommunications, nutrition, logistics, shelter and child protection<sup>59</sup> Clusters/Subnational Clusters and Working Groups.

We received a total of 362 responses to the questionnaire, 219 (64.2%) male responders and 122 (35.8%) female. Participants identified with a wide range of nationalities.

We also asked Cluster members about their length of experience in the Cluster: 41% of respondents had been working in the Clusters for over two years and 39% for less than a year.

## A proxy for coordination: analysing the questionnaire results

In using the questionnaire, we aimed to establish the degree to which there was a statistically valid correlation between the presence/absence of a certain factor and effective coordination in the Cluster. The questionnaire did not, however, include a direct question on the effectiveness of coordination in the Clusters (see constraints, below). Rather, there were four questions which, taken together, were used as a proxy for successful Cluster coordination. These questions are suitable for two reasons. First, in terms of content they address the main aspects of coordination that have been themes throughout this research – presence of a shared vision, strategy and prioritisation, ability to implement these as a group and degree to which members are able to align their own organisations' plans and priorities with those of the Cluster (but they also assume the higher the level of coordination, the better – see constraints, below). Second, when we looked at the responses we found these questions had in general been answered quite similarly. That is, if someone rated one question highly, they generally tended to rate the others highly as well.

In also looking at the results from the Food Security Cluster questionnaire, we are able to further confirm that questions about the Cluster's ability to provide a common vision, strategy and prioritisation for humanitarian response are a reasonable proxy for the effectiveness of coordination. We compared the results of the question, which was asked in this questionnaire but not our main Cluster questionnaire, 'Overall, how effective is the existing food security coordination mechanism?' with the results of two questions<sup>60</sup> about creating a common vision, strategy and prioritisation. The results indicate that respondents who scored highly on the overall effectiveness question in turn scored highly on the other two.<sup>61</sup> Although this is not a perfect comparison, given the wording of these questions, this does reinforce the suitability of the questions we chose to act as a proxy for

59 Sub-Clusters such as child protection were included where they operated independently of the protection Cluster.

60 Specifically, 'Coordination has led to a common vision for addressing food security in humanitarian operations' and 'Coordination has led to organisations creating a common strategy and common priorities for the food security response.'

61 This resulted in a Spearman's rho correlation of 0.4882 for the question about vision and 0.4746 for the question about strategy and priorities, indicating a moderate to high correlation among the three questions.

Cluster effectiveness in the main questionnaire.

In the end, we elected to combine the median scores for two questions:

- How effective is the Cluster in creating a common vision for your sector's humanitarian operations in the country?
- How effective is the Cluster in identifying common priorities and creating a strategy in order to achieve this vision?<sup>62</sup>

These questions were answered identically by 58% of respondents, and a further 29% were within one unit away (for example 4, 5). However, we felt these questions were an incomplete proxy for coordination on their own, therefore we decided to also look at two additional questions:

- How effective is the Cluster in supporting or implementing common plans for sectoral operation in the country?
- To what degree are Cluster member organisations able to align their own priorities and the Cluster strategy?

Together, we felt these four questions were a suitable proxy for effective Cluster coordination in terms of content. However, interestingly, while the first two questions received quite similar scores, the second two questions deviated from those scores enough that we decided to look at the correlations separately, once with the combined median of the first two questions, then a second and third time with the latter questions.

## Interviews

Given the challenges and limitations of the questionnaire for this research question, we shifted our emphasis to place more weight on evidence from the interviews. In total, 109 Individuals were interviewed. Primarily, these individuals had also participated in the questionnaire, and were from Clusters that had either scored relatively high or low on questions about Cluster effectiveness as well as some of the key factors relating to our hypothesis. We aimed to speak to five to six individuals from each Cluster we decided to interview, one of whom was the CC. In most Clusters, we succeeded.

In addition, we interviewed several people involved in the Clusters at a global level, as well as several individuals with extensive experience in the Cluster system. A list of interviewees can be found in Annex B. Interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured format. They aimed to:

- Clarify how interviewees understood the coordination function of the Clusters;
- Identify the factors interviewees felt supported coordination, and how they supported coordination;
- Establish whether interviewees felt there were any relationships between the factors we had identified in the hypotheses and coordination (where these factors had not already been mentioned) and what the nature of any relationship was.

Given the number of hypotheses, questions related to the third element of enquiry – the hypotheses – changed from one interviewee to the next, to ensure a number of interviewees had considered each factor: no interviewee

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<sup>62</sup> This question was not asked in the initial questionnaire, so for those responses we had to use a further proxy, a combination of two questions that together address the two aspects of this question: 'How effective is the Cluster in creating a strategy in order to achieve this vision?' and 'To what degree are Cluster members able to identify and agree on priorities for the sector in addressing the humanitarian crisis in the country?' As nearly 50% of participants scored identically on these two questions, this is an appropriate proxy for the responses from the initial questionnaire.

was asked to consider all of the factors.

All interviews were transcribed and coded using MaxQDA software.

## Analysis

In our analysis, we looked at the balance of evidence in favour and against the hypotheses from all three areas: the interviews, the review of evaluations and the questionnaire. In some cases, where the hypothesis had not been addressed by the questionnaire, we considered evidence only from the two other sources.

Where all available sources concurred, we tended to conclude that the hypothesis had been supported or had been refuted. Where there was disagreement within or between the main sources, we noted this in the report, and in making conclusions gave the greatest weight to the interview evidence.

## Limitations and constraints

The research faced a number of limitations and constraints.

The first related to the sample – both for questionnaires and interviews (as the interviews were based on the questionnaire). By necessity, this was a convenience sample: although we started with a list of 60 country clusters, balanced to reflect location and sector, we received responses from only 24. We cannot therefore say with any certainty that the questionnaire or the interviews accurately reflect all Clusters (although we have, wherever possible, triangulated with the literature).

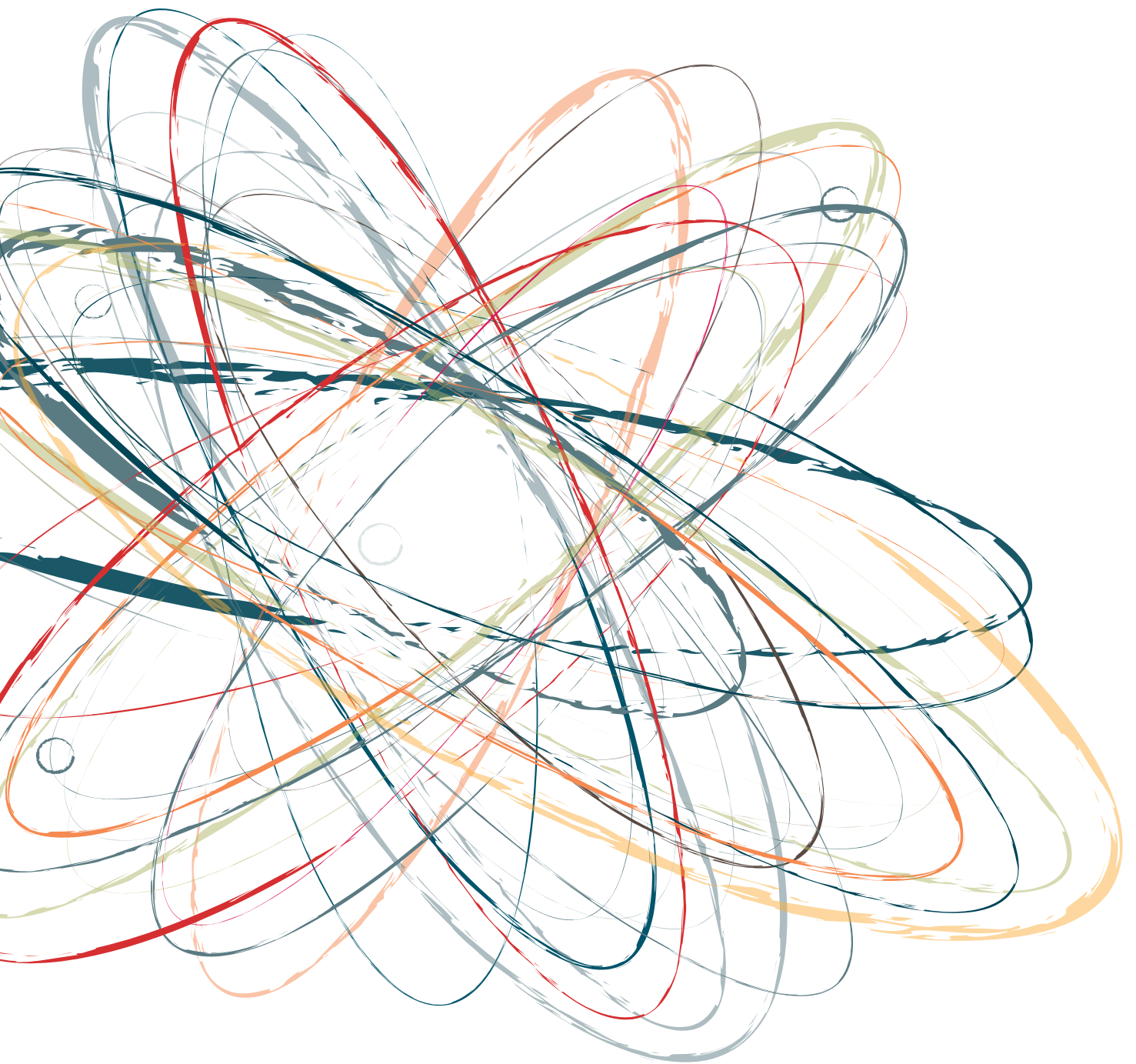
The sample also underrepresents the views of those who choose not to participate in the Cluster system, or who are not able, for one reason or another, to engage with the Clusters. While we attempted to speak to individuals representing organisations that do not participate in Clusters, the number of these interviews was small.

The second main constraint related to the questionnaire, and to assumptions that were made around the design of the questionnaire, and particularly assumptions related to the construct of coordination.

At the time of the questionnaire design, we assumed successful ‘coordination’ meant the design and execution of a single, common plan. The questions we used as proxies for coordination, as a result, related to the ability of the Cluster to design and implement a single Cluster strategy. As the research shows, this is only one way of thinking of coordination, and assumes coordination is successful only where it assumes a very high level (the level we have called collaboration in this paper). There is a possibility that the questionnaire may have overlooked correlations with lower levels of coordination – and the results of the questionnaire should be read with this caveat. The questionnaire was also developed fairly early in the research process, so made use of a preliminary set of hypotheses. As a result, it was unable to test hypotheses (even imperfectly) that dealt with factors related to the task, resources and several factors related to composition and to leadership of the Cluster.

Finally, the questionnaire relied on respondents self-scoring. A potentially more objective approach of using external observers to score results was not possible given time and resource constraints.

For all of these reasons, we did not use questionnaire results alone to validate or refute any of the hypotheses.



## Annex B: List of interviewees

Below is a list of those individuals we interviewed for this study. In addition to this list, we must note that two additional individuals were interviewed but wished to remain anonymous. These names are not on the below list.

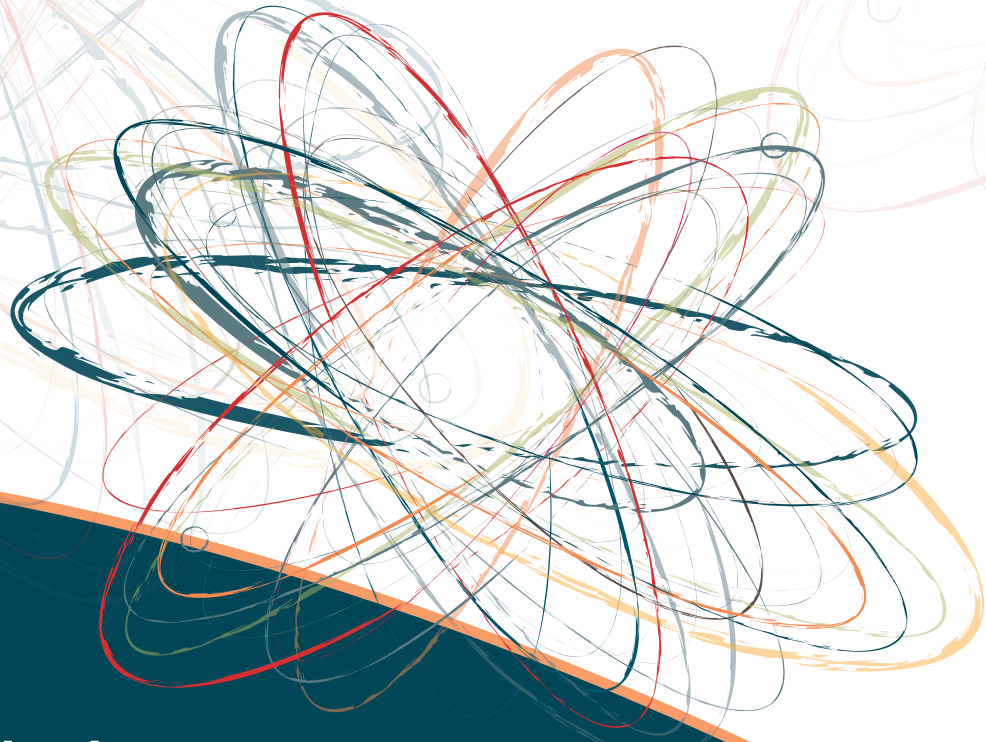
- Saif Abdulmohsen
- Norman Franklin C. Agustin
- Wigdan Adam Ahmed
- Wafa'a Alsaidy
- Mo'een Alwageeh
- Alshawki A'Malik
- Misgana Amanuel
- Javad Amoozegar
- Aaron Anderson
- Floriano Aranez
- Joseph Ashmore
- Louise Aubin
- Nasir Aziz
- Francesco Baldo
- Martin Barasa
- Rodeliza Barrientos
- Mariel Bayangos
- Wayne Bleier
- Kenneth Chulley
- Nilrey Jim Cornites
- Woldeselassie Deboch
- Arnaud de Coupigny
- Anis Daifalla
- Maria Sarah G. Delos Santos
- Paul Del Rosario
- Deng Mareng Deng
- Samson Desrie
- Stef Deutekom
- Nestor de Veyra
- Begna Edo
- Ali Nasr Elbadawi
- Patrick Elliott
- Alam Fakhre
- Eureka Fuentes
- Rene Gerard Galera
- Aashima Garg
- Qaseem Ghausy
- Miguel Gomez
- Christine Goyer
- Tawanda Guvi
- Haifa'a Harun
- Selahuddin You Hashim
- Dher Hayo
- Jessica Hedman
- Vladimir Hernandez
- Edwin Horca
- Lubaba Hussein
- Isatu Kajue
- Ali Ahmed Ibrahim Khalil
- Jumma Khan
- Elizabeth Kigen
- Dominik Koepl
- Lea Krivchenia
- Geovani Lapina
- Sasha Logie
- Sultan Mahmood
- Manuel Marques Pereira
- Leo Matunga
- Jean McCluskey
- Sean McGirk
- Donna McSkimming
- Nicolas Meron
- Ghamdan Mofarreh
- Ayanle Mohamoud
- Severine Moisy
- Maria Moita
- J.F. Mona Saroinsong
- Lisa Monaghan
- Evelyn Moorehead
- Suresh Murugesu
- Moises Musico
- Nuno Nunes
- Caroline Nyamayemombe
- Kamal Olleri
- Jackson Omona
- Sheena Carmel D. Opulencia-Calub
- Lei Orioste
- Jørn-Casper Øwre
- Dominique Porteaud
- Allison Prather
- Feral Vincent R. Quitlong
- Constantino (Chappy) Rago
- Mohammed Zahidur Rahman
- Zulfiqar Rao
- Jennifer Roberts
- Davide Rossi
- Elena Rovaris
- Yasser Saad
- Nevins Saeed
- Tawfiq Saleh
- Francis Sarpong-Kumankuma
- Graham Saunders
- Luca Scarpa
- Maryanna Schmuki
- Yvonne Serrano Duque
- James Shepherd-Barron
- Kavita Shukla
- Corazon Siya
- Victoria Stodart
- Sandrine Tiller
- Manuel Torres de Lara
- Jonathan Valdez
- Richard Wecker
- Dave Wemyss
- Judith Wolff
- Shafiq Ur Rahman Yousafzai
- Buthaina Zaid





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