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EVALUATION REPORTS

Agenda item 6

INFORMATION NOTE ON THE INTER- AGENCY REAL-TIME EVALUATION OF THE APPLICATION OF THE INTER- AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE CLUSTER APPROACH IN THE SOUTH ASIA EARTHQUAKE

*For information**



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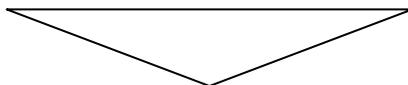
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DRAFT DECISION*



The Board takes note of the eight key actions and the two recommendations of the “Information Note on the Inter-Agency Real-Time Evaluation of the Application of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Cluster Approach in the South Asia Earthquake” (WFP/EB.2/2006/6-D).

* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the Decisions and Recommendations document (WFP/EB.2/2006/16) issued at the end of the session.



INTRODUCTION

1. At the annual informal consultation on evaluation in June 2006, the Office of Evaluation (OEDE) informed the Board that it would share the results of joint evaluations of interest to the Board. This information note summarizes the main findings of the Inter-Agency Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) of the Application of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster Approach in the South Asia Earthquake, managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at the request of IASC. The final draft of the RTE was discussed in March 2006 by the IASC Working Group, which recommended key actions, endorsed by the IASC Principals in April 2006. The RTE outcomes will be fed into the planned IASC self-assessment of cluster roll-out countries. The main findings given in this information note have been extracted from the final draft of the RTE.

BACKGROUND

2. In September 2005, in the context of the humanitarian reform process to enhance overall humanitarian response, IASC developed the cluster lead agency system to respond more effectively to identified gaps in humanitarian assistance and protection in large-scale emergencies and existing situations of internal displacement. The cluster lead agency system should be applied to major new emergencies as of 2006.
3. Nine global-level clusters were created: logistics, telecommunications, emergency shelter, camp management, protection, water and sanitation, nutrition, health, and early recovery. IASC confirmed the leading roles of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in education, WFP in food aid, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for refugees, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for agricultural livelihoods. No clusters were created for these sectors, as no global gaps to be filled by inter-agency mechanisms were identified. For WFP, the gap-filling and operational nature of the cluster approach are particularly important elements.
4. At the global level, cluster leads are accountable for ensuring adequate and predictable preparedness and response, working with relevant actors and agencies. At the field level, the cluster leads provide support to the Humanitarian Coordinator; they do not carry out all activities themselves, but act as "providers of last resort". Cluster leads are required to take all necessary action to ensure commonly accepted standards for timely, adequate and effective humanitarian action that achieves the expected impact in the specific cluster area.
5. The earthquake in Pakistan was the first test case for the cluster approach, which at the time was still being elaborated. In November 2005, the IASC Working Group requested an inter-agency RTE¹ focusing on the practical implications of the cluster approach in Pakistan.

¹ The final draft of the RTE is available on the IASC Web site: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc.



PURPOSE OF THE REAL-TIME EVALUATION, SCOPE AND CONDUCT

6. The purpose of the RTE was to provide real-time feedback into the cluster approach and to inform the global development community about the approach. The RTE did not assess the overall humanitarian response to the earthquake but rather focused on applying the new cluster approach and refining it in this context. It did not evaluate the cluster approach in itself, but its application to one early test case.
7. The RTE consisted of a field mission to Pakistan from 10 to 20 February 2006 by an inter-agency team² of eight people. The evaluation methodology included a desk review of relevant documentation, a key stakeholder analysis based on a questionnaire and including interviews with participants in the cluster structure — members of the country team, cluster leads and members, Pakistan government officials, agency headquarters staff, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and major institutional donors — and 80 interviews with key informants. Before the report was finalized, two validation meetings were held in Geneva with the learning group of the IASC/United Nations Development Group (UNDG) South Asia Earthquake Task Force and the global cluster leading agencies.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

8. The emergency in Pakistan was unusual in that it involved highly competent and cooperative national authorities; their buy-in and adoption of the cluster system was a factor in the success in responding to a rapid-onset natural disaster on an exceptional scale. The following RTE findings may therefore be applicable in countries whose national authorities already provide strong response mechanisms, but are not necessarily applicable more generally.
9. At the time of evaluation, it was too early to evaluate the impact of application of the cluster approach. The team considered that the latter should be reviewed after two years of experience in various countries.
10. The Pakistan country team was positive about the cluster approach and its potential for improving response, even though implementation was uneven and problematic in the beginning. The cluster approach provided a single and recognizable framework for coordination, collaboration, decision-making and action in a chaotic operational environment.
11. In the team's view, the personal attributes and dynamism of individual leaders are generally as important as any structural enhancement that a new system can offer. Some staff lacked personal authority, leadership experience and the basic group facilitation skills required to manage clusters. This hindered effective implementation of the clusters.
12. Many respondents felt that the success of the cluster approach depended on the country team facilitating an enabling environment, with greater guidance and support from IASC and the headquarters of its member agencies.

² The inter-agency team was composed of representatives of UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Health Organization (WHO), UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), for the International Council of Voluntary Agencies [ICVA]), OCHA (Coordinator) and WFP (team leader).



13. The following are the findings of RTE findings on the functioning and management of the cluster model.

Understanding and Assumptions of the Cluster Approach

14. There was inconsistent understanding of the cluster approach within the Pakistan country team because of insufficient guidance from agency headquarters; Terms of Reference and other documentation were not initially available in the field. The purpose of the approach — to identify and fill gaps — was not well explained. The importance of flexible application, based on each field context and complementarity with the existing system, was also not well communicated. As a result, some clusters were established where no gap existed.
15. Roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined, and most people interviewed were not fully aware of the implications of the cluster approach, why it was developed, and how it affected accountability, predictability and reliability. Few respondents could elaborate on the critical notion of “provider of last resort”. For many in the field, the distinction between the cluster and the traditional sector-led approach was unclear. Many respondents criticized the cluster approach for imposing additional bureaucracy, coordination and meetings.
16. Several cluster staff found it difficult to separate cluster responsibilities from their agency-mandated functions. It was felt that some clusters were driven as much by agency priorities as by cluster responsibilities. A shift away from “agency centricity” will be required for clusters to function properly.

Accountability, Predictability and Reliability

17. The cluster approach established a predictable assignment of sector/cluster responsibilities for an emergency relief operation, but did not address the challenges of field-level coordination, joint needs assessment and overall strategic planning.
18. The participation of agencies in the cluster operation was inconsistent. Increased effort must be made to enlist NGOs, international financial institutions, other government offices and donors to broaden the cluster approach beyond a United Nations exercise.
19. The Government of Pakistan and its military forces played a vital role in the cluster approach and readily adapted their relief structure to the framework; this was key to the relief effort’s success. Clusters with designated government counterparts, such as health, performed well; others experienced difficulties until suitable government partners were identified.

Gaps in Service, Needs Analysis and Priority Setting

20. Some clusters — emergency shelter, camp management, health and food/nutrition — demonstrated how the cluster approach can contribute to priority setting. This did not always result in proportionate resource allocations, however, and decision-making authority was unclear within and between clusters.
21. Inter-cluster information management, gap identification and authority for allocating resources were weak. Data collection was not standardized, even though templates for needs assessment were distributed to some cluster members.



22. Discussions with respondents revealed that the cluster approach did not generally improve baseline or joint needs analysis; some gaps were still not fully assessed four months into the response. Other clusters, however, rapidly established ongoing data collection, such as early detection of disease outbreaks.
23. Other examples showed that the cluster approach had not fully identified and addressed gaps in humanitarian assistance during emergencies. In the absence of gap analysis, many national and international NGOs coordinated informally among themselves.

Coordination, Stakeholders, Role of the Humanitarian Coordinator

24. As already noted, many informants felt that the cluster approach increased bureaucracy and organizational structure. Some heads of clusters felt that they did not have authority for decision-making and had to consult their agencies first.
25. Inter-cluster coordination was identified as a deficiency, as were contact and interaction between field hubs and Islamabad. Clusters in the field were seen as more operationally relevant and better able to mobilize resources and identify gaps.
26. Many respondents supported expansion of the United Nations country team into an IASC country team with donors to improve stakeholder participation, including NGO involvement, and increase the coherence of the Humanitarian Coordinator system. Donors appreciated being integrated into cluster meetings, but their engagement and participation were not consistent.
27. The interface between the clusters and Pakistan government structures functioned well. Respondents noted that the cluster structure needs to become a government-led process as soon as possible after an emergency.

Resource Mobilization

28. Ideally, the cluster approach promotes more coherent planning and cost estimation, leading to reliable funding appeals. As cluster leads are responsible for developing consensus on priority needs and mobilizing the necessary resources, equitable allocation of funding and overall cost estimation are possible. This was attempted through the Flash Appeal, whose speed of preparation was much praised. Some NGOs did not participate, however, and found that the process lacked transparency. Only two NGOs had proposals in the first version.
29. A potential conflict of interest arose when cluster leads were attracting resources for their clusters while simultaneously raising money for their agencies. The evaluation concluded that cluster leaders should be free to do both.

Cross-Cutting Issues, Standards and Benchmarks

30. The evaluation found that cross-cutting issues of gender, human rights, participation, environment, and monitoring and evaluation were overlooked in the cluster application in Pakistan. Within clusters there was no accountability for these issues, which were overshadowed by the pressing demand for immediate delivery of supplies and services, and there was no cross-cluster mechanism to address them.
31. Monitoring and evaluation served more as a source of information on activities rather than supporting decision-making. Cluster management guidelines issued by OCHA and approved by the cluster heads in November 2005 stipulate that clusters monitor the



response using qualitative and quantitative indicators. This emphasis came somewhat late for the relief phase of the emergency, but is helpful for preparation of the recovery phase.

Transition to Recovery

32. Many respondents felt that recovery efforts received low priority in the overall humanitarian response and were started relatively late because of the focus on life-saving interventions. There was limited understanding of what the early recovery cluster entailed, making it difficult for other clusters to relate and contribute to this cluster.
33. Most respondents expected that the clusters will continue beyond the emergency phase, but emphasized that the recovery effort must be led by the Pakistan government and move to the provinces — beyond the federal level. Government capacities must therefore continue to be supported and strengthened. The United Nations, donors and international financial institutions must advocate for policy change to “build back better”. Given the presence of international financial institutions, there is urgent need to develop a clear strategy for transition and to define and promote the United Nation’s competencies and comparative advantage in early recovery and transition.
34. The evaluation team identified the following eight key actions in the Executive Summary of the final draft of the RTE. These have been endorsed by the IASC principals and constitute the basis for follow-up:
 - **Key Action 1:** The IASC Working Group must incorporate the cluster approach in all IASC members’ operation manuals, training materials and partnership frameworks, ensuring that staff receive briefing and training.
 - **Key Action 2:** The IASC Working Group must disseminate the recently defined roles and responsibilities of cluster leaders and members, heads of agencies and organizations, country teams and Humanitarian Coordinators. The roles of United Nations common services and their responsibilities for providing services to cluster members should be specified. Country-level coordination arrangements should be reviewed in order to mitigate duplication and overlaps between existing coordination structures and coordination activities generated by the cluster approach.
 - **Key Action 3:** The IASC Working Group, along with the global cluster lead agencies and OCHA, should develop cluster toolkits for policy guidance, joint assessment and planning formats, minimum standards and benchmarks. These and other relevant tools and documentation should be accessible through a common information system for the field-level application of the new approach. Practical guidelines on inter-cluster linkages and reporting mechanisms for government and national NGOs should be included.
 - **Key Action 4:** OCHA and the IASC Working Group should examine how to develop the role of OCHA in supporting the cluster system and should refine a cross-cluster coordination framework that ensures representation by all IASC members.
 - **Key Action 5:** OCHA must redefine the humanitarian information centre’s role in the cluster system and include strategies for standard setting, information management and data analysis to support strategic decision-making.
 - **Key Action 6:** The IASC Working Group must facilitate greater involvement by international NGO representative organizations, enlisting their participation in order to increase the predictability of core cluster membership.



- **Key Action 7:** The IASC principals, along with UNDG, must reinvigorate high-level efforts to coordinate with and partner international financial institutions in order to galvanize their support for the cluster approach.
 - **Key Action 8:** OCHA, in consultation with IASC agencies, should explore the potential for the new Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF) to support early deployment of dedicated cluster leads, information officers and administrative support, providing cluster-specific seed funding to ensure a capacitated response.
35. The following are additional recommendations addressed to the IASC principals, as per Annex 4 of the final draft of the RTE:
- The IASC principals, together with UNDG, must revitalize high-level efforts to coordinate with international financial institutions, especially the World Bank, and define their respective roles and responsibilities during the recovery period.
 - The IASC principals should review coordination arrangements at the country level — taking into account existing management and coordination structures such as the IASC country team and the disaster management team— in order to reduce layers and avoid duplication and overlapping of meetings, and thus increasing cluster effectiveness.
36. In response to the key action for implementation of the cluster leadership approach, a preliminary guidance note was issued in June 2006 clarifying the recently defined roles and responsibilities among cluster leaders and members, heads of agencies and organizations, country teams and Humanitarian Coordinators. This will be revised on the basis of comments received from all concerned parties.

ACRONYMS USED IN THIS DOCUMENT

CERF	Central Emergency Revolving Fund
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	non-governmental organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OEDE	Office of Evaluation (WFP)
RTE	real-time evaluation
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization