The Evolving UN Cluster Approach in the Aftermath of the Pakistan Earthquake:
an NGO perspective

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Introduction

The South Asia earthquake on 8 October 2006 claimed at least 73,000 lives. Measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, it left many others without food, clothes and shelter to face the harsh winter. So far, through ActionAid International's emergency response, thousands of tents, packs of food and basic supplies such as blankets, as well as medical supplies, have been distributed in Pakistan. Within one week of the earthquake, relief aid was being delivered by ActionAid staff in three different locations in an area which is extremely inaccessible, as well as being politically sensitive.

The many challenges faced by those who were implementing the emergency response included getting to grips with a new approach to humanitarian response being developed by the UN – the cluster approach. This report draws from the experiences of UN agencies, international, national, and local NGOs, and donors in responding to the earthquake to present an analysis of the cluster experience in Pakistan, along with recommendations for the future.

Executive Summary

The aim of this report is to highlight issues which need to be "factored in" to the development of the cluster approach, a key aspect of the UN humanitarian reform agenda. The intention is to provide an assessment of the practical value of the approach in Pakistan and the implications of this for the humanitarian reform agenda. A summary of the main findings can be found in 'Action Points' in Section 2 of this report.

A point to be acknowledged from the outset is that the Pakistan earthquake was the first occasion in which the cluster approach was implemented in a disaster response situation, and therefore it is too early for the validity of the approach to entirely stand or fall by experiences in Pakistan. There are, however, valuable lessons to be learned from the implementation of the approach there.

In broad terms, the earthquake response was regarded as having been effective, particularly as the feared second wave of winter deaths was avoided. Pim Kramm, the Deputy Head of the Dutch Humanitarian department, commented that operations worked well in Pakistan and he felt a tangible difference between his visit to Pakistan and other disaster zones. Key factors identified as affecting the success of the response, after initial difficulties, were the high level of cooperation from the Pakistani government and the relatively mild winter. It is unclear how much of a difference the cluster approach made itself.

1.1 Outline of the Cluster Approach

The cluster approach was first set out in a Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) paper commissioned by the UN. The basic premise was that accountability, predictability and reliability could be improved by identifying organisational leaders for areas in which there was an identified gap in humanitarian response. These organisations would then be responsible for specific areas, or clusters.

Within the first 24 hours of the response, a set of nine clusters, Food and Nutrition, Water and Sanitation, Health, Emergency Shelter, Early Recovery and Reconstruction, Logistics, IT Telecommunications, Camp Management and Protection, modelled on the HRR recommendations, were established in Islamabad, plus a 10th cluster for Education. Field cluster sites were established in each of the main UN field presences and dubbed "humanitarian hubs". However, as the emergency progressed, the number of clusters and sub-clusters grew exponentially, making it difficult for NGOs to keep track of the number of clusters that existed.

There was a high level of confusion amongst both UN and NGO staff as to what the cluster approach was about, primarily because it was still in the process of being developed at the global level when it was introduced into Pakistan. As a result, those implementing the approach did not have Terms of Reference, appropriate support or training. Draft generic Terms of Reference for cluster leads at country level were developed in Geneva in January 2006, and these are attached as Appendix 2 to this report. However, it should be borne in mind that the cluster approach was being implemented in Pakistan well before these were developed. Clusters were credited with providing an opportunity for information sharing and for people in the relief effort to network on the fringes of meetings. They also provided the potential for coordination attempts, which had varying degrees of success, but which were regarded as worthwhile in any case. Both INGOs and donors commented that the fact that a named agency was responsible for coordinating efforts in a particular area was helpful.

Adequate attempts were not made to involve local NGOs and governmental structures. Local NGOs regarded cluster meetings as meetings of an elite group of foreigners, which, though helpful, did not pay sufficient attention to the ideas and issues raised by local NGOs. The vast majority of NGOs, both local and international, felt that cluster meetings, which were always held in English, should have had an Urdu interpreter present, to enable local NGOs to be involved. Even those who spoke English among the Pakistani NGOs said that they had

difficulty in following all the UN acronyms and they often felt as if they were in UN internal meetings. Others regarded cluster meetings as talking shops and preferred to spend their time in the field.

The humanitarian intervention in Pakistan contrasted with that in complex emergencies by the presence of a strong, though not always constructive, state structure. The role of the Pakistani military in the relief effort was praised by the UN and NGOs alike, however there are concerns about its part in the relief effort, particularly due to the lack of parliamentary and civil oversight of reconstruction funds. There was very limited effort on the part of the UN to empower local democratic structures, which were already weakened by the policies of the military government prior to the earthquake. These were further damaged as a result of the earthquake and were then side-lined in the humanitarian response.

1.2 Relative Cluster Successes

There was a clear finding that the performance of clusters varied widely from cluster to cluster. One INGO commented that, whilst the cluster approach was a common-sense one, some clusters got "so bogged down with the mechanics they completely lost their focus". Some clusters were carried by the charisma of their lead, while those oriented towards ground-level work such as logistics, food and shelter were more successful. Those clusters that focussed on future livelihood strategies/irrigation were regarded as not being immediately relevant to the relief effort. Attendance in Health, Education and Watsan was low in the beginning and Livelihoods and Protection still have a small membership; Protection has not been a successful role. Clusters that operated well need to assist not so successful colleagues and there should be feedback to Geneva on what worked and what did not in terms of running clusters.

Clusters were hampered by a lack of full attendance at meetings and problems with, for example, operational/field staff located at hub clusters while decision-makers, such as heads of agencies in Islamabad, a problem compounded by communication problems between hubs and clusters. In Pakistan, the cluster approach appears to have

been expanded to cover the entire humanitarian response, rather than simply gap sectors identified in the Humanitarian Response Review. This may have had an impact on its effectiveness. Meetings were too long and too frequent, there was a general feeling among NGOs that clusters were overly compartmentalised and there was no need for so many. There was also a spread of sub-clusters, and complaints of duplication and overlap. NGOs described a non-participatory attitude on the part of the UN, where they were treated simply as implementing partners, or "policed", rather than having an input into conceptual thinking.

There was also a criticism that there was not enough analysis, synthesis and thinking ahead within meetings. Clusters provided some back up support on technical matters, such as shelter design and heating arrangements, but not enough. Too much time was spent agreeing on guidance on what kind of support to provide. This led to people bypassing clusters in deciding what kind of response was necessary. There was a lack of monitoring and evaluation, and synthesis between clusters and across hubs and clusters. This lead to duplication and omissions. For example, in the week immediately following the earthquake in Muzzaffarabad, children were emptying mineral water bottles into a large barrel for washing and bathing purposes, presumably as a result of a lack of water for washing and a surplus of drinking water.

Representatives of donor agencies attended clusters sporadically but did not have decision-making authority in terms of funding proposals. In general, donors supported the cluster approach as something to be developed. They were cautious of coming to any firm views on its success in the light of what happened in Pakistan as the cluster approach had not been finalised at global level. Most donors stated that the approach had not yet affected funding attitudes to the UN and they would continue to channel funding where this was felt to be most effective, including to a strengthened humanitarian coordinator function.

There were structural problems with the clusters, such as very little back-up support for cluster leads who were essentially taking on two full time roles, an agency role and a separate role as head of cluster. There were also concerns about limited information flow between cluster and hub level, and lack of staff at hub level. In addition there was a high staff turnover, which inhibited the development of institutional memory and the ability to develop relationships with stakeholders. The lack of staff and high turnover may need to be addressed as part of wider issues within the UN. A number of donors stressed the need to support OCHA.

1.3 From the Outside

Geneva's role in the implementation of the cluster approach in Pakistan is unclear, but the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Earthquake Task Force missed an opportunity to help overcome problems concerning gaps, duplication and analysis. If adequate support is not available at global level, cluster leads may not wish to "carry the can" for all cluster failings. There does not appear to be any mechanism in existence for stakeholders in Pakistan to input into the humanitarian reform agenda in the light of their experiences.

The cluster approach carries a considerable amount of potential, but there is clearly some way to go before this can be fully realised. Clusters cannot be an answer without the availability of trained staff, adequate support and appropriate engagement with outside actors to ensure that measurable improvements in humanitarian response are made.

2

Action Points

2.1 Engagement with Local Democratic Structures

- It is within the gift of those involved in the earthquake response to empower such civil structures as exist after the earthquake, at the most local level. For the reconstruction phase in Pakistan, clusters should focus on independent assessment of the government's reconstruction priorities and on capacity building with secular NGOs and elected local bodies.

- While forming clusters in a country there needs to be a clear exit strategy. Key actors in local authorities should be identified early through existing UN agencies operating in a country and other sources. All possible support must be provided to them so that all the information, networking and capacity building done in the early stages is not lost, but is relevant to and built on for the recovery and reconstruction stages.

2.2 Encouraging Local Organisations to attend Cluster Meetings

- OCHA, the Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC), and the cluster leads need to proactively identify key local actors and make sure that they know how to get access to minutes of cluster meetings even if their staff are not attending them.

- A clear strategy for local involvement is required. This will require the IASC country team to strengthen its knowledge of and engagement with local/national NGOs prior to an emergency occurring.

- The monitoring of a cluster's performance, particularly at hub level, should include an assessment of the attempts made to involve local communities and civil structures.

2.3 Language

- Having an Urdu interpreter present at cluster meetings would have enabled local community groups and citizens to engage with the process, and assisted with capacity building. It would also have helped ensure that the response was implemented in a culturally appropriate way. In the same way, cluster meeting notes, agendas, etc., should have been translated into Urdu as far as possible.

2.4 Engagement with the Pakistani Government

- There needs to be analysis of the differences between the implementation of the cluster approach in fragile states, as compared to that in a strong but relatively autocratic state, including any lessons learned.

- For the reconstruction phase in Pakistan, there needs to be an independent assessment of the government's reconstruction priorities.

2.5 Encouraging the Involvement of non-UN Organisations

- Terms of reference need to be developed for cluster leads which take into account the experience in Pakistan.

- UN agencies need to make significant further outreach to NGOs, particularly local NGOs, to set out the role of clusters and how NGOs can interact with them. Feedback from NGOs should be assimilated into future work plans.

- In particular, UN agencies need to adopt a more participatory approach with regards to NGO involvement in clusters.

- NGOs should be involved in the conceptual stages of planning and treated as genuine partners rather than implementing agencies. The UN should avoid calling or changing meetings at short notice without consultation. This is an issue of "attitude" which needs to be resolved if NGOs are truly to engage with clusters.

- As the cluster approach appears to have been adopted for the entire UN earthquake response in Pakistan, the rationale for having different clusters to cover "gap" areas no longer applied and it may have been better to merge linked clusters, as suggested by one respondent. This is an issue to consider for future sudden onset emergencies.

- Better communication connections between hubs and clusters, and across clusters, could counter problems of not having key decision makers in the same place at the same time.

- More senior and experienced technical staff need to be deployed at field level. This would assist with support and capacity building and improve analysis.

2.6 Linkages/Analysis

- Structural issues such as administrative support and information management need to be resolved so that adequate analysis of information can take place and there is free flow of information across hubs and clusters. This will address the issue of "connectivity", ensuring that analysis benefits from input from all relevant clusters and hubs.

- An appropriate mechanism needs to be developed for feedback from cluster leads to the global level concerning what worked during the Pakistan response and what did not, so that lessons can be learned and good practice developed.

- Linkages between earthquake response and ongoing development activities need to be identified and bolstered for the recovery phase.

- Mechanisms need to be developed for forward planning within clusters from the outset of an emergency.

- The lack of strategic analysis, overview and in-depth discussion was universally felt to be missing from the cluster approach and incorporating this into the work of clusters is likely to have a dramatic effect on NGO attendance.

- The role of global clusters with regard to the above points needs to be considered.

2.7 Cross-Cutting Issues

- Specialist UN agencies should have an independent role in monitoring thematic issues in a cluster response, for example UNIFEM for gender, the Human Rights Council for human rights and UNEP for environmental issues. This may be through representatives of these organisations attending cluster meetings/acting as advisory support for all clusters on relevant issues.

ActionAid International notes the existence of the joint UNEP-OCHA environment unit in Pakistan and takes the view that cross-cutting agencies should take the lead in evaluating the performance of clusters in their own right against clear thematic standards.

2.8 Funding

- The role of donor agencies representatives within the cluster process should be clarified. IFIs in particular need to be encouraged to attend meetings.

- The relationship between clusters, the CAP and the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) needs to be considered and delineated.

2.9 Mass Media

- Mass media could be better utilised to spread awareness about clusters and to carry out coordination activities. The UN needs to have a bold, centrally devised strategy which can then be implemented and adapted by IASC Country Teams according to the needs of the emergency and the particular country in which it occurs.

2.10 Structural Issues

- There needs to be improved information flow between cluster and hub level, and across clusters. A central coordination system at each cluster and hub will resolve overlaps between clusters and meetings.

- Full training should be provided for clusters on their roles and responsibilities. Guidance should be provided to cluster leads on how to avoid unnecessary fragmentation into sub-clusters and

control "cluster spread", whilst avoiding cluster meetings that are so large as to be unwieldy.

- The number of cluster meetings should be rationalised so that they become manageable.

- There is an "over-clusterisation" at national level, when it is actually the hubs that need the most focus, as they are most directly involved in the relief effort.

- Administrative support for cluster leads is a necessity, and the co-location of cluster heads should be considered.

- The frequent turnover of cluster leads must be resolved. This may require consideration of the length of the employment contracts of UN staff and the manner in which they are rotated in and out of emergencies.

- It is necessary to distinguish between the duties of heads of agency and cluster leads, whilst ensuring that the lead organisation attends meetings in its own right.

- National clusters should concentrate on information consolidation from hubs and policy support to hubs.

- The role of OCHA within the cluster system needs to be clarified and supported.

2.11 Monitoring and Evaluation

- The cluster approach relies strongly on information provided by stakeholders about their activities, and it is important to ensure that the information provided is accurate. Mechanisms should be set up to re-survey and monitor areas of activity in which stakeholders operate.

- Data formats and standards need to be agreed for making the information more usable, as the variation in these caused a lot of confusion.

- Databases need to be kept up to date.

- As recommended by the HIC and Real Time Evaluations (RTE), information management requires a dedicated cluster with additional investment in upgrading skills, raising awareness and communications technologies, e.g., internet cafes. This cluster could also play a role in engaging the media.

2.12 Engagement with the Cluster Approach at Global Level

- The RTE identifies the confusion amongst NGOs between the cluster and sector approaches. ActionAid International's research identifies a further lack of clarity concerning the role of cluster leads at global cluster level.

- Interviews with local, national and international NGOs on the ground have disclosed an almost complete lack of knowledge of the role of cluster leads at global level.

- A clear demarcation between the different roles of clusters at global, as well as national and hub level would enable stakeholders to decide whether it was appropriate to provide input into the global process, including through an NGO coalition such as International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).

- The IASC task force on earthquake response in Geneva appears to have added little value. The task force could have assisted in analysis of the information coming in or strategic overview, flagging gaps, etc. However, the meetings mainly dealt with numbers of items distributed, etc. This was a missed opportunity.

- As the cluster approach is implemented in different countries, mechanisms need to be created for affected populations and stakeholders, such as those in Pakistan, to input into the global reform process, should they wish. This would enable the global process to benefit from a "bottom-up" participatory approach.

- Global clusters/the IASC need to consider how best to support the cluster approach as implemented in a particular country, how to be a resource in respect of lessons learned in the past and how draw out best practice for the future. The mechanisms by which they intend to do this should be explained to stakeholders so that they can input into the process if they wish.

Photo Credit: Chris Steele - Perkins/Magnum/ActionAid

Background

The South Asia earthquake, which struck on October 8th 2005, occurred in the midst of a period in which unprecedented consideration was being given to UN humanitarian reform, both by the UN as well as various donor countries. Broadly, these have focussed on three issues:

- Inadequate levels and techniques of financing.

- Inadequate speed, quality and effectiveness of response.

- Lack of a common basis for assessing and comparing levels of need.

In late 2004, prompted by the failures of the international response to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland, commissioned a number of consultants to carry out a Humanitarian Response Review. This highlighted systemic weaknesses in humanitarian response and also revealed a lack of investment in preparedness and "surge" capacity necessary for agencies to fulfil their sectoral responsibilities. It also suggested approaches for dealing with this, such as assigning "cluster lead" agencies in areas where there are often gaps in humanitarian response, improving coordination and considered the utility of benchmarking. The review took place over a very short time span and has been criticised by, for example, ICVA, an NGO umbrella body, for preventing in-depth research into the problems, or a comprehensive global mapping and analysis of capacities. The ERC determined that the issue of assigning cluster responsibilities to the various sectors was to be dealt with immediately, whilst the proposals relating to coordination and benchmarking were put off for later consideration.[1]

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1. TALKBACK, ICVA Newsletter, 3 October 2005, Special Issue: Humanitarian Reforms

The UN reform agenda is regularly discussed within the IASC, a forum that brings together the UN, the Red Cross, as well as several NGOs and three NGO consortia (ICVA, InterAction and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response). In addition to this, donors have their own views on humanitarian reform and these are also featured in this report.

In September 2005 it was agreed that the cluster approach would be implemented in all new emergencies. In the South Asia Earthquake of October 8th, 2005 the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team (UNDAC), together with the Humanitarian Coordinator and the UN Country Team, decided to use the cluster approach in Pakistan. Simultaneously the cluster approach is being developed in the DRC, Uganda and Liberia in relation to complex emergencies. There is ongoing consideration of whether it should be implemented in other countries, with possible candidates including Colombia, Somalia and Nepal.

The findings in this report come from a series of semi-structured interviews with respondents from UN agencies, international, national and local NGOs and community groups in Pakistan who were involved with the emergency response. Respondents answered questions on cluster-related issues which were formulated after a desk-based review of available meeting notes and reports on the earthquake response, the progress of the humanitarian reform agenda and the cluster approach. The paper highlights universal comments and criticisms about the approach as well as points made by particular respondents that are of specific interest. The interviews were carried out over a period of 2–3 weeks. The intention was to interview a spread of respondents from UN cluster heads, donors and local and international NGOs in both Islamabad and the hubs, as well as local community groups, but this turned out to be dependent on the availability of respondents within the short time period. The interviews were carried out by Gita Parihar, a UK-based consultant and Fawad Khan, a Pakistan-based consultant, for ActionAid International in February and March 2006. This report, by Gita Parihar, presents a synthesis of their findings.

4

Engaging with Pakistani State Structures, Civil Society and Population

The Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) highlighted the importance of recipient state and population engagement in the reform agenda, and the IASC working group on HRR has acknowledged that local and national NGO engagement is absolutely key in relation to capacity building. The IASC generic Terms of Reference that have now been formulated for cluster leads at country level refer to the need to coordinate with national authorities and local structures and ensure responses based on participatory and community-based approaches. They also require cluster heads to promote and support the training of humanitarian personnel and the capacity building of humanitarian partners and help strengthen the capacity of national authorities and civil society.

It should be noted that the generic Terms of Reference had not been formulated at the time the cluster approach was implemented in Pakistan. However, given that the issue had been flagged within the HRR and subsequently, attempts to understand and engage with local structures and civil society were very limited. This has raised concerns that jihadist groups have been empowered at the expense of civil society. In contrast, UN engagement with the military government was concerted and strong, although this too has raised questions about the disempowerment of elected local government, since so much of the emphasis of the cluster approach was primarily driven from the centre.

4.1 Role of the National Government/Military

Virtually all organisations worked closely with the Pakistani military for logistical support. Respondents were generally very appreciative of the role of the army in the earthquake response. It provided logistical assistance and did a good deal of evacuation, transport, setting up camps and food and shelter distribution in the relief phase. The UN felt that it was very supportive and one OCHA official described a degree of cooperation by the government that was uncommon in its experience and went so far as to say it had been a pleasure to work with the government. Local NGOs viewed the military at field level as being more immediately responsive than the UN as the army had manpower and logistics locally.

One UN respondent identified that a key difference between the UN intervention in Pakistan and that in many other states was that Pakistan is a sovereign state with a functioning government. As such it was very different to environments such as Bosnia and East Timor where the state apparatus no longer existed in any real form at the time of the intervention. This difference made the government the natural implementing partner in Pakistan. However, as the respondent pointed out, the role of the military is inherently problematic in the longer term as it is not an apolitical institution and there are difficulties with it carrying out roles which are normally associated with civilian administration.

There has been criticism of the military for sidelining elected bodies and civil society organisations from the relief effort, as well as reconstruction and rehabilitation plans (see for example, the recent International Crisis Group briefing on the earthquake response[2]). One INGO commented that the presence of the military government with Kofi Annan at the donor conference in October 2006 gave it greater legitimacy. At the outset of the earthquake, the government was relatively open in its behaviour, but as the focus turned to reconstruction it became less so, and NGO respondents raised concerns about the government's performance/attitude in the reconstruction efforts.

A hub cluster representative described how the army set a fixed date of March 31st for camp closures to take place, which was being rigidly implemented, resulting in coercive migration. At the time of writing the deadline had been extended to April 10th, although there remains a high level of confusion around the policy. UN advocacy in this area has been lacking. One UN employee described the organisation as seemingly more concerned with its own exit strategy. This emphasises the difficulty of the UN not distancing itself appropriately from the government in the first place.

At a camp management meeting in Muzaffarabad in February, participants discussed issues concerning flooding and relocation of camps following the recommendations of experts reported in the media. The government representative said flatly that its experts had decided that this would not be a problem, whereas the cluster lead, UNICEF, said that contingency plans were being made for evacuation to safe areas as soon as such areas could be found.

In terms of engagement with the cluster approach, government representatives appeared to have more of a presence on the ground than in Islamabad and in shelter/camp management meetings than other clusters. The director of one INGO commented that she had never seen an operation where the UN and the military were so close and it was an opportunity for the UN to represent to NGOs the governments' thinking on issues, which did not happen. She stressed that ultimately it was for the government to deal with issues like urban planning – otherwise people would do what they could with whatever is available. In this respect, it was important to ensure that the government was engaged and attended cluster meetings.

2. Pakistan: Political Impact of the Earthquake, International Crisis Group Policy briefing, 15 March 2006

4.2 Engaging with Local Democratic Structures

There was a distinct lack of engagement between the UN and local district and civic structures. There seemed to be a surprising lack of awareness of these, given comments by a local NGO that 18 UN agencies were working in Pakistan prior to the earthquake and so could have been expected to share a good level of local knowledge. A local NGO commented that there was no real attempt to empower structures at Union Council level, which is the most local level in the Pakistani political structure. Union Council representatives are elected and it was in their interests to fully collect data and assist their communities otherwise they would be held accountable for it at the next election. Prior to the earthquake, power was already being moved away from local level by political forces in Pakistan, particularly in North West Frontier Province (NWFP). These difficulties were exacerbated by the loss of life of many local officials, who were killed in the earthquake, but still it was felt there should have been some assessment by clusters of local government capacity, and efforts made to engage with and bolster such capacity as existed.

Instead, NGOs commented that there was an absence of local government involvement at hub cluster level and UN agencies often relied on the army. In clusters where adequate information existed, it was possible to act independently as a cluster and rely on the basis of an independent assessment of humanitarian need, rather than military advice. One INGO stated that its partnership with local authorities was bi-lateral, rather than through the clusters. Another commented that whilst INGOs would never embark on a programme without discussion with local government, the UN appeared to take the view that "local" was District, rather than Union Council level.

A consultant from ActionAid International attended a WES meeting in Muzaffarabad on February 28th 2006 where the district government had joined the cluster for the first time and requested information on "who, what, where" in the construction phase. On being interviewed, the district government representative said that only 4–5 NGOs coordinated with local authorities. In another example, a local NGO was told by local authorities in Battagram that they did not know what its activities were even when it was working within a cluster. ActionAid International attended a district council meeting in Muzaffarabad on February 15th 2006 where district officials had been attending cluster meetings and the head of the district (or Nazim) called a meeting of local NGOs to find out what activities were being carried out in the area. This appeared to be an attempt by the district government to assert its authority in the area and the style of the meeting appeared to reflect those of cluster meetings.

One cluster head suggested that for the reconstruction phase, clusters should focus on independent assessment of the government's reconstruction priorities and on capacity building with non-jihadist NGOs and elected local bodies.

4.3 Engaging with Local Populations and NGOs

The general feeling of those interviewed was that a large part of the relief effort was conducted outside the purview of clusters (estimates centred around the 50% mark, though this varied according to location and one INGO went as far as to say as it was 80%). One donor commented that in the crisis the majority of the response came from local civil society and the assistance of the international community had been somewhat exaggerated. The largest locally funded NGO, Edhi, was completely absent from the cluster system.

One of the biggest failings in relation to engaging local community groups, citizens and organisations was to hold cluster meetings solely in English. This exacerbated for local groups the problems faced by all NGOs in deciphering the cluster approach (see 5.1). One INGO staff member in Pakistan-administered Kashmir commented that at many of the shelter meetings, upwards of 50% of the attendees were Urdu speakers. Providing an Urdu interpreter would have assisted with capacity building and enabled local communities to contribute fully to discussions. As one local NGO representative said, local people may not have been informed about

the work of international agencies, but may have had information that would have helped in the relief effort. For example, they could have helped instil an awareness of the culture and values of the host community and shared their knowledge of the difficult local terrain. A Pakistani national employed by an INGO commented that cluster heads were insensitive to the breaking of fast in Ramadan and the saying of evening prayers and continued meetings at these times.

A representative from one community group with an excellent command of English explained how she had made a number of comments at cluster meetings which she felt had helped matters. For example, she said that sleeping bags were inappropriate as villagers firstly did not know how to use them and secondly were afraid of how they would get out of them if there was another earthquake. She highlighted the necessity to explain to villagers how insulation curtains worked, otherwise they would be used as blankets. She also suggested that joint kitchens were not appropriate as people would be reticent to cook in front of their neighbours and worry about being accused of not sharing sufficiently. She took the view that local NGOs were taken for granted and made to do the actual distribution work in villages without financial support, whereas INGOs spent money on salaries and overheads.

Another Kashmiri NGO described clusters as being reluctant to incorporate local views. For example, it had warned that tents would not stand up to snowfall but the cluster did not take this into consideration, with the result that the tents collapsed after the first snowfall. The representative added that if there had been more snow during the winter this could have had disastrous results. A respondent from a coordination body for Pakistani NGOs commented that the UN brought in relevant staff for a report on gender issues from regional headquarters, but Pakistani-based women's organisations and technical experts were not asked for input.

One UN hub cluster coordinator said that smaller local organisations were very hard to track. The UN operated an open door policy on attendance at cluster meetings, which was not effective enough. For example most of the local NGOs and some INGOs said that they heard of the clusters by "word of mouth", or when they approached the UN for help with relief goods. This was usually many days after the initial cluster meetings. In contrast other INGOs were telephoned by the UN (see 5.1).

Another important factor contributing to the lack of attendance by local NGOs was the fact that they were out in the field working and did not have time to attend cluster meetings, particularly given the manner in which these meetings were held (see further 5.1). A respondent from a local district council in Mansehra stated that local organisations which were able to understand English were able to improve their practices simply by attending cluster meetings though many found it difficult to decipher UN acronyms and jargon.

An INGO representative in the Kashmir region was struck by what she described as the "overwhelming involvement" of local NGOs and their legitimate expectation to be supported. However, far from being assisted with capacity building, some local NGOs found themselves constantly having to assist UN staff with getting up to speed on relevant issues due to the high turnover of cluster heads (see 6.3).

Local NGOs took the view that they should have been used whenever possible to empower civil society. One community-based group took the view that NGOs from other parts of Pakistan, such as Karachi, were as alien to the area as international NGOs. An umbrella grouping of Pakistani NGOs stated that it had a policy of separating NGOs who came in just for the earthquake with those who had an established presence and office space. Most of the NGOs it represented hardly ever attended the cluster meetings. One donor expressed concerns that NGOs (including INGOs) established themselves at hub level in order to bid for reconstruction funds, leading to a fear that sufficient emphasis was not being placed on the emergency effort.

One donor commented that there were only 3 or 4 NGOs that the international community could work with as the rest were jihadist organisations and

these were over-used. On the basis of ActionAid's research this is incorrect and, if clusters had a better awareness of local organisations, they would be in a position to advise donors of whom to fund.

The involvement of sectarian and jihadist organisations in the relief effort raised questions about the relationship between the humanitarian imperative and political concerns. UN officials at a Camp Management cluster meeting in Muzaffarabad stated that attendees at its meetings included organisations such as Al-Khidmat. It was clear that

in the immediate earthquake response the humanitarian imperative took precedence. One cluster respondent described advice from the HC as the supply of CGI sheeting to an efficient cadre of people in earthquake relief, albeit from a banned jihadist organisation, fell within the terms of the General Assembly resolution on terrorism. One respondent said that groups like Kashmir Liberation Front and Jumaat-I-Islami helped a lot of people in difficult/high altitude areas but, unsurprisingly, were never cluster members.

Photo Credit: Chris Steele - Perkins/Magnum/ActionAid

Clusters – Substantive Issues

5.1 Encouraging the Involvement of NGOs

The preceding section looked at issues specific to local NGOs. This section looks at the relationship between NGOs in general and the cluster approach. It has been identified, both in the Pakistan context and previously, that there is confusion amongst NGOs about the role of UN and non-UN actors within the cluster approach. IASC missions to both the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda found a "significant" lack of clarity among humanitarian partners at field level about the humanitarian reform agenda broadly and the cluster approach specifically. One report[3] highlighted that the lack of a communication strategy on the humanitarian reform process might hamper successful implementation at field level. Generic Terms of Reference were developed during the missions and the Action Plan formulated on December 12th endorsed the idea of generic guidance in respect of the cluster approach, to be subject to adaptation at country level to suit the demands of the situation.

It has also been noted[4] that a great deal of work has gone into developing the cluster approach but not much has been done to fully brief donors or other stakeholders on it. A report on cluster implementation in Pakistan in November 2005[5] found that negative feedback had been received in particular from the NGO side and it was felt that a good advocacy campaign on the actual objectives of the cluster approach was needed.

3. Inter-Agency Standing Committee 63rd Working Group meeting, Issues arising from consultations with the Humanitarian Coordinator and IASC country team on the implementation of the Cluster approach in the DRC. (11 November 2005)

4. Background documents, IASC principals meeting 12 December 2005

5. Emerging Issues based on experience of implementing the Cluster Approach after the recent earthquake in South East Asia, 63rd IASC working group meeting, Geneva 21-22 November 2005

Despite suggestions in the IASC report, the UN Real Time Evaluation of the cluster response in Pakistan has noted that the cluster system failed to instil NGO ownership of the process. There would appear to be a number of reasons for this. As one INGO has commented, there was no clearly stated strategy for involving all actors/players in clusters, even though clusters depend on information provided by NGOs to run successfully.

Cluster heads in Pakistan felt that unless there was some obligation on all actors to attend, the UN would have limited success in running clusters. However although NGOs were happy to voluntarily attend cluster meetings, (insofar as they were aware of them and found them to be useful) they are unlikely to allow themselves to be obliged to work with the UN through clusters, particularly in view of the problems set out below. There are also limits as to how far certain organisations could allow themselves to be coordinated by the UN in any case, because of the nature of their work. This did not however apply in the context of the earthquake. One cluster head commented that it was important to emphasise coherence rather than coordination as some NGOs do not want to be coordinated. He felt that emphasising coherence would bring people in and allow for coordination across a cluster. Most local NGOs who joined clusters were not informed of their existence or invited to do so; they found out about meetings by word of mouth. This was not the case with INGOs that were members of the Pakistan Humanitarian Forum, a network of INGOs working in Pakistan prior to the earthquake. For example, Church World Services received a call inviting its member agencies to cluster meetings, and following this it contacted its nine member agencies such as Islamic Relief and Concern. However, other INGOs such as ActionAid and Plan were not contacted.

A hub cluster in Mansehra commented that, initially, it was difficult to get "who, what, where" data from agencies as they did not see the point of giving it to the UN and were sceptical of more paperwork. In the early stages, the cluster spoke to DfID about requiring agencies to make information available as a pre-condition of funding. However, the representative added that once the "who, what, where" database was established it became a useful tool and there were relatively few difficulties in obtaining further information from agencies. The database also provided an independent record that could be shown to donors.

One cluster lead described how, since December, general coordination meetings have taken place, which is an opportunity to engage with NGOs on priority issues. Heads of clusters attend these meetings and there is more outreach to NGOs than before December. He commented that these meetings were standing room only. A General coordination meeting attended by our consultant was dominated by UN agencies and INGOs. Cluster heads gave progress reports on the planning and return strategy, (covering return stages, logistics, etc.) which was mostly UN-centred.

UN agencies and their implementing partners appeared to make up the majority of attendees at cluster meetings with other organisations and the government attending less frequently. A number of NGOs commented that meetings were very UN-centric. One INGO representative expressed the view that non-UN agencies were discouraged from taking the initiative in cluster meetings. He said there were many examples in the minutes of the agencies simply talking about themselves and forgetting that their major implementing partners on the ground were NGOs. Another INGO added that NGOs could feel excluded even though they were doing as much work and doing it as well as the cluster members. This was echoed in the comments of local NGOs. A third said that minutes of meetings shared information that was relevant to the lead agency and not all the members. Other NGOs commented on a lack of opportunity to be involved in matters at the conceptual, rather than operational stage.

In terms of the capacity building of humanitarian partners, which is a goal set out in the draft Terms of Reference subsequently produced for clusters by the IASC,[6] one INGO representative commented that there was a lack of presence to guide/train/

6. See Appendix

support other agencies and that more technical people were needed on the ground. He said that the UN role appeared to be more about policing what agencies were doing rather than recognising that this was a joint effort and being supportive of this fact. He added that UN agencies did not discuss with implementing partners the situation on the ground or check whether there were facilities in situ to implement their plans. They simply took the role of middleperson, channelling funding to others.

An ActionAid International consultant attended a cluster meeting in which a person from a local NGO complained about an issue which held up the entire meeting. The cluster head was being assisted by an OCHA representative who stopped the local NGO representative from continuing in an unnecessarily abrupt manner. OCHA's role may be to police other UN agencies but it is not appropriate for it to do this with NGOs. In another example, a local NGO representative said that she was informed late on Friday afternoon that the UN would be providing a feedback session on the Pakistan cluster evaluation and that this would take place that Sunday. She said this caused great difficulties for people who were not ex pats and relied on Sunday as an opportunity to see their families and take a break. The time of the meeting was eventually changed to Monday.

This was not the case with all clusters, for example the IOM cluster in Muzaffarabad was described as taking on board feedback. However, the issue of attitude is clearly a matter that needs to be resolved in order for NGOs to participate wholeheartedly in clusters.

5.2 Coordination

As far as the success of coordination efforts are concerned, the majority of respondents stated that they could not see much difference between the cluster approach as implemented in Pakistan and the sector approach, with various qualifications.

Information-sharing and networking were generally recognised to be a strength of the cluster approach, one INGO commented that good information was available for proposal writing, such as identification of areas of intervention, vendors

and technical issues in relief. A local NGO described how it was possible to get to know who was working in which area and avoid these areas so as not to duplicate, although databases need to be kept up to date to be useful.

One cluster lead stated that there was a high turnover in cluster attendance, but that there had been some improved coordination among UN agencies. Other clusters described government attendance at their clusters and gap-filling as being good. Attendance at cluster meetings varied according to the perceived relevance and importance of the theme, as well as the skills of the cluster lead. Shelter appears to have been the most attended cluster, along with Health, WatSan and Food. Respondents generally described the Shelter, Health, Food and Air Service/Logistics clusters as being the most successful. An INGO representative commented that the UN's support to her in terms of email and phone was excellent.

Clusters with a large membership became unwieldy, one INGO commented that Muzaffarabad was a huge district, which lead to meetings with too many people in one room, where the information being sought was too detailed. She added that it was difficult to know to what extent the problems that arose were the product of a very difficult situation and how far they related to the cluster approach not working.

When delays in decision-making were feared, cluster members carried out interventions outside the cluster. On one occasion a UN agency went ahead with a decision to provide individual cooking stoves for camps rather than communal cooking facilities.

There were omissions, for example one local NGO said that no damage assessment was done in Rawlakot in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, as there were very few deaths reported. This was because most people were out in the fields on a harvest holiday at the time of the earthquake, but their homes were damaged and they needed shelter, food, etc. The first mapping of Rawlakot was done in February, which was too late and the local NGO said it only received real help from the

army. An INGO said that omissions in formats and focus on only two main camps lead to the neglect of many other smaller camps. OCHA viewed the key question in this regard as being how many people were out there that they did not know about, adding that in mid-February they found a community that had not been touched by any agency. There were also cases of duplication: one INGO described how another planned to set up a clinic in a particular area, despite the fact that it had been agreed within the cluster that this was an area in which the first INGO would work.

As touched upon above, both NGOs and the UN identified drawbacks in the lack of attendance at meetings by key players including government, local NGOs and some INGOs. Theoretically, Islamabad was responsible for strategic overview and issues such as operational benchmarks. Field clusters had the responsibility of operational execution. However, levels of authority were mixed between Islamabad and the clusters. Getting top decision-makers to attend regularly was almost impossible and donors were mainly present at Islamabad whereas needs arose at hubs. Sometimes the appropriate support staff were not in the relevant cluster meetings and were in the field. Sometimes UN agencies did not attend meetings, ActionAid International was informed that UNICEF was not attending food cluster meetings in Battagram even though they provide food and water for children.

A spontaneous cluster-type approach occurred in the remote Allai valley which comprised meetings of a grouping of local and international NGOs such as SRSP (Sarhad Rural Support Programme), Sungi, Care International, Save the Children US, CRS (Catholic Relief Service), doctors and nurses sent by the Cuban government and an ongoing Rural Water and Sanitation project by the North West Frontier Province government funded by DfID. Sungi described how this grouping met every day in a meeting convened by a Colonel Zaki of the Pakistan Army. All parties present attended and worked together as one team, dividing work into geographic areas and sectors. There were no thematic areas, just progress reports on the day's activities and joint planning for the next day, dividing work and sharing

resources. Gaps were identified and overlap minimised, and it also broke the monopoly of a single agency. These meetings continued until January and then people went to the cluster meetings in Battagram when things eased up a bit.

5.3 Linkages/Analysis

The interviews which ActionAid International undertook generated recurring feedback that the cluster approach could have had more important and far-reaching consequences than it actually did, and offered a potential for combined working and analysis that was not fully realised. In the words of one local NGO stakeholder "the combined total did not live up to the sum of its parts" as it was too fragmented. NGOs also felt that there should have been more in-depth discussion, qualitative and strategic analysis and synthesis of the information obtained to determine next steps, rather than simply information-sharing.

One reason for the failure in this regard was identified as problems with connectivity (see p.21). OCHA pointed out that an ad hoc "Team Orange" which visited the various clusters and programme leads and produced "orange documents" on the issues that it felt people should be talking about. But this was disconnected from any line of authority and therefore nobody was obliged to do anything about its findings.

There were linkages between problems with defining global cluster leads at the outset of the implementation of the approach and decisions made in the emergency response. For example, whilst the cluster lead for Shelter was changed from IOM and then back again, a major donor made an unnecessary decision not to fund tents. An INGO commented on the lack of analysis at the beginning of the emergency, stating that 70% of tents were not winterised and this problem was addressed too late. The major donor, referred to above, added that people spent a lot of time in Islamabad discussing clusters at the expense of undertaking basic analysis and getting things done. It should not have been a surprise to anyone that winter would arrive and be followed by spring, this should have been factored into the analysis. Problems with using tents in winter

were already evident in the lessons learned from Kosovo. In this respect, the earthquake has raised issues which are similar to those in other emergencies, for example the question of land rights of displaced people and female-headed households. It is clear that in areas such as these, the lessons learned from previous emergencies are not being appropriately harnessed. Global cluster leads may have a role to play in this regard (see p.28).

One INGO stated that the approach should have been more purposeful in terms of planning and implementation. There was no mechanism for dealing with recovery, whereas in the affected areas, people were starting to return and rebuilding their own homes rather than waiting for earthquake-proof housing to be redesigned. The INGO representative suggested a time-line to assist with forward planning, stating, for example, where livelihoods, etc., be taken in. She said that everything was done in an ad hoc way; current discussions focussed on whether relief should be a separate cluster from recovery when this should have been worked out earlier. The relief phase raised issues concerning lack of urban planning, rubble clearance and demolishing of unsound house structures, she did not see all of these being resolved in time for winter. An local NGO commented that linkages needed to be identified in cluster meetings between earthquake programmes and ongoing projects.

Clusters have adopted approaches to deal with strategic planning. The head of the Shelter cluster in Islamabad had a sub-division looking at strategic planning which was made up of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 3 NGOs (rotating), Donors (ECHO, DfID, USAID), the Federal Relief Commission, 2 national NGOs and selected cluster leads depending on the subject of the meeting. ICRC/OCHA were invited as observers. It promoted policy and advocacy positions on behalf of the cluster for later ratification by the wider Cluster membership. The NGOs self-selected and people were encouraged to follow its guidelines.

In Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Oxfam took on some detailed coordination on behalf of IOM in order to research the transitional phase. It became the point of contact for INGOs planning transitional shelter activities and the "NGO consortium" became the point of contact for local NGOs for this exercise. Oxfam understood that it was asked to do this because the issue was slightly further forward than the field-based issues being addressed by the cluster meetings at that time.

5.4 Cross-cutting Issues

Cross-cutting issues were generally regarded as falling through the cracks in the cluster response. A local NGO commented that there appeared to have been no work done on female-headed households; the Livelihoods cluster initially focussed on agriculture and was gender blind. The local NGO representative added that the gender cluster coordinated by UNFPA was very secretive and exclusive. She had made a request to see a particular draft report which had not been acceded to at the time of ActionAid International's interview with her. A recent Habitat cluster meeting she attended was comprised of 60 men and 3 women.

Environmental issues had also been sidelined – the local NGO commented that impacts of the earthquake such as rivers changing course were not addressed. An INGO commented that 4 Corrugated Galvanised Iron (CGI) sheets were given to each family with the expectation that they would make the structures themselves. This could have led to massive logging and further destabilisation of the mountain slopes. Finally, human rights concerns were not adequately addressed. One such concern raised in an OCHA meeting was referred to the Social Protection cluster.

These problems may arise from a lack of knowledge on the part of cluster leads on how to spot cross-cutting issues and address them, and the involvement of agencies with expertise in cross-cutting issues in an advisory and monitoring role is recommended.

5.5 Connectivity

ActionAid International's research indicates that there was an "over-clusterisation" at national level, when it is actually the hubs that need the most focus,

as they are most directly involved in the relief effort. The "connectivity" across clusters and the dynamic between hubs and clusters, were not adequately tapped or understood in the earthquake response. One cluster head took the view that data streaming was necessary between hub and cluster level and also across hubs in order to be able to do this. One relatively cheap way in which this could be achieved would be to have an Internet station at each hub.

There appeared to be very little awareness of what coordination efforts existed between clusters in Islamabad and those in the field. Many NGOs described the interaction between hubs and clusters as poor. One INGO representative described Islamabad as "like a different planet" though another described information flow as reasonable and one cluster lead described it as good.

An INGO commented that only the heads of cluster interacted and something was lost in the process. Others pointed to the lack of staff at hub level as compared to Islamabad level and the inconsistency of reporting formats between the two as a reason for poor communication. One INGO stated that minutes from the field hubs were not shared with agencies in Islamabad.

A local NGO flagged a lack of sharing from Islamabad to the field. Agencies in Islamabad were constantly asking for information from the field but this was one-way traffic with nothing in return, something which created resentment. An INGO said that clusters in Islamabad were too philosophical and suffered from mission creep.

As far as the dynamic across clusters is concerned, a hub cluster in Mansehra identified that in Islamabad, the different clusters are located in different offices and the attendees of meetings vary from meeting to meeting so there is little continuity. In Mansehra, there is a smaller community so there is a reasonable amount of cross-cluster information

flow. The Camp Management cluster in Muzaffarabad stated that they share problems with linked clusters – for example health problems are shared with WHO and Food with WFP, as well as the Watsan cluster.

One cluster head suggested co-locating cluster heads in one place, adding that it would create immense synergy. An INGO said that the Camp Management and Shelter clusters were starting to have joint meetings in Islamabad – but this realisation of connectivity hit people much later than it should. The person concerned had found out at one meeting about how to feed into the action plan, but this information had not been shared with the other clusters. Another INGO has stated that the action plan is an important issue in the reconstruction phase but many NGOs were not aware of it.

5.6 Monitoring and Evaluation

One cluster lead hub commented that there was very little monitoring and oversight of equality and equity and that funding needed to be allocated to this. In addition, reports of coverage were inaccurate on occasion. One local NGO stated that in one case where a cluster reported 25,000 shelters distributed, its survey showed that there were only 2,700 on the ground. As a result it stressed the importance of re-surveying areas and carrying out independent assessments of coverage. The cluster said that there was considerable effort to spread out, but there were gaps.

A related point made by another local NGO was that decisions were taken in the clusters but there was no follow up and many organisations did not follow the agreed principles. A third local NGO commented that cluster heads in Mansehra verified information provided in meetings.

Clusters – Structural Issues

A key factor affecting the implementation of the cluster approach in Pakistan was that it had not been fully developed at global level before it was introduced and therefore was not a "fully cooked meal" as one cluster head put it. UN agencies found themselves implementing the cluster concept before their staff had been trained or fully knew what clusters were intended to do. In addition there were changes and delays in appointing cluster heads at global and hub level. The fact that the initial UN emergency response was in many cases managed by people who knew nothing about either clusters or Pakistan hampered its effectiveness.

The fact that the entire emergency response appears to have been implemented through the cluster approach, rather than simply the "gap" areas identified in the HRR, diminished the rationale for dividing the clusters into the various themes. According to one cluster head there were initially 10–12 clusters and instead of converging they diverged in Islamabad with new sub-clusters forming. There was overlapping and duplication and many respondents felt that clusters needed to be integrated.

6.1 Number of Meetings

NGOs felt particularly tested by the sheer number of meetings and the duplication between them. In addition there were complaints that the meetings were held at inconvenient times, without proper agendas, or that they were cancelled/changed at short notice.

It was hard for NGOs to spare people simply to attend meetings and sometimes the agenda got hijacked by side issues that were not relevant to many of those attending and could have been resolved in alternative fora. The lack of training for UN staff on how to run clusters did not help.

6.2 Terms of Reference

The lack of Terms of Reference was a definite problem, both for cluster leads, UN agencies and NGOs. It contributed to problems with duplication and confusion about the role of clusters, both at national and hub level. This lack of UN knowledge about clusters filtered down to confusion amongst NGOs. One INGO compared the experience of being confronted with the cluster approach to being like an undergraduate faced with a PhD level doctrine. There were no guidelines, so agencies crafted their own guidance. For example, the Emergency Shelter Cluster developed a Terms of Reference for the cluster and cluster coordinator in week 4 of the emergency response, which remained in draft form at the time of the interview. NGOs remain confused about the aims behind clusters and their role within them.

6.3 Staff Turnover

Staff turnover among the UN, particularly cluster heads, was cited as being a problem by both International and local NGOs. International NGOs described how this weakened clusters and, as mentioned above, local NGOs referred to the frustrations of having to help bring new arrivals up to speed, rather than obtaining assistance for their activities. In Mansehra there were 4 changes to OCHA cluster heads, 8 to the head of the Security cluster and 5 to the UNICEF cluster lead. IOM retained the same cluster lead and its performance was better because of the build up of institutional memory, knowledge of the situation on the ground and relationship/trust building with cluster members.

A donor representative identified that lack of UN presence in the hubs and beyond as a continuing issue relating to the ability of qualified staff. He commented that an important lesson to be learned was that the sooner experienced staff were deployed to the field, the sooner it would be possible to have accurate information allowing for an analysis of the best response. He added that if the UN had good people in the field, international agencies would have known where to go and ask for help. He added that most people within OCHA were on six-month contracts as far as he understood, and this might be an issue.

6.4 Duties of Cluster Leads

There were difficulties with cluster heads separating their roles as cluster leads from their role within their agencies, though the extent of this problem varied from cluster to cluster. Where it occurred, it led to the cluster lead pushing forward their agency's own agenda rather than carrying out their designated role as head of cluster. Some local NGOs said that they could not tell the difference between agency and cluster business.

One reason for these difficulties was that cluster leads often needed to combine two full time jobs – running an agency and running a cluster – and on occasion there could be a conflict between the two. In addition, cluster leads did not have a sufficient staff secretariat to support them, or sufficient training, as one UN agency commented – much more effort is needed to lead a cluster than the one hour of the actual meeting. Otherwise running clusters added to the workload as agencies were blamed for all their failures.

One INGO commented that the clusters were driven by the charisma of their leaders and there appeared to be an element of competition between them. A national NGO was of the view that those cluster leads who managed well took advice from non-UN members. Some of the better-run and more efficient clusters did not appear to help the weaker clusters to do better.

An INGO described a debate within a cluster hub about the advisability of a joint implementation and coordination role and whether this was a good idea in the emergency context. However, it was felt that it would be difficult for an agency to carry out a coordinating role if it did not also implement – the two roles were mixed to that extent.

6.5 Information Management

NGOs commented that assessments were duplicated, formats were not standardised and the process of information collecting was over complicated. A hub cluster also said that HIC insisted on inappropriate information requirements. There were drawbacks due to the fact that the UN had very little physical presence in the affected areas

and relied on second hand information that was not verified (as to the difficulties with this, see 5.6).

UN cluster heads regarded HIC as being very good in Islamabad, although it was not particularly efficient in giving out information and coordination at the hubs, especially Battagram, due to lack of capacity. HIC was also described as doing the best it could given the knowledge and resources available, handling government and NGO information which was not always accurate in the first place.

INGOs commented that the maps from HIC setting out where agencies were working were good (after some initial hiccups) as were their road updates, although the WFP said that they were not detailed enough for food distribution. One INGO mentioned that HIC had a "pushy" attitude which did not work with voluntary non-UN partners. Another INGO thought that they could have made a better job of communications given their budget, and outreach to NGOs was weak. However, local NGOs were particularly appreciative of the information provided by HIC.

One INGO commented that HIC could distribute agendas of meetings so that people know what might be of interest. A question arises of what, if any, role HIC should play in data analysis, this would seem a function best left to the clusters themselves.

6.6 Media

NGOs found national TV very helpful in making announcements for help and took the view that the UN could have utilised this more. One INGO representative referred to a Radio station, Power 99, which encouraged NGOs to use it to broadcast messages, she understood this to be free of charge and successful. A local NGO commented that a Communications cluster should have been set up to engage with the media.

6.7 The Role of OCHA

It is unclear where the overarching role of OCHA lies in the cluster approach, for example, what types of analysis it should be carrying out. In the Pakistan response, OCHA was described by one UN agency as the engine of coordination but not the glue that binds all agencies together. It was commented that it could have made better use of the information available and the standard formats developed in Geneva. It was also described as a little autocratic and as needing to do more than policing.
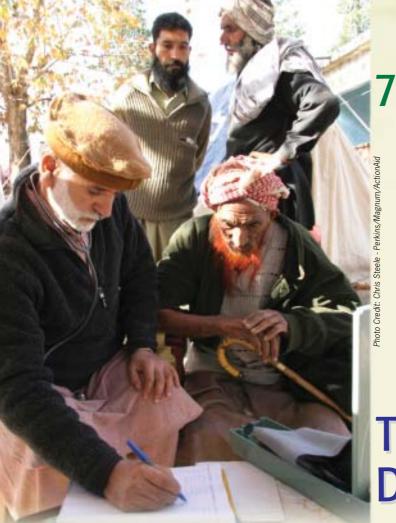
At headquarters level, a number of donors expressed concerns that reforms to OCHA have not strengthened the response capacity of the organisation. One commented that internal politics were transferring the centre of its work from Geneva to Washington, which appeared to be undermining the motivation of its very dedicated staff. They stressed the need to underline OCHA's mandate within the humanitarian reform process. A major donor expressed concerns that OCHA in Geneva was not responding to OCHA in the field.

6.8 The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) function

The role of the HC in respect of the cluster approach in Pakistan was described as having been to engage in cross-clusteral issues and operational oversight. One local NGO commented that the HC was a little removed from the everyday work of clusters but was very good in the heads of agencies and the inter-cluster coordination meetings.

At headquarters level a number of donors stressed the importance of supporting the role of the HC in deciding how funds should be allocated as s/he was best placed to assess which needs were most urgent. This was seen as a way of bypassing inter-agency rivalry or inability on the part of UN agencies to decide how to distribute work. In such a situation, the relationship between the HC and cluster heads would need to be defined.

The ERC's role in mobilising the Government of Pakistan in the earthquake response was described by one UN agency as vital.

Photo Credit: Chris Steele - Perkins/Magnum/ActionAid

The Role of Donors

A local NGO representative particularly stressed the importance of getting international financial institutions to attend clusters. She commented that the World Bank (WB) and International Development Bank have provided huge sums of money in soft loans and credit for relief and reconstruction and wield immense influence, but did not attend cluster meetings. For example, she discovered during a cluster meeting that the WB had directed that only 10% of households needed to be surveyed prior to rebuilding and therefore the 100% figure endorsed by Nespak, a Pakistani public sector engineering firm, in a Habitat cluster meeting was of no consequence. The WB did not have a representative present at the meeting to explain its decision or be persuaded to change it. ActionAid International was unsuccessful in arranging a meeting with the WB to discuss this point.

The general attitude among the limited number of donor country staff interviewed at ground level was that clusters were useful, but there appeared to be a fear among the donor of divulging information at ground level. The head of one cluster commented that it was easier to get information from individual NGOs about who was funding them than get information directly from donor representatives. The heads of two hub clusters urged that the role of donors and implementers in the clusters need to be clarified as the clusters tend to be donor-driven in their approaches.

While donor country representatives in Pakistan appeared to attend clusters, albeit sporadically, they did not have decision-making authority and dealt with requests for funding according to development/ foreign policy determined in the donor country. Funding proposals are also generally sent to the donor countries for approval.

Respondents commented that clusters were coordinating with donor representatives in Pakistan but not deciding where money went as they had no

legal standing to be taking or disbursing funds. Given the difficulties identified above with the separation of agency and cluster mandates, this would appear to be a good thing. However, one INGO commented that if people were serious about collaborating there needed to be a mechanism for deciding how to invest in activities. It is also important to delineate how clusters fit in with the HC and the CAP. As explained above, some donors view the best option as being to support the role of the humanitarian coordinator to make funding decisions.

At headquarters level one donor country, which had not been active in Pakistan prior to the earthquake, found the existence of cluster leads, such as IOM, very helpful as this assisted it to decide which funding proposals to take forward, enabling it to access information which it would not otherwise have had.

Donors commented that it was not fair to gauge the validity of the entire cluster response by how it succeeded or failed in Pakistan. But some donors added that they were not closely involved in the cluster approach. The representative of one major donor was unclear on the difference between clusters and sectors, though she felt that ensuring accountability and predictability are good goals. Donors reiterated that they would continue to channel funding to where it was felt to be most effective, whether this was through the UN or otherwise.

8

Clusters at Global Level

The HRR described three humanitarian networks whom it viewed as remaining vertical to one another: UN agencies, The Red Cross/Red Crescent movement and NGOs.

This analysis is problematic as it will be evident from the information above that NGOs are a highly diverse grouping which, like the UN, operate at a number of levels. NGO involvement in the global clusters has been limited, which is concerning as over 50% of operational activity lies with NGOs. Issues relating to mandate apply at the global as well as national level – some organisations might in certain contexts feel that they were compromising the necessity for them to be neutral and impartial. However, in principle, there seems no reason why NGOs would not wish to engage with the cluster debate at the global level, in the same way as they have at country level. Such involvement would no

doubt be based on a clear appreciation of the utility of this exercise.

A practical example of problems with a lack of NGO involvement can be found in the progress report of the global cluster working group on camp coordination and camp management[7] in November 2005. This cited the lack of involvement of others, in particular non-UN actors, as a major impediment so far as the four agencies involved constitute only a small proportion of agencies which have interest, experience and capacity in this cluster. To address this situation, UNHCR launched a special effort addressing potential partners from the NGO community and other humanitarian agencies. A major donor flagged the change in UNHCR's mandate concerning IDPS, as a very important issue; this donor described itself as actively engaging with UNHCR on this point in a manner it had not previously

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and commented that NGOs are also likely to relate to UNHCR in a manner they had not previously due to the change.

Donors have had limited input into the cluster process at global level. One donor representative commented that there were de-briefings for donors about the reforms in Geneva, but the end of 2005 offered the first opportunity for donors to ask questions about UN reform. Donors voiced curiosity as to how NGOs would accept the UN's role as a cluster lead and how far the NGO umbrella bodies on the IASC are adequately able to represent the entire spectrum of NGOs in all their diversity.

In December 2005, the IASC agreed that bilateral organisations could be invited to participate in specific discussions at global level, should this be deemed appropriate by the respective clusters. The organisations the UN appeared to have in mind were the biggest 10–15 NGOs.

The interviews in Pakistan disclosed an almost complete lack of knowledge on the part of non-UN staff about the role of Geneva and the global clusters. Respondents were unclear on whether this was because the role of Geneva was designed to have little impact on the ground or whether their own lack of awareness meant that they were not engaging adequately with clusters at global level. OCHA described the global clusters as feeding into the IASC forum, which had an overarching policy role and was not concerned with policy strategy.

However, the IASC set up a taskforce on earthquake response in Geneva, which appears to have added little value. The meetings dealt mainly with numbers of items distributed and activities being carried out. This was a missed opportunity for the taskforce to assist in analysis of the information coming in and strategic overview, flagging gaps, etc., particularly given the difficulties experienced with this on the ground.

There is a lack of awareness about the different roles of clusters at global, as well as national and hub level. A clear demarcation between these would enable stakeholders to decide on whether it was appropriate to provide input into the global process, including through an NGO coalition such as ICVA. This is an issue of relevance to donors as well as NGOs. Louis Michel,[8] European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, gave a speech indicating that he would welcome an initiative by the IASC to commission a study into housing proposals, with the aim of looking into a public private partnership aimed at producing housing kits. This type of exercise would appear to fall within the ambit of the global cluster lead and might assist when the next emergency strikes.

As is evident, the implementation of the cluster approach in Pakistan created many opportunities for learning and for development of the humanitarian reform process. This will no doubt continue to be the case as it is rolled out in different countries. The UN should therefore consider a mechanism whereby affected populations and stakeholders, such as those in Pakistan, can input into the global reform process, should they wish. Such a mechanism would enable the global process to benefit from a "bottom–up" participatory approach.

UN cluster heads interviewed in Pakistan described varying levels of support from Geneva, although there appeared to be limited guidance from this quarter. One cluster head described support as generally being good, with the caveat that there were no Terms of Reference or resources allocated. He described about 15% of his time as being spent in interface with Geneva. He said he had sought advice on issues such as how to move the cluster into the transitional phase but did not seem to think that anything useful would be forthcoming. The WHO obtained technical guidance from the health cluster on medicines, as well as agreement from the global health cluster on the use of field hospitals, an approach which had previously been discarded but was found to be useful in the earthquake context. A third cluster coordinator said he had minimal input into Geneva, and his expectation of guidance from Geneva was also minimal.

The confusion over the implementation of the approach at the outset of the emergency and the

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8. European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Geneva, Palais des Nations December 12th 2005

lack of training on the approach insofar as it had been developed, point to a failure in support from Geneva. One INGO commented that somebody from Geneva who understood the approach should have flown out to Pakistan and provided training on it. It seems clear that the role of the IASC and of clusters at global level needs to be moved out of the shadows in order to ensure that the accountability and predictability sought from the clusters can be achieved.

Conclusion

The above findings should provide some food for thought in the debate about the future direction of humanitarian response and the cluster approach in particular. It will be apparent that stakeholders have varying perceptions of the efficacy of the approach and a wide range of suggestions as to how it could be developed, in order to realise its potential. It is hoped that the UN will incorporate these suggestions into its humanitarian reform strategy.

It can only be beneficial for UN agencies, national governments and civil structures in affected countries, local, national and international civil society and donors, to work cohesively in humanitarian response. The ultimate aim must always be to implement a swift, people-centred approach to emergency response and subsequent reconstruction, with maximum coverage and minimum duplication, reaching all those in need.

Appendix

List of Organisations interviewed and locations

UN Organisations/Cluster leads

OCHA   :   Islamabad

IOM   :   Islamabad, Mansehra, Batagram

UNDP   :   Islamabad

UNICEF :   Mansehra WES and Education Cluster Coordinators, Mansehra

WFP   :   Batagram

WHO   :   Islamabad

INGOs

ActionAid International: Islamabad, Bagh, Mansehra and Muzaffarabad offices

Church World Services: Islamabad

Concern: Islamabad

Goal: Islamabad

ICRC: Islamabad

Islamic Relief: Islamabad

MSF Holland: Muzaffarabad

Oxfam (Mansehra, Batagram, and Pakistan-administered Kashmir)

Plan: Islamabad

RedR: Batagram

Save the Children US: Islamabad

Local NGOs

Hope Muzaffarabad: Muzaffarabad

Joint Action Committee: Islamabad

Kashmir Education Foundation: Islamabad

NRSP: Islamabad

SRSP: Muzaffarabad, Mansehra

Sungi: Islamabad

TVO: Islamabad, Mansehra

Affected Communities

Awami Camp

Maidan Camp Community

Tanda village

Meeting with the deputy representative of the District Nazim: Muzaffarabad

Donors

DfID

ECHO

Minbuza (Netherlands)

SIDA (Sweden)

A further major donor who wished to remain unnamed

(all of the above were interviewed at Head Office Level)

Norwegian Embassy in Islamabad

Meetings

WES (Water and Sanitation) cluster meeting: Islamabad

Food Cluster meeting: Batagram

General Coordination meeting: Mansehra

Camp Management meeting: Muzaffarabad