UNHCR, IDPs and clusters

by Tim Morris

In December 2005 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)[1] endorsed a 'cluster'-based mechanism to address gaps in the humanitarian response to IDP and refugee situations. How will it work?

The cluster approach is evolving in response to a key recommendation of the Humanitarian Response Review, an independent report commissioned by Jan Egeland, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator.[2] In September 2005 the IASC Principals[3] assigned global sectoral responsibilities to UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies. UNHCR is the designated 'cluster' lead in three areas of conflict-induced displacement: emergency shelter, camp coordination and management, and protection. Each cluster lead has accepted to be the agency of 'first port of call' and 'provider of last resort' within this sector/cluster. The cluster leads are to support UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators in ensuring a coordinated response.

The new arrangements, which came into force on 1 January 2006, are designed to provide much-needed predictability and accountability for the collaborative response to IDPs. As far as UNHCR's engagement is concerned, they do not apply to existing refugee operations – or affect UNHCR's core mandate relating to refugees – but will have far-reaching implications for UNHCR, especially in situations of internal displacement generated by conflict. The potential addition of millions of new beneficiaries is certain to put pressure on the agency's staff and already over-strained financial resources, at least in the short term. However, it may also provide a unique opportunity for UNHCR to re-orient itself as a central agency dealing with conflict-related displacement, potentially drawing in more resources that will benefit both refugees and IDPs.

The IASC considers that it will take a couple of years to put in place the approach at a global level. The new arrangements are being piloted in 2006 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Uganda and Liberia – and should be applied in any new emergency that arises during the year. Although the system was not fully elaborated at the time, the response to the earthquake in Pakistan in late 2005 was organised along the lines of clusters.

A forthcoming evaluation of this operation will provide guidance on how to apply the cluster leadership approach in sudden-onset disaster response. Somalia, where the approach is already being widely used, will be presented as another pilot country to the IASC Principals at their meeting in April. Nepal and Colombia are other possibilities which will be assessed for their feasibility to implement the cluster approach. The IASC Principals have said that the cluster approach will be the framework for humanitarian response in all "major new emergencies".

As cluster lead, UNHCR must ensure that assessments and strategies are in place within the areas of its responsibility. This does not mean that in each and every situation UNHCR will by itself fund or implement all field activities. UNHCR's role is to ensure that other actors take on activities that fall within the cluster to the best of their capacities and that additional funding is secured or at least appealed for. Where capacity gaps exist in the cluster as a whole and where no other actors can realistically respond, UNHCR will have to be prepared to act as a 'provider of last resort' and to carry out priority activities, seeking funds accordingly. UNHCR is to develop its leadership capacity to carry out its responsibilities in protection, emergency shelter and camp coordination and management.

Implementation challenges

The process which led to formulation of the cluster approach, the Humanitarian Response Review,[4] resulted from IASC discussions in New York and Geneva. The cluster approach has been HQ-based and

	Cluster	Cluster lead
1	Logistics	World Food Programme
2	Emergency telecommunications	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – OCHA (Process Owner)
		UNICEF (Common Data Services)
		WFP (Common Security Telecommunications Services)
3	Camp coordination and management	UNHCR for conflict-generated IDPs
		IOM for natural disaster-generated IDPs
4	Emergency shelter	International Federation of Red Cross/Crescent (IFRC)
5	Health	World Health Organisation
6	Nutrition	UNICEF
7	Water, sanitation and hygiene	UNICEF
8	Early recovery	UNDP
9	Protection	UNHCR for conflict-generated IDPs
		UNHCR, UNICEF and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for natural disaster-generated IDPs

its true test lies in the field. Some lessons have already been learned from experience in Pakistan. Each country situation will be different so there is a need for flexibility, based on which agencies are best placed on the ground to respond. Antonio Guterres, High Commissioner for Refugees, has argued strongly for a bottom-up approach to the application of the clusters. The cluster lead approach needs to be adjusted to the reality of the situation by the IASC teams on the ground, and cannot be applied dogmatically. At the same time, the concept of IASC field teams is one that still requires clarification, particularly when it comes to issues like NGO representation and decision-making authority. NGO participation in UN Country Teams remains weak, ad hoc and inconsistent despite recommendations made in the Humanitarian Response Review.

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While UNHCR is taking the lead in protection, emergency shelter and camp coordination and management, it also intends to be a constructive partner in other clusters where it does not play a lead role. UNHCR will be particularly supportive of the work of the UNDP-led early recovery cluster to deliver sustainable durable solutions and protection in post-conflict and post-disaster situations.

The initiative has been developed very fast and there are still many aspects to be worked on. It has elicited support and optimism but also a fair degree of scepticism.[5] Some NGOs, including the coalitions represented on the IASC, have expressed concerns that:

■ NGOs have not been provided with enough information on what exactly the cluster approach is, why it is being implemented and how they are supposed to support it.
■ It is unclear whether an agency designated as 'provider of last resort' will only actually step

forward once it gets required resources: NGOs responding to the Pakistani earthquake were unsure what the term meant.
■ The cluster approach is UN-centric and has been developed without sufficient regard to the structures of NGOs or of donors.
■ Staff of an NGO engaged in various clusters may find themselves running from one cluster meeting to another.
■ Some of the UN agencies that are leading clusters do not have the operational capacity to fulfill assigned roles or experience of working with NGOs.
■ There is no cluster for education.
■ The role and involvement of national and local NGOs have not been clarified.

The IASC is working on some guidance material that will emphasise simplicity, and stresses that the approach is not about 'more meetings'. OCHA will need to re-orient its role in support of Humanitarian Coordinators to bring together the clusters and ensure that the overall response works.

UNHCR challenges

Introducing the inter-agency cluster leadership approach will require considerable internal rethinking and reorganisation as well as additional resources to ensure that UNHCR can continue to live up to its responsibilities. UNHCR is trying to ensure that its efforts to resource stand-alone IDP operations do not have a negative impact on funding for its refugee and returnee programmes. Ultimately, however, IDP programmes need to become an integral part of UNHCR's fundraising efforts. This will not be a major change as UNHCR already approaches durable solutions programmes in a non-discriminatory and area-based fashion, of equal benefit to refugees, IDPs, host communities and other affected populations. UNHCR needs to ensure that its IDP programmes are, similarly, eventually mainstreamed within a holistic approach.

The Humanitarian Response Review and the resultant cluster leadership approach provide unique opportunities for the international community to improve the delivery of protection and assistance to IDPs by ensuring that critical sectors now have designated lead agencies, where in the past no agency systematically took responsibility.

The approach strengthens one of the three 'pillars' of humanitarian reform led by the Emergency Relief Coordinator: increasing the predictability and effectiveness of the system's response. The other two pillars are expansion of the Central Emergency Revolving Fund – now the Central Emergency Response Fund – and strengthening the system of Humanitarian Coordinators. These reform efforts are meant to mutually reinforce each other to ensure that situations such as the slow and patchy humanitarian response in Darfur will be avoided in the future (as far as the humanitarian community is able to influence the situation). UNHCR will need to approach this new challenge in a spirit of true partnership, engaging and consulting with all major stakeholders including NGOs, donors and host governments.

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For further information, see *Cluster 2006 - Appeal for Improving Humanitarian Response Capacity* http://ochaonline.un.org/cap/webpage.asp?Page=1355

1. A body which brings together eight UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, three consortia of NGOs (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, InterAction and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response), the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration. For more information on IASC, see: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc
2. www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2005/ocha-gen-02sep.pdf
3. IASC Principals are the heads of all IASC member agencies or their representatives.
4. http://ochaonline.un.org/ocha2006/chap6_6.htm
5. See the October 2005 edition of *Talk Back*, www.icva.ch/cgi-bin/browse.pl?doc=doc00001467 and Gerald Martone, *The IDP quagmire: old wine, new bottles* www.interaction.org/library/detail.php?id=4582