

Elephants in the humanitarian room

by Tim Morris

Several of the preceding articles reflect optimism about humanitarian reform and cite successes of the Cluster Approach. However, many within the humanitarian community – practitioners, donors and analysts – harbour doubts, often not publicly aired, which they shared with FMR during the preparation of this issue.

Many have expressed concern at the speed of roll-out of the Cluster Approach, given the perceived shortage of suitably qualified Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) to provide leadership and of adequately trained cluster leads with experience in logistics and coordination. There are worries about the Cluster Approach proving to be overly labour intensive. Some cluster leads have struggled to cope with the numbers of grants, partnerships, guidelines, memoranda, groups, sub-groups, meetings and minutes spawned by humanitarian reform. Donors are concerned at the costs of the eleven clusters and unwillingness of lead agencies to absorb them from their own regular budgets. Mechanisms by which cluster leads are accountable to HCs or procedures for HCs to mediate between competing clusters remain unclear.

Clusters seem to be making some UN agencies anxious. UN staff may not have grasped what clusters are or understood their new responsibilities. The tendency for UN agencies to start talking about ‘firewalls’ – to demarcate activities they will undertake separately from their responsibilities as clusters members/leads – is a worrying impediment to the comprehensive approach.

Is the Cluster Approach globally applicable? John Holmes, the UN’s Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), has described it as “the way we now do business”. However, many doubt whether its mechanisms should be deployed in all humanitarian operations. Should it be rolled out only where gaps in provision have been identified or governments lack response capacity? A recent UNHCR evaluation of the Cluster Approach recommended that it is premature for the Cluster Approach to become the standard response mechanism.¹

NGOs are frustrated by slow disbursement of funds channelled through the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF²). Donors are worried by the high level of CERF administrative overheads. INGOs are rankled by inability to directly access CERF funding or get information about disbursement procedures.³ CERF may have given UN agencies access to more flexible and predictable funding but at a price of imposing new burdens on their international and local partners. UN agencies can take months to sub-contract, in effect diverting funds dedicated to saving lives into bureaucracies. Non-UN actors with field capacity to intervene now have to wait longer for funds. A recent independent review notes that UN transaction costs have increased and finds no indication that CERF has succeeded in its declared goal of improving coordination between UN and non-UN humanitarian actors.⁴ In fact, it may have driven them apart as they now compete for the same humanitarian funds. By reinforcing the role of UN middlemen, is CERF at odds with the UN’s move to embrace business-like efficiency?

Among other questions being asked are:

- In practice, how does the Cluster Approach differ from sectoral coordination systems?
- Is the reform process impeding UNHCR’s ability to address IDP issues?
- Why is nutrition, but not food, a cluster?
- What exactly is a POLR – provider of last resort? After several years of high-level commitment to guarantee protection and assistance – and use of the Cluster Approach in eight chronic humanitarian crises and six sudden-onset emergencies – there

is still no coherent definition of this key concept of the reform process.

- Is the Early Recovery cluster clear in its objectives? Several agencies lament the lack of agreed financing mechanisms at the field level for early recovery programming and coordination.
- Are the drivers of humanitarian reform doing enough to engage with host authorities, civil society and other local actors?
- Is the UN sufficiently involving national governments in the Cluster Approach or tweaking cluster responsibilities to fit with pre-existing structures created by governments?
- Are some UN agencies dragging their feet in actualising commitments set out in the Global Humanitarian Platform’s ‘Principles of Partnership’?⁵
- Is humanitarian reform making it harder to accommodate diverging traditions and practices?

Encouragingly, UN staff are talking more about the need to consult with other agencies and refer more frequently to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. Unprecedented efforts are being made to ensure that debate about humanitarian reform is in the public domain, and not confined to the corridors of humanitarian power in Geneva and New York.⁶ However, a much wider range of humanitarian actors must be engaged to make sure there is genuine coherence between all four areas of the humanitarian reform package – partnerships, financing, clusters and HC strengthening. All could be mutually reinforcing.

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1. www.unhcr.org/excom/EXCOM/46d586782.pdf

2. <http://cerf.un.org>

3. eg Save the Children Alliance: www.savethechildren.net/alliance/media/newsdesk/2007-01-31.html

4. <http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docId=1073098>

5. www.icva.ch/pop.html

6. Many documents are available online: see www.humanitarianreform.org and www.icva.ch/doc00001560.html