

# Cluster approach – a vital operational tool

by Allan Jury and Giammichele De Maio

**Many of the problems encountered in cluster implementation in the field derive from a misunderstanding of the key operational nature of clusters.**

The true value of clusters lies in their ability to boost operational capacity and effectiveness, rather than in their procedural aspects. Misunderstanding about this fundamental nature of clusters has led in some cases to a proliferation of meetings, overemphasis on funding issues, unnecessary clusters at country level, involvement of non-operational actors and additional bureaucratic layers. This is not what the Cluster Approach should be about.

At the global level, the Cluster Approach aims to strengthen system-wide preparedness and coordination of technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies by ensuring that there is predictable leadership and accountability in all main sectors. At country level the aim is to strengthen humanitarian operational response by demanding high standards of predictability, accountability and partnership in all areas of activity.

The Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on UN system-wide coherence on development, humanitarian assistance and the environment issued its final report – 'Delivering as One'<sup>1</sup> – in November 2006. The panel included many senior government figures, including Josette Sheeran who subsequently took office as the eleventh Executive Director of WFP in April 2007. The HLP has largely endorsed the direction of ongoing UN humanitarian reforms, reinforcing the will of all players to proceed with their implementation, both at global and country levels. All major emergencies since then have seen the international response organised following the Cluster Approach.

The IASC has repeatedly urged flexibility when applying the Cluster Approach. It should not necessarily amount to an overturn of existing structures. The Cluster Approach should bring about operational improvements, preserving effective mechanisms that are already in place and concentrating on providing effective services in areas where further capacity is required.

WFP plays a significant role in the cluster system, acting as the lead agency for the Logistics Cluster

and co-lead for the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster, as well as being an active participant in the nutrition, protection, education and early recovery clusters. The IASC reconfirmed WFP as the global lead in food aid, a sector recognised as already meeting standards set for the cluster system.

For WFP, clusters are an operational tool whose aim is to improve operational response in all areas of emergency intervention. The implementation of the cluster system should strengthen predictability, comprehensiveness and quality of humanitarian response in any specific humanitarian situation. Cluster structures at country and global levels should therefore be simple and results-oriented, focusing on operational gap filling, and include all organisations with real operational capacities in the sector. Mapping existing operational gaps should be the first activity of a newly-formed cluster followed by the development of shared, realistic plans to address them.

The Cluster Approach should respect the mandates and nature of all participating organisations, including national and local actors, as well as recognising the level of commitment to the cluster's activities that each can afford. It is important to clarify the commitment of each cluster member at the country level as soon as possible to enable a transparent and effective distribution of labour, thus ensuring predictability and accountability in responding to the needs of the people whom we all serve.

## Cluster approach in action

In Guinea, imposition of martial law in April 2007 prompted the UN to raise security levels and evacuate all non-essential staff. As the UN was ill-equipped to handle the unexpected security deterioration – and humanitarian workers'

*Ozdan Hadziemin of WFP's Fast IT & Telecoms Emergency Support Team (FITTEST), UAE, installing VHF base radio antenna on tower in Guinea.*



FITTEST/Pierre Parry

safety was endangered by lack of proper communication tools – the Humanitarian Coordinator made a request to WFP as the leading entity in the Emergency Telecommunication Cluster (ETC) in Guinea.

We responded by sending an assessment mission to five operational areas in the country and developing a proposal to address identified weaknesses in the system and ensure compliance with the UN's minimum security standards. After review by the Humanitarian Coordinator and UN Country Team, funds were made available from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).<sup>2</sup> WFP immediately mobilised staff

who worked round the clock. Within three months they had significantly improved radio coverage in the capital, Conakry, and in other operational areas and had trained UN and NGO staff in the use of the new communications equipment. An inter-agency telecommunication working group is maintaining the upgraded infrastructure. The upgraded system is alleviating risks in an unstable environment and helping humanitarian workers as they carry out their mandate of caring for affected populations.

This example of successful inter-agency cooperation, made possible by the humanitarian reform process,

demonstrates both the importance of stronger partnerships between UN agencies, NGOs and other key stakeholders at all levels – to bring together diversity of expertise and comparative advantages of different partners to achieve common objectives – and the essential value of clusters as an operational tool.

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1. [www.un.org/events/panel/resources/pdfs/HLP-SWC-FinalReport.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/panel/resources/pdfs/HLP-SWC-FinalReport.pdf)

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