HUMANITARIAN REFORM: FULFILLING ITS PROMISE?

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’ – 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’
Early recovery from disaster: the Pakistan earthquake

by Andrew MacLeod

In October 2005 Pakistan suffered a massive earthquake that left an unprecedented humanitarian need. Although a brutal Himalayan winter was only six weeks away there was no second wave of deaths. Civil-military cooperation and the Cluster Approach have had significant success.

The earthquake killed at least 73,338 including 18,000 schoolchildren. Over 128,000 people were injured and 3.3 million displaced. Over 600,000 houses, 6,400 km of road network, 6,298 education facilities, 350 health facilities, 3,994 water supply systems and 949 government buildings were destroyed. The size of the IDP population and the number of houses destroyed were significantly greater than the Asian tsunami despite the death-toll having been lower.

The Pakistani military launched a massive response, supported by US, British, NATO and Australian military forces, amongst others. Coordination was an enormous challenge, as it always is for a host government in the aftermath of a disaster. This was particularly the case for a military lacking experience in working with NGOs and unfamiliar with the humanitarian principles they defend. It was thus necessary in Pakistan to use a model of ‘non-interfering coordination’ in which the military shared an open and honest assessment of needs with the humanitarian community and allowed NGOs to choose what operations they would undertake and where. In this model, gaps in humanitarian delivery are ‘back-filled’ by the army and government agencies.

UNHCR Representative in Pakistan Guenet Guebre Christos being briefed by military officials in charge of relief operations in Mansehra, Pakistan.