

Reviewed Paper

32nd WEDC International Conference, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2006**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF WATER RESOURCES, WATER SUPPLY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION****The cluster approach to humanitarian response: lessons from the Pakistan earthquake***William L. Fellows, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia*

The responsibility of the United Nations Children's Fund relative to water and sanitation in humanitarian responses worldwide began with an over all responsibility for non-food assistance. It was transformed to sector leadership in the 1990s and now has become cluster manager. This new cluster approach has much potential to improve the international communities ability to respond to an emergency but many challenges remain. Effective global leadership by UNICEF is essential to the realization of this potential but ultimate success depends on the effective engagement of the broader Humanitarian community on the ground.

A brief history of the cluster approach

Going back to the 1984/5 drought/famine in Ethiopia and Sudan the humanitarian response was generally conceived of being composed of food and non-food items. This was formalized in 1989 with the commencement of Operation Lifeline in Southern Sudan with World Food Programme (WFP) being given lead responsibility for food and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) having responsibility for non-food items.

As emergencies became more complicated, and our understanding of the needs of the affected population improved, the complexity of the response also increased. Improved understanding of protection issues and the need for continuing education greatly expanded the non-food sector until it was no longer practical for one agency to coordinate.

The concept of lead agencies came out the practical difficulties of coordinating such a large and complex response. The number of partners during this period was also increasing dramatically further complicating the task of coordination. As preparation began for what seemed to be an increasingly inevitable war in Iraq UNICEF was appointed the lead agency for Water and Sanitation and led the contingency planning process. This role continued in Baghdad, Basra, and Erbil immediately after the invasion.

In December of 2003 after the second bombing of the Canal Hotel in Baghdad the United Nations Family working in Iraq met in Amman in a three day workshop to work out how it could continue to work effectively in Iraq with as light a foot print as possible. The need to effectively coordinate the response was very evident to all participants. In order to form working groups the response was divided into ten sectors with UNICEF being asked to lead the water and sanitation cluster. The United Nations Development Assistance Frame-

work was used to produce a work plan by cluster.

It should be noted that the exercise that developed the cluster concept was an internal UN exercise but the effectiveness of the approach was quickly demonstrated by how quickly the broader humanitarian community bought into it. For the next two years communication with the various governments of Iraq and work plans were developed through and by the clusters.

Given the realities of working on the ground in Iraq the WATSAN cluster was to a very large extent a virtual one. While physically meetings took place regularly in Amman and Kuwait many members of the cluster were not able to attend meetings on a routine basis so discussions took place via the internet, all plans circulated and developed with input from the field and many decisions taken only after feedback from the field had been received.

Not everyone involved in Humanitarian work in Iraq participated in this initial attempt at a cluster approach. Notable the US military and large US contractors however coordination with these organizations was still possible to a degree through the lead agency approach. UNICEF having also been appointed the lead agency for water and sanitation was able to obtain official plans and budgets and while not being able to influence them to a very great degree we were able to at least minimizing duplication. The fact the USAID was funding a senior WES post to interalia coordinate the sector probably helped. It should be noted however that the British, Italian, Polish and Japanese Military were very active cluster members as well as the principle British contractors. This was due in part to their more manageable size and their ready access to Kuwait where an active arm of the cluster was operating.

In 2005 a Humanitarian Response Review was launched by the Emergency Relief Coordinator to assess the humani-

tarian response capacities of the UN, NGOs, Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and other key humanitarian actors. The team looked at complex and major emergencies and considered preparedness and response capacities. Due to time constraints they focused on the international response capacity in the initial phase of an emergency.

One of the key findings of this report, issued in August of 2005 was that “The clear discrepancies between declared and actual capacities in water and sanitation need urgent attention. While there is an almost ritualistic acknowledgement of the importance of the Sphere Standards, many agencies lack the capacity to implement these requirements. The main elements needed to make an immediate impact on preparedness and response capacities in the sector has to be translated into commitment, starting with an active and clearly recognized leadership.

The report identified areas where there were clear gaps in the capacity to respond. There was originally no cluster proposed for food, education or originally health (although this was added by the insistence of WHO). There was however no controversy over the reports recommendation that the capacity of the Watsan sector needed to improve.

One of the key recommendations of the report is “In terms of sector coordination, the report recommends the assignment of clear responsibilities to lead organizations at sector level, with a priority in relation to the protection and care of IDPs and the development of cluster models between networks at the sectoral, regional, and local levels. This is what we now know as the cluster approach.

Subsequent to the report the Inter-Agency Standing Committee assigning the task of Watsan leadership to UNICEF.

Rolling out the approach

This brings us to October 2005. The OCHA team arriving from Geneva, fully aware of all of the preceding developments recommended to the UN Coordinator (who was later to also be appointed Humanitarian Coordinator) and through him to the UN Country Team that the cluster approach be adopted. A famous quote from a senior member official of OCHA to the United Nations Disaster Management Meeting on October 11th was “The IASC Principals have decided that the cluster approach will be implemented in the Pakistan Emergency. Is this clear?” Since almost no one in the room had ever heard of the cluster approach it was of course as clear as mud.

Given that this was the first time that the cluster approach was being officially rolled out, with very little clarity and no prior training there were understandably teething problems still much good came out of the process. The cluster immediately provided a structure around which to develop the consolidated appeal. The initial consolidated appeal was launched within 72 hours of the earthquake, the fastest that such an appeal had ever been issued.

The joint experience of the cluster members was also a great asset in the initial phase of the emergency. The ability to draw

on this wide range of experience meant that we did not need to constantly reinvent the wheel. One member who had been in Banda ache recommended we use the assessment form that had been used there. This form was obtained, translated and distributed to all members within days. Another recommended that reporting formats developed in Darfur would be most appropriate for use in Pakistan. Again these forms were obtained, modified and distributed within days.

Though dialog and discussion a prioritized strategy was agreed upon by the sector to which all members could work. There was some coordinated response of the actors in the field and a unified report produced from the sector.

An interesting feature of the cluster approach over the lead agency approach was the involvement of donor agencies, at least at national level. This gave them equal input into the development of priorities and approaches and a much better understanding of the challenges and the needs of the sector. To a certain degree this changed the dynamic between them and the implementing agencies on the ground creating much more of a team effort rather than donor-recipient relationship. The support that they provided to the cluster coordinator greatly enhanced his ability to coordinate activities as it was obvious to all if any agency was acting in coordination with the cluster.

As an indication of effectiveness, at the 6 week mark of the emergency a USAID evaluation found that “with few exceptions, UN agencies were inadequate to the task in the weeks immediately following Pakistan’s earthquake” but found “UNICEF was performing reasonably well as the lead agency for water and sanitation”.

Constraints and opportunities

The most notably being that while the cluster was very quick to function at the national level it was much slower to get established at sub-national level. This was due in part to the difficulty of the emergency and the time it took to realize this and partly due to the fact that we are still learning exactly how much time and energy must be devoted specifically to cluster coordination was in the initial stage was seriously underestimated.

Another related to the size and difficulty of the emergency was the very significant gaps that emerged. One thing that a cluster approach can do is to maximize the efficiency of your capacity it does not in and of itself increase the capacity you have on the ground. A great deal of criticism was level at the cluster when people were found to be lacking services. This was usually due to simply a lack of capacity on the ground not a lack of coordination. Government capacity was greatly crippled by the earthquake and the NGO (and to be fair the UN) were not to scale. A lot of the NGOs that responded did more than just water and sanitation and given the general lack of capacity on the ground Watsan was in constant competition with shelter and food. Given the situation this might have actually been the correct decision.

It is unfortunate that it took a couple of disease outbreaks to get people to understand the magnitude of the problem but

they did get peoples attention. Capacity of several NGOs, most notably Oxfam, as well as UNICEF increased significantly after these outbreaks but there was still not enough resources to do everything everywhere. The scale of the problem was simply enormous.

The final failure related to the scale of the problem was the lack of a comprehensive assessment despite a common assessment tool agreed upon by the cluster and used by many in the field. Urban areas were generally effectively assessed, IDP camps greater than 50 tents were effectively assessed and select areas where various NGOs visited were effectively assessed but this left somewhere between one and three million people un-assessed, a pretty large margin of error even for an emergency the size of the Pakistan Earthquake. It is amazing that in this day and age anyone would show up at a disaster without a GPS but people did not have them.

One of the things that the cluster approach is not intended to be is an alternative government. The existence of this approach does not absolve the government from its duty to provide safe water and a healthy environment to its people nor is responsibility to coordinate such a response. One of the greatest failures of the Watsan cluster at central level in Pakistan was our failure to effectively engage the Government. This was in part due to the lack of a clear central ministry with overarching responsibility for water and sanitation and partly due to the lack of any equivalent structure in the Pakistan military that played a leading role in the national response.

Another issue that is still being debated and on which there is still a lack of understanding is the issue of “Agency of Last Resort”. Some interpret this to mean that it should not be the agency of first resort while others felt that it was responsible for doing everything that could not be done by others. In any emergency it is imperative that whoever is best placed to respond quickly does so. However, it is very important that the Cluster coordinator be able to separate his/her role as coordinator from that of her/his agency. As Cluster Coordinator you represent the sector not your agency and you must be able to ensure that capabilities are maximized regardless of which agency this is. It is also important that the mandate of the coordinator extend to that of the sector and all aspects of the response be considered regardless of the mandate of the agency.

Still in both Iraq and Pakistan it was never envisioned that adequate water and sanitation would be provided to all. In any resource constrained situation priorities must be set and tough decisions made. In Pakistan the initial priorities were people high in the mountains who did not wish to leave, urban areas and large camps. Even after this prioritization it was not possible to get assistance to everyone in these categories so the idea of anyone being able to provide all resources required is simply not practical. It is however incumbent on the cluster that the greatest number are given the greatest good with the resources available.

What makes for an effective coordinator?

Then what are the attributes of an effective cluster coordinator? Certainly the person must have sufficient experience and maturity to be respected by all partners. Each and every emergency will be unique and each and every response will be unique so the cluster coordinator must have a range of experience and the flexibility to develop new approaches and adapt to a changing environment.

The coordinator must be prepared to work long hours under difficult circumstances to build an effective team, s/he must be willing to lead by example. This also means being sensitive to the diversity of the group, in particular local NGOs who will have the most on the ground experience but may not be able to articulate this experience in a meeting easily.

The coordinator must be articulate and be able to communicate effectively the needs of the entire sector to other clusters while not losing sight of the overall picture. The coordinator must be an effective advocate on behalf of the sector with the donors and the media but s/he must have broad shoulders and be willing to accept criticism. The coordinator must be able to differentiate the needs of the lead agency from the needs of the sector and make decisions based on the greater good of the sector but as far as the failures of the sector are concerned “the buck stops” with the coordinator. Where ever possible the coordinator should not have any direct implementative responsibility.

The coordinator must be decisive and must be willing to on occasion offend people. Lives are at risk and when an agency is not performing tough decisions must be made. g

The coordinator must be a facilitator, fully capable of getting all the partners to work together to agree upon strategies, priorities, plans and budgets. Last and certainly not least the coordinator must be able to effectively chair a meeting. This process unfortunately requires a lot of meetings, particularly at the initial stages, and there is nothing worse than, while children’s lives are at risk, to be sitting through a poorly chaired meeting.

The future of the cluster

Given the complexity of the process that has led to the cluster approach and the speed with which it has taken root it seems safe to say that is it with us for a while. UNICEF is taking its global responsibility very seriously coordinating a global working group in Geneva. Preparations for moving to a cluster approach are well underway for three pilot countries, Liberia, DRC and Uganda and other countries are being considered. It is therefore imperative for the wellbeing of millions of women and children (as well as men) that we do the best that we can.

What should participating agencies expect out of the cluster approach? They should expect effective leadership which is familiar with and has been trained in the cluster approach but more importantly they should expect leadership with respect for their capacity. Ultimately it will be the agencies on the ground who will determine if a response is successful or not,

not the effectiveness of the meetings. They should have a significant say into all decision being taken by the cluster, when they disagree they must have the right to register that disagreement. They should be able to expect clear roles and responsibilities with little or no duplication and overlap.

They should be able to expect that the cluster will reach out to them. Local NGOs in particular will have to have the process explained to them and be encouraged to participate. The cluster should to the extent possible come to them. It took some time in Pakistan to fully understand the manpower requirements of the cluster approach and to recruit effective coordinators at sub-national level. This should happen much more quickly in the future.

The Cluster must be able to provide clearly agreed upon strategies, priorities, workplans and allocation of resources. In the future the over riding frame of the consolidated appeal must be strengthened if we are to have a coordinated response and this can only happen will all partners participating. Agreed upon assessment formats which can be quickly and simply used by all must be agreed upon in advance. Reporting formats that are quick and easy to use must be rapidly modified and used by all. The reporting structure also needs to be clear to all, it makes no sense to ask an agency to report to the district Watsan coordinator, the district humanitarian coordinator, the national Watsan coordinator and the national humanitarian coordinator and yet the different work done by different agencies must not be lost in the process so that capacities can be mapped and gaps identified.

Finally NGOs should expect an over all net benefit from participating. They should expect useful information to be provided to them. They should expect facilitation with the development of their plans and proposals. They should expect assistance with the donors to raise money and they should expect to get credit for the work that they do.

An area that clearly still needs some additional capacity developed is in the area of hygiene education. There are several broad approaches to this topic, mass media, social marketing, and participatory approaches and as in other areas of the sector the debate at times breaks down in to either or debates. It is of paramount importance that we not use one approach or another but rather that we use all approaches. This will normally mean that a team will need to be assembled as it is rare to find any individual with all of the required skills. However as with other aspect of the response, time is of the essence. Messages must be quickly agreed upon, mass media quickly engaged, rapid assessments conducted rapidly, participatory tools quickly developed and put into the hands of the community along with the training to use them with in days not weeks or months.

Conclusion

There is still much work to do if the Cluster approach is going to prove effective. The approach is still in the process of being defined and is still poorly understood. The process of developing the tools and capacity to implement them is under way at a global level and there is much potential in the approach but if it is to become more than just potential the broader humanitarian community must buy into the process. UNICEF can lead but ultimately its success or failure is in the hands of our partners.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of the brave men and women who have sacrificed their lives in Iraq providing water and sanitation to the children of Iraq.

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