

The WASH Factor

Oxfam's experiences with humanitarian coordination for water, sanitation, and health

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In the humanitarian coordination system of 'clusters', the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) cluster is widely acknowledged to be among the best functioning. Interviews were conducted with more than 50 individuals with experience of the WASH cluster in more than 25 countries, focusing on evidence of improved humanitarian response from the WASH cluster and what helps or hinders improvement. On the whole, Oxfam staff felt that the WASH cluster had improved the effectiveness of humanitarian response, but that there was still much that could be done to improve the cluster. Their reflections may also be useful for other clusters.

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Executive summary

The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) cluster is widely acknowledged to be among the best functioning within the humanitarian coordination system established in 2005. It is commonly believed that it is easier for the WASH cluster to function well because the standards are agreed, water and sanitation are fairly straightforward interventions, and outcomes are tangible and measurable. While these factors have helped the WASH cluster, they alone have not led to the relative success of the cluster.

Interviews were conducted with over 50 individuals, the majority of whom were staff of Oxfam International affiliate organisations, with experience of the WASH cluster in more than 25 countries. Many of the Oxfam views were validated by other NGO colleagues, UNICEF, and other WASH partner staff in the field and at headquarters. The discussions focused on evidence of improved humanitarian response from the WASH cluster and what helps or hinders improvement.

On the whole, Oxfam staff felt that the effectiveness of humanitarian response had improved as a result of the WASH cluster, but that there was still much that could be done to improve the cluster. Oxfam's culture and management directives encourage staff to coordinate with others in their sector on all levels, and most of the Oxfam staff interviewed intrinsically feel that coordination must be done. Thus, even before the roll-out of the cluster system, Oxfam staff were encouraged to start coordination mechanisms at least with other NGOs and, when possible, with government and United Nations (UN) actors. The introduction of clusters has established a recognized, formal and predictable forum in most humanitarian responses.

According to Oxfam staff, the WASH clusters excel when they

- manage and share information well;
- have full-time coordinators who are dedicated to and understand the purpose of coordination;
- change their roles as a function of the context, the phase of the emergency, and/or the needs of the cluster members;
- include local/national government when appropriate;
- create an open forum for discussion and some decision making or consensus building;
- are not felt to be ' beholden ' to UNICEF; and
- try to be accountable to affected people.

Oxfam believes that the WASH cluster has enhanced coordination and, as a matter of policy, Oxfam will continue to support further improved efforts for humanitarian response using the cluster approach. However, coordination is only the means to an end. Oxfam staff, from field to headquarters, want evidence that the cluster (as opposed to other coordination mechanisms) improves the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian response. If the cluster approach appears to mean an ever-increasing number of meetings with little or no evidence of improved response, staff commitment to the cluster may wane.

1 Introduction

In 2005, the then UN Emergency Response Coordinator, Jan Egeland, launched the reform of the humanitarian system. A review of the system, the Humanitarian Response Review, was commissioned, and three key areas in which reform was needed were highlighted: leadership, coordination, and funding. Later, as a result of the perceived UN-centric nature of the reforms, a fourth area was added on partnership.

As a part of this process, in September 2005, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) agreed to designate 'cluster lead agencies' in nine sectors of humanitarian activity (later expanded to eleven) specifically to address the area of coordination. The 2006 IASC guidance note on the use of the cluster approach called for the application of the cluster approach in all countries with Humanitarian Coordinators and stated that at a country level, clusters should provide 'high standards of predictability, accountability and partnership in all sectors or areas of activity'.¹

This research report concentrates on the coordination of humanitarian response, focusing primarily on field-level implementation of the WASH cluster. The purpose of the research was to document Oxfam's experiences as one of the major actors in WASH, actively participating in the cluster at the global level, as well as in almost all countries in which the cluster approach has been activated.

Oxfam hopes that this report will provide a perspective on the cluster approach that has been largely missing: that of a fairly large NGO which has committed to supporting a cluster on all levels and which has dedicated significant resources to the cluster in the hope that humanitarian response is improved as a result of coordination. It is hoped that these reflections will feed into cluster evaluations and discussions on the cluster approach and into thinking about the future of clusters.

The report begins by laying out the foundations of humanitarian coordination and Oxfam's commitment: what the cluster approach is, the reputation of the WASH cluster, and Oxfam's approach to WASH and to coordination. Based on this, the experiences and reflections from Oxfam staff are outlined. This section highlights the eight areas Oxfam staff feel are key to ensuring that the WASH cluster functions well. Five country case studies are examined to give practical examples of the findings. Lastly, the report sets out the recommendations that Oxfam staff see as necessary for the future success of the WASH cluster. These recommendations come from Oxfam staff members who have worked in the field, both before the roll-out of the cluster approach and since. They are purposely formulated to reflect their words. Other clusters may find them relevant.

2 Background

The cluster approach

Before the Humanitarian Response Review and the advent of the humanitarian reform process, sectoral coordination, usually between the government and the UN system, was the only formal coordination that took place in a country. OCHA sometimes made attempts to coordinate among humanitarian actors, but often, particularly on sub-national and global levels, coordination happened on an ad hoc basis and was largely dependent on the goodwill and initiative of NGOs and the UN.

The cluster approach was envisioned as part of the wider reform process to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response by ensuring greater predictability and accountability, while at the same time strengthening partnerships between NGOs, international organizations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and UN agencies. Global-level cluster lead agencies were identified for each cluster, and given responsibility for improving the timeliness and appropriateness of humanitarian response in the sectors for which they were responsible. For the most part, the designated global lead agencies are UN agencies. On a national level, this remains the case, although there is much flexibility; on a sub-national level, the identification of a cluster lead or coordinator is determined by the presence of the lead agency and/or the NGO with the largest operations in the area and the willingness to take on the role.

The global cluster lead agencies are responsible for providing predictable leadership of the clusters. They are mandated to ensure common standards and policies, to enhance partnership and to streamline responses. They are responsible for building response capacity to encourage system-wide preparedness and strengthen the cluster's technical capacities (e.g. training, surge capacity, standby roster, stockpiles). On a national level, cluster coordinators are responsible for facilitating a process that helps to ensure the inclusion of key humanitarian partners; the establishment and maintenance of appropriate humanitarian coordination mechanisms; needs assessment and analysis; planning and strategy development; the application of standards, and the provision of assistance or services as a last resort (POLR).²

The WASH cluster

Before the advent of the cluster approach, WASH sector actors met informally to discuss issues of common concern and often worked together both in the field and on a global level on specific projects, such as the development of the Sphere Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. The formation of the cluster, however, has given UNICEF clear leadership responsibilities and enabled it to dedicate staff time and resources to coordinating WASH activities. The development of the cluster has also made global-level WASH meetings open to more actors and led to a more systematic and formalised coordination forum for global actors.

The cluster has a workplan that includes five strategic areas composed of fourteen projects, each led by a different agency and supported by other agencies. Details of the WASH cluster workplan and agencies can be found at www.humanitarianreform.org.

The WASH cluster is widely acknowledged to be among the best functioning of the clusters. The first phase Cluster Approach Evaluation in 2007 identified several areas of good practice across the WASH cluster and described it as being progressive at the field level in comparison with the other clusters. The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform project mapping studies undertaken in five countries also cited WASH as the most effective cluster.³ It is commonly believed that it is easier for the WASH cluster to function well

because the standards have been agreed on; water and sanitation are fairly straightforward interventions; and it is very tangible – outcomes are relatively easy to measure. All these factors have helped the WASH cluster, but the relative success of the WASH cluster cannot be attributed to these factors alone; also significant have been the resources that all cluster partners have invested in the cluster. In addition, other clusters had similar advantages, but, without strong NGO commitment, have not been as successful at capitalizing on these. Nor has the WASH cluster performed well in all cases.

Oxfam and water, sanitation and public health promotion

Water, sanitation and public health promotion are widely recognized by the humanitarian community to be some of Oxfam's global competencies. Oxfam has contributed to the development of standards such as the Sphere Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, and has also contributed to coordination mechanisms, the global development and provision of high-quality WASH equipment (water tanks, bladders, buckets, latrine slabs) and public health promotion materials. Oxfam clearly sees itself as a leader in the WASH sector, and feels a responsibility to participate actively in coordination, strategy setting and training of other actors (particularly national/local authorities and NGOs).

Largely because of the commitment to coordination, Oxfam has been active in the WASH cluster since its inception. The first Global Cluster Coordinator was an Oxfam staff member on loan to UNICEF for three years; Oxfam is an active partner in the cluster on all levels and has seconded a senior staff member to be a part of the WASH rapid response team (RRT). Oxfam is currently an active participant in the WASH cluster in 22 countries, co-chairing in two on a national level and many on a sub-national level.

3 Oxfam's approach to the WASH cluster

Oxfam believes that coordination is only the means to an end – the ultimate aim is to serve affected people better. Oxfam staff share one overarching concern: is the investment we make in clusters making any difference to people on the ground? While this question will probably never be adequately answered, Oxfam believes that good coordination can lead to more efficient use of resources, more accountability and transparency and, as a result, a more effective response.

Oxfam seeks to support the WASH cluster by participating in global, country and regional cluster meetings and processes as well as leading on a number of global cluster projects. Oxfam offers to host or lead working groups on specific technical subjects such as the global hygiene promotion project or excreta disposal projects locally. In general, Oxfam does not offer staff to be national WASH Cluster Leads or Co-Cluster Leads. Oxfam's goal is to have country programmes with appropriately skilled staff to ensure that Oxfam becomes a 'leader of good practice'.⁴

Oxfam staff mentioned the obligation for proactive commitment by the organization to engage and be present in all activities. Oxfam's guidance on participation in clusters to managers and WASH staff is:

- Oxfam managers should place a sufficiently high value on clusters and other coordination mechanisms to allocate resources for engagement;
- Oxfam staff participating in clusters should demonstrate leadership and actively promote IASC and Oxfam values and standards (Code of Conduct, Sphere, etc);
- Other cluster partners should value Oxfam's participation and seek opportunities for collaboration.

Oxfam WASH staff involved in clusters said that they rarely spend less than two days per month on cluster activities, and, on average spend eight to ten hours per month; at a minimum, staff spend a couple of hours per month in meetings. One senior staff member working in a complex emergency said that he had spent 24 hours in coordination meetings each month. Staff of other agencies recognize that the NGO commitment to the WASH cluster is one of the factors which has led to the strength of the cluster. They also recognize that Oxfam is one of the few organizations present in the WASH cluster across countries and on global, national and sub-national levels.

4 Experiences in the WASH cluster

Oxfam staff acknowledge that the WASH cluster may function better than other clusters, but report that success has been patchy and it has been a struggle.⁵ Most feel that results are inconsistent and, in many countries, still lack flexibility and coherence.

Hands down, we need it and it should continue to exist. Imagine how much worse [coordination] would be without it!

Oxfam public health promoter

The humanitarian reform process places the responsibility for leadership, as well as accountability for success, primarily on the UN. At the same time, the review highlighted the responsibility and duty of all humanitarian partners to engage in coordination. Oxfam staff feel that the onus is no longer on them or on individual staff of other organisations to be proactive in instigating coordination mechanisms. Coordination is widely accepted as a minimum standard, and the leadership for WASH coordination rests squarely with UNICEF. For many Oxfam staff, the predictability of the formalized structure and coordination forum was the most significant improvement to have resulted from the development of the cluster system.

In the absence of the cluster system, we often felt it was incumbent on us to start coordination. In Darfur in 2003 and Liberia in 2004, donors even put pressure on us to do so.

Oxfam public health engineer

As well as ensuring complementary actions among partners, the cluster lead agency is also required to apply shared, agreed common standards to improve the response at country level. Many of the Oxfam staff interviewed mentioned that the WASH cluster proved to be a valuable forum for discussing and reaching agreements on technical, methodological and operational approaches. Technical Working Groups, or TWIGS, were cited as an efficient way of focusing specifically on practical technical standards, issues and solutions.

Several people mentioned that information sharing, as a general rule, has improved with the WASH cluster. Most felt overall knowledge increased about their environment and on what partners and other WASH actors were doing. The 3Ws matrix (who does what, where⁶) was noted to be a useful tool, and a few people also referenced web-based resources which complemented the 3Ws matrix. Good information management helped to identify the gaps and the most vulnerable groups, as well as identified changes and adaptations needed in partners' operations. Strong information management systems allowed for good analysis to spot trends in fluid situations and tracked key information from other clusters.

Dedicated coordinators without agency responsibility and with appropriate skills and experience were widely recognised by all those interviewed as a key component of a well-functioning system. Oxfam staff went further, saying that attitude and approach were as important. Oxfam staff felt strongly that clusters that are managed flexibly and either with strong support from the UNICEF country office or without any expectation of UNICEF support were more effective.

Oxfam staff expressed some optimism that the development of the cluster system could lead to a more consistent engagement with national authorities. More systematic partnership with local government, in particular and where appropriate, was thought to be one of the successes of the cluster in a few countries. Some also saw an opportunity for more systematic consideration of disaster risk reduction (DRR) as the cluster system develops. It was widely hoped that these initiatives could be introduced more globally,

reducing at least the time it takes international organisations to begin working and, at best, reducing the need for the intervention of international organisations by ensuring that governments are able to respond with little outside support.

Box 1: Case study Zimbabwe – some good practice

Oxfam staff in Zimbabwe thought that the WASH cluster was an important part of the humanitarian response and invested heavily in it. Oxfam is co-lead of the national cluster and maintains close collaboration with the Health Cluster and the Cholera Command and Control Centre. On a sub-national level, Oxfam leads in two provinces and participates in several TWIGs.

Staff attributed the success of the cluster to a number of factors: the strength and existence of sub-national clusters; the inclusion of national NGOs and local government; and a good system of information sharing. Staff also appreciated the focus on accountability, the quick action on technical approaches and standards and the strong and active involvement of donors and private sector actors.

One interviewee thought that the cluster was ‘driven by a real and urgent need to provide water, sanitation and hygiene promotion services on time, effectively in order to prevent further mortality and morbidity,’ underlining the common goals and focus of the cluster.

Sub-national clusters: The development of sub-national clusters led to some of the functions of the cluster being decentralised and ensured that decision making happened on an appropriate level. In particular, the formation of TWIGs at provincial level allowed the national cluster to focus on strategy, while ensuring that the standards agreed to by cluster participants were based on field-level experience. The decentralisation and involvement of provincial and district-level government in the sub-national cluster has also meant that it is easier to identify and fill gaps, and has made the cluster responsive to local needs.

National NGOs: Just over 20 percent of the WASH cluster participants represent national NGOs. National NGOs generally find participation stimulating, although they find the ‘fancy’ humanitarian jargon difficult at times. One local NGO found participation in a TWIG particularly edifying; he felt that he could openly participate, express concerns, learn from others, and work collectively to achieve a common goal. Efforts by the cluster to continue discussion of longer-term development WASH during the cholera crisis helped to give a voice to national NGOs during the hectic time.

Technical standards: The Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) was very effective, particularly in agreeing technical standards and approaches (e.g. distribution of ORS, working with health volunteers, assessment methodologies, etc.) The Group develops advocacy messaging, influences the disbursement of UN funding and encourages transparency and broad-based involvement in the cluster. Members of the SAG are required to make a definite commitment to participate fully in the SAG. The SAG group strives to act based on the needs of the WASH sector and affected people, rather than being driven by any individual agency agenda.

Accountability: Members of the cluster appreciate the efforts to make the cluster accountable. The cluster has managed to mainstream a number of measures, such as monitoring and evaluation, sharing of reports, standardising approaches and collective decision making to ensure that there is accountability among members. Oxfam staff did some research on this and a consultant was sent from the Global WASH Cluster project to advise the cluster on improvements that could be made. As a result, accountability has been prioritised as an integral component of WASH activities.

WERU (WASH Emergency Response Unit): The WERU is comprised of six international NGOs. These organisations are WASH focal point agencies in different provinces across the country and are responsible for taking the lead in WASH rapid assessments using a set of agreed tools. The mechanism is working well; all cholera alert cases have been responded to in 24 hours.

Information sharing: Lastly, regular updates of the 3Ws matrix and the annual WASH ‘atlas’ of projects and achievements, combined with the speed and utility of the information that was disseminated, were thought to have improved the efficacy of the operation.

Lastly, accountability to affected people was one notable weakness, although some acknowledged that there is a global cluster project on this.⁷ Oxfam staff noted one or two good examples, but, as a whole, felt that there was little priority given to this basic element of understanding the effectiveness of the response.

There has been some comprehensive self-analysis and contemplation, and we are moving generally in the right direction, but we still need to push more for systematic monitoring of accountability and standards.

Oxfam public health promoter

Information sharing: the case for dedicated cluster coordinators, information officers and the 3Ws

Several national WASH clusters were reported to have made improvements in information sharing, with a general sense that the amount of information shared on gaps, needs and in determining strategies has strengthened between partners in the cluster.

Those interviewed thought that in recent experiences, the WASH clusters have spent perhaps too much time and energy on information sharing at the expense of other activities; sometimes this focus on information sharing was perceived to have slowed implementation, as NGOs staff are sitting in meetings instead of implementing projects. However, the deployment of a dedicated cluster information officer in some countries has supported efficient information sharing, by analyzing and disseminating information through the cluster, allowing meetings to focus on issues of common concern. Putting the information from the 3Ws matrix onto a map was seen as extremely useful for identifying gaps and supporting the cluster to make strategic evidence-based decisions.

Coordination and management of meetings, planning useful agendas and outlining meeting objectives all help information sharing during meetings. The information officers have been a key resource for such efficient, focused and well prepared meetings.

Out of four clusters, having an information officer in two of these made a big difference.

Cluster coordinator

NGOs have sometimes taken it upon themselves to meet outside of the cluster mechanism when information sharing is not carried out effectively by the cluster or other information management mechanisms. That has happened previously in South Sudan, where the government was involved in coordination, and in the Philippines in 2007.

Similarly, those interviewed stressed that information shared in meetings has to be managed appropriately. In Goz Beida, Chad, where there was only a very limited number of NGOs attending the WASH cluster meetings, the meetings focused on coordination and developing a common approach. The outcome was that strategies were developed for working with community committees and on harmonising projects and technical designs. Information sharing on specific projects – such as mapping activities and project updates around who was doing what – was about what other clusters were doing. At the Abéché level, in contrast, there were too many actors and large portions of the meetings were devoted to presentations. In other countries, like Haiti (2008), existing good relationships have made for useful, efficient meetings.

Where connectivity allows, the use of electronic forums like ‘Google groups’ for information sharing in some instances has helped to make meetings and information sharing more efficient. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Indonesia, Uganda and Pakistan all have some sort of web-based system in place.

Good cluster coordinators are key to ensuring that the cluster is seen to be useful and encourages the participation of NGOs. Coordinators must plan meetings in advance and chair them well. Meetings focusing on the 3Ws matrix were felt to be useful in the early stages of a crisis, but meetings need to move quickly on to problem solving and/or

addressing technical issues. A good coordinator can be strengthened and the value of the cluster increased by good information management.

Joint approaches and standards

Several interviewees felt that working jointly to adjust standards and guidelines to the context was the most valuable outcome of the introduction of the cluster. The cluster has meant that standards can be agreed upon among most of the organizations active in an area and these standards can, to some extent, be enforced both by the cluster coordinator and through peer pressure.

Cluster groups often transparently appoint sub-groups or TWIGs to work on specific issues, which are particularly valuable for solving problems and making recommendations on sensitive issues like funding. Approximately half of the people interviewed commented that the WASH cluster had been successful in agreeing on better and context-specific standards, including guidelines, technical standards and working methods. This allows organizations to meet a common standard and helps to ensure that affected people are able to hold organizations to account to clear and common standards. Often Sphere standards are adapted to suit the local situation, e.g. 50 people per latrine in urban areas or 800 people per hand-pump in arid locations where water is scarce. Part of the success of these sub-groups is their location across a wide range of field locations. The closeness to operations is important for identifying context specific needs and gaps.

Lastly, the global cluster has made available a range of tools, guidelines, best practice notes and other resources that are not otherwise available. Many respondents felt that this was a clear indicator of the positive impact the cluster has had. For example, the global cluster identified the lack of guidance on public health promotion as a gap. As one of their first projects, the cluster members worked together to agree, introduce, promote and implement a more standardized set of hygiene promotion tools for training field workers and for use in the field.⁸

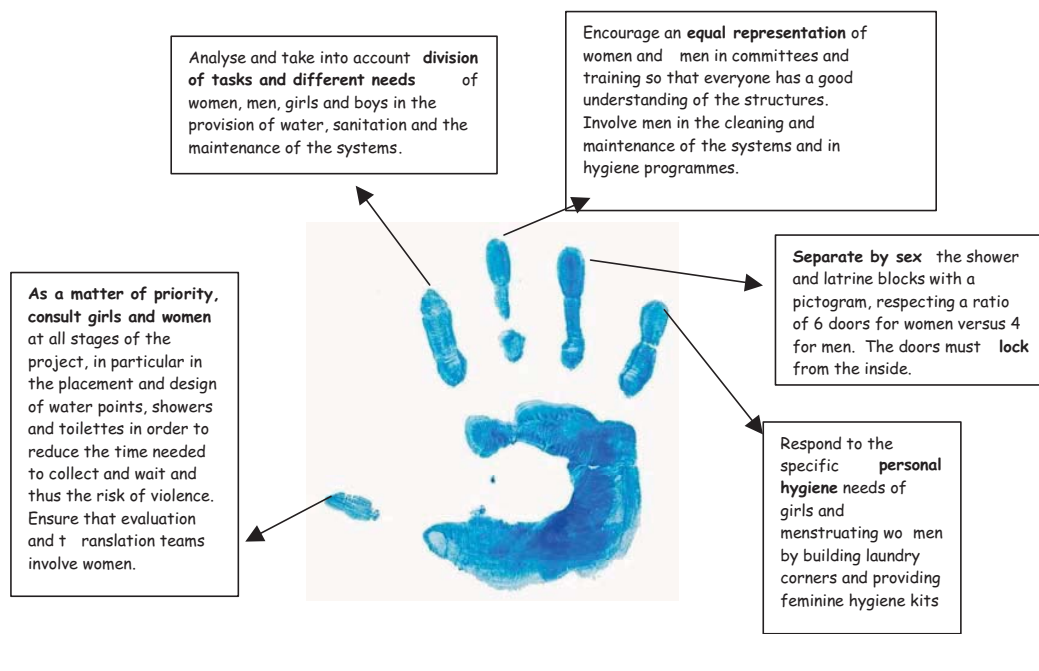
In Pakistan, tools were developed for minimum standards on water and facilities quality. In DRC, one national NGO was pleased that the cluster had harmonised core field activities in hygiene, including messages and monitoring tools for hygiene promotion in emergencies. In contrast, the cluster in Dakar, Sénégal seemed ad hoc, with no standards and no mapping.

Box 2: Case study Democratic Republic of Congo – joint approaches

The WASH cluster in the DRC responded to the need to ensure that gender was adequately mainstreamed into WASH programming by developing and agreeing to five commitments (see below). These commitments help to ensure that all WASH cluster actors take into account the specific needs of girls, boys, men and women and also help the WASH partners to hold each other to account. It is also referred to when assessing pooled fund submissions. (Original in French.)

COMMITMENTS FOR THE SECURITY AND DIGNITY OF GIRLS, BOYS, MEN AND WOMEN IN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

In order to ensure a quality response to the needs of girls, boys, men and women in water, sanitation and hygiene in emergencies, UNICEF and its partners will:



Connecting preparedness, risk reduction, response and reconstruction

As highlighted by the 'Global Survey of gaps in WASH capacities for emergencies', commissioned by the WASH cluster: 'Respondents identified the lack of a common strategy in the response as the most frequent critical or severe constraint.'⁹ The feedback during these interviews was consistent with that finding, and identified positive outcomes from well-planned common strategies. Strategies were thought to be more valuable when they included links with other clusters and relevant groups, and when they considered long-term issues like preparedness, DRR and post-emergency planning and transition.

Oxfam staff who have been involved in clusters that have done some strategic planning found this to be an inspiring and worthwhile function of the cluster. The SAG structures were highlighted as playing an important role in ensuring quality strategic planning. SAGs exist in the Zimbabwe (see Box 1), Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sumatra WASH clusters. These groups have discussed strategies, and agreed selection criteria and mechanisms to determine which projects will be funded.

In Indonesia, in 2009, although Oxfam and UNICEF had done a lot of preparedness work together in the WASH cluster in the West Sumatran capital Padang, some staff expressed concern that DRR was not prioritised within the cluster generally or in some of Oxfam's responses, even while recognising that climate change is likely to lead to an increasing number of natural disasters. Some Oxfam staff felt that DRR and climate change adaptation need to be more explicitly connected in the cluster.

... the cluster system feels a little outdated if it doesn't catch up. The clusters are a good thing, but they need to look ahead. The [smaller] disasters need to create a precedent on not separating preparedness and response.

Oxfam programme manager

A number of respondents mentioned the success of the Bangladesh WASH cluster in shifting its focus from disaster response to preparedness and risk reduction following the emergency response to the floods in 2008. The cluster developed WASH sector contingency plans and standardized reporting formats.

Box 3: Case study Philippines – local level coordination

During the 2009 Ketsana response, the cluster system was reactivated quickly, drawing on learning from the flood response in 2006. Since much of the flooding following the typhoon in September 2009 was in urban areas, traditional WASH activities had to be adapted. For example, it was impossible to dig latrines in many of the places to which people had been relocated. In addition, because the floods lasted so long, leptospirosis and dengue, diseases which are uncommon in most responses, became issues for the programme. The government of the Philippines also took a proactive role in coordination, although was quickly overwhelmed. The WASH cluster got off to a slow start, but with the arrival of the Rapid Response Team (RRT) WASH coordinator, the cluster became more effective.

Sub-national clusters: The national level coordination was seen to be ineffective and it took almost a month to get any systematic local-level coordination in place. A number of respondents also found it time consuming to have both a water cluster and a WASH cluster at the national level.¹⁰ The sub-national coordination, however, was thought to be more appropriate because local government was responsible for coordinating response on the local level. Once in place in Laguna, for example, local coordination was commended for being very focused on relevant issues such as avoiding duplication and ensuring similar approaches. One respondent felt that discussions between the health cluster and WASH cluster, sectors which are always interlinked, would not have happened without the cluster mechanism.

Local government capacity building: Both the WASH cluster and Oxfam have invested in training local government on a sub-national level. While humanitarian actors always hope that this will ensure some sustainability, there is often little time or energy for this. However in the Philippines, one government official said, 'This is the essence of what the cluster is about...Everything cannot be shouldered by the local government [in this case], the cluster helps us with Plan B'.

Building on this, Oxfam is also training local Department of Health officials on public health promotion techniques and messages.

'...thanks to Oxfam for helping us to help ourselves. We will remember all of this for next year's flooding.'

Supporting innovation. Because most of the affected people were in urban areas, all WASH actors had to find new solutions. The cluster facilitated this by encouraging the sharing of experiences and project designs. The number of cluster actors was small in the Philippines, so issues could be raised, discussed and problems solved together.

Partnership

Overall, Oxfam staff feel that the cluster approach has improved processes and decreased barriers to coordination. One of the remaining challenges at field level was described as 'overcoming the mind-set of UN staff' in relation to partnership and their overall acceptance of reform. In the opinion of some interviewees, UNICEF staff seemed to equate reform with a loss of power. One interviewee said that some UNICEF staff expressed 'a casual acceptance of ineptitude,' leading Oxfam staff to despair at the prospect of moving the cluster forward further. UNICEF has reportedly already gone through a 'culture change' in understanding partnership. However, at the field level the awareness the new culture is progressing extremely slowly. UNICEF WASH staff and partner staff often find themselves explaining UNICEF's cluster responsibilities and changing ideas of partnership to in-country UNICEF staff. WASH cluster staff sometimes face great resistance from UNICEF country offices.¹¹

Many people in the organization do not know what Principles of Partnership (PoP) are or, in some cases, support it, but it is an issue that the cluster has been working on for the period of the cluster.

UNICEF staff member

This lack of awareness of the cluster system and the Principles of Partnership (PoP) is not limited to UNICEF or the UN. Many Oxfam staff interviewed had not heard of the PoP, and some still feel that they must defer or act deferentially to UNICEF staff in the cluster: 'UNICEF decided it in the cluster, and so we had to [do it].' Many interviewees also found patchy acceptance and commitment to clusters and coordination among NGOs, with different actors participating in each country, often leading to the lack of consistency and predictability.

For national NGOs, the problem appears to be not a lack of participation itself; positive feedback from several WASH clusters listed large numbers of national NGOs involved in the coordination mechanisms. However, a lack of *active* participation by all partners is a problem. One person commented negatively that the cluster tends to consider the voice of bigger more established NGOs, even though they may have some weakness in their strategies or in project implementation '...it will not be highlighted if it was a local NGO or young international one.' While it is within the purview of the cluster coordinator to ensure that all have equal voice, other agencies also bear responsibility for listening to and respecting all views.

A local NGO involved in the WASH cluster in DRC expressed the belief that the cluster is doing well in terms of coordinating its activities with other NGOs. He cited the WASH group presentation of results from rapid assessments and mapping of all the actors for pooled funding submissions, and the fact that priorities are defined in the cluster meeting under objective criteria that are established by all the cluster members. Experience over the past three years has shown that the coordination process starts at the provincial level and helps to avoid complaints and misunderstandings within the cluster.

In contrast, there was a clear lack of common strategy and a partnership approach in Sri Lanka, and issues in working with UNICEF. Partly as a result of the lack of buy-in from UNICEF, the WASH community was left fractured and uncoordinated. The political context is very complex and improved linkages between partners to agree common strategies could have overcome some of the existing operational difficulties.

After four years, there is evidence of a continuing lack of understanding among many actors regarding the rationale, objectives and structure of the cluster approach. These observations can be interpreted as either a refusal to 'buy-in' to the approach or a lack of belief in it.¹² The resulting incoherence and inconsistency within organisations dramatically affect the chances of improved humanitarian responses through the cluster mechanism.

There appears to be a misconception of the role of the cluster lead ... where the cluster lead has misconceptions over the dual role ... Facilitation/coordination versus agency implementation is often mixed, leading to the [false] idea that WASH agencies should follow, rather than guide.

Oxfam public health programme manager

Working with local structures

Although water is one of the most deeply political issues, those in government structures who provide water and sanitation services are often perceived in-country as apolitical. The WASH cluster has been largely successful at ensuring local government is included in capacity development and appropriate coordination.

Many of those interviewed said that, at sub-national level, where there has been good coordination, there have also been strong national actors involved in both coordinating activities and implementing programmes. This was especially true for national NGOs, as in Pakistan, DRC, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

I think that a very good level of coordination was there before the WASH cluster; maybe it would have happened anyway.

International NGO staff member (non-Oxfam)

Oxfam staff also noted that while the cluster is often an improvement, other coordination mechanisms, sometimes in place long before a crisis, can be just as or more effective. Although there is no formal WASH cluster in Bolivia, for example, interviewees were positive about plans for emergency response planning and preparedness, for which the UNICEF Regional WASH Advisor is organising training. The Government of Bolivia is very engaged with the development of water and sanitation activities, has a close relationship with the UN, and is developing links with NGOs.

There is a clear idea of how to work by UNICEF, and the people involved have experience. They are now working fast to make up for lost time.

Oxfam programme manager

The long-term focus demonstrated by UNICEF in Bolivia is creating linkages beyond the WASH cluster to government, and this development of preparedness mechanisms is viewed positively by NGOs.

Flexibility

The consensus among Oxfam staff was that coordination was best when the cluster had a flexible and facilitative structure, adapting both to the context and to the level on which coordination was needed. Where the cluster was seen as rigid and formal, some members felt constrained. In at least two countries, where government control is top-down, the cluster is viewed as being too uptight, rigid and formal, so parallel forums meet for discussions on a more useful level. The clusters create 'strong structures that can adapt to the context.'

The WASH cluster in Abéché, Chad, was not thought to be useful in developing common approaches. One of the reasons cited for this was UNHCR's insistence that coordination mechanisms for issues relating to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and to refugees be separate. This caused problems for WASH staff, who were thus required to attend two different meetings per week. Although UNHCR has been requested to join the clusters, they appear inflexible. The result is that no one has a good overview of needs and problems across the country.

In Burma/Myanmar, Oxfam found work in the technical working groups labour intensive and was asked to take on projects such as the 'Sanitation in Emergency Guidelines' with little support. In other countries, partners reported that they had found

working with Oxfam staff challenging; in one instance one Oxfam staff member agreed to a standard, only to be replaced by another staff member, who subsequently complained about the standard and tried to get it changed.

Cluster coordinators can play an important role in ensuring that the cluster operations evolve with the needs and demands of the members and promote flexibility. Other cluster members also have to recognise the need for the cluster to change and take responsibility for cluster projects.

Dependency on UNICEF

At a country level, where it is working, there is a more effective and open forum for agencies to meet and work together without the feeling that you are beholden to the coordinating agency (usually UNICEF).

Oxfam public health engineer

In most countries and on the global level, the WASH cluster is heavily dependent on UNICEF, not only for leadership, but also for administrative support, the employment of cluster staff and the administrative arrangements for cluster projects. When the UNICEF country office accepts and buys in to their WASH cluster responsibilities, many of the bureaucratic challenges of working closely with a UN agency can be overcome. In other cases, UNICEF dependency is seen as a hindrance sometimes perceived to be blocking the hiring of staff, delaying staff appointments, slowing logistics, favouring development partners for humanitarian response grants, protecting its own interests, and withholding information. Examples of these problems have been described in several countries.

All Oxfam staff agreed that where there is a dedicated cluster coordinator who has no UNICEF programmatic responsibilities and is less dependent on UNICEF, the cluster tends to be better managed, more effective, and more of a partnership.

It's very difficult for people not to feel beholden to their donor. They won't feel that the conversation or coordination is equal and they won't feel they can openly discuss problems.

Oxfam WASH partner

Conversely, UNICEF sometimes puts pressure on the implementing agencies to cover WASH cluster coordinator positions, often informally, because the internal UN systems are failing or the country office has little WASH capacity. This has been described in several places by NGOs. In West Sumatra (2009), for example, the activation of the WASH cluster was slow. There was

... a lack of awareness of pre-existing work, and Oxfam covered during a delay in bringing in a coordinator, and was asked to help with systemizing coordination, providing an information officer and a technical advisor.

Oxfam programme manager

The RRT was developed to make up for this gap, and demonstrates real partnership between UNICEF, as lead agency, and cluster partner agencies, specifically Action Contre la Faim (ACF), Care and Oxfam. This team was highly praised, as were UNICEF efforts to train and rotate experienced cluster coordinators. The regional emergency WASH advisors were also thought to be effective.¹³ However, these resources are often only effective at the national level, leaving a coordination gap at sub-national level, where it can often be most effective. Oxfam, Care and ACF staff see themselves in a proactive role and there is a general sense that they have skills in WASH that make engagement obvious. Some thought that the UN dependency is too strong, and that

... engagement and leadership by INGOS like Oxfam is very much expected by the UN, [but] that gives us real leverage.

Oxfam Programme Manager

Box 4: Case study occupied Palestinian territories – dependency on UNICEF

During the Gaza crisis in late 2008–early 2009, the WASH cluster quickly deployed a member of the RRT to Gaza to set up the WASH cluster, while UNICEF recruited a dedicated WASH coordinator. Very early in the response, it was clear to WASH actors that UNICEF in the OPT did not have a sound understanding of the cluster approach. WASH actors complained that UNICEF was internally focused and regarded the WASH cluster as a secondary activity, whereas child protection (an on-going concern for UNICEF in the OPT) was given more support.

Once the RRT WASH cluster coordinator left, UNICEF still had not recruited a dedicated coordinator, leaving the WASH cluster leaderless and without a common agreed strategy. In OPT where water is a complex and sensitive issue, this has been cited as one of the biggest problems to overcoming operational difficulties.

While Oxfam has taken on a de-facto co-lead role, there were no agreed terms of reference between the two agencies. Together with delays in signing grant agreements, this led to tension between the two organisations.

Despite these difficulties, the WASH actors achieved some success. Using an existing forum (EWASH), the WASH actors developed a WASH advocacy programme. This programme was funded by the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) through a grant to Oxfam. Local and international NGOs were included in the advocacy, which made both the EWASH network and the advocacy stronger. The shift from UNICEF leadership (but still including the participation of UNICEF) meant that the group could be more flexible and avoid some bureaucratic hurdles, particularly around sign-off. Many of those who have worked in the OPT said that the advocacy work of the WASH cluster was very successful and demonstrated the added value the cluster can have. They said that it improved links between Gaza and the West Bank and resulted in a worldwide media campaign (covered by Al Jazeera and the BBC among others), which focused on the impact of the blockade on water and the environment. Although the relationship with UNICEF was described as having been an issue at times, their presence was still seen as critical.

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)'s management of the shelter cluster was referred to a number of times when discussing the success of clusters in being independent from UN agency demands. Although the coordination of the shelter cluster is not independent of its lead agencies¹⁴ (IFRC as convenor in natural disasters and UNHCR leads in conflict situations), IFRC structures its role as cluster coordinator independently from its internal operations. At country level, IFRC achieves this separation through the deployment of dedicated and independent Shelter Coordination Teams that include cluster partner personnel (who retain their agency visibility, but do not have agency responsibilities) but are funded by IFRC. A coordination-specific component is included in IFRC Emergency Appeals for funding, and helps to ensure dedicated coordination funding at country level. The Global Shelter Cluster Coordinator has budget authority over this funding to ensure separation from IFRC operations. IFRC has developed this system independently to reflect the different demands, opportunities and constraints.

We need to find a more human way to get people working together.

Cluster coordinator

On a global level, the WASH global cluster team was generally seen as making very positive steps towards improvements, and strong regional support from WASH advisors was much appreciated.¹⁵

Accountability

...we need to be a bit more pragmatic about it.

Oxfam public health promoter

Accountability was described as a real weakness in the cluster structure. Oxfam staff describe continuing difficulty with ensuring accountability in the context of the cluster. In the response to the cyclone in Haiti in 2008, for example, although it was obvious that the IDP camps would be open for some time, the lack of leadership on accountability (despite good coordination), meant that no one explained to the population in the camps what would happen in the next phases. Other interviewees thought that accountability and gender issues were taken into account automatically within some WASH activities. Cluster coordinators recognized that NGOs and implementing organisations may be carrying out their own monitoring of activities, but these are not examined in the cluster and, across the board, the WASH clusters are not looking at accountability in any structured way. Most people were aware of the need to carry out monitoring and evaluation of activities and thought peer reviews and surveys among beneficiaries were valuable tools and had worked well in the few cases where they had been tested. Some felt that since not all agencies have internally prioritized accountability, cluster should not be expected to focus on it. Senior Oxfam staff, however, felt that the cluster should drive organizations (including Oxfam) to become more accountable and support them to do so. Thus, Oxfam has been on the steering committee of the WASH cluster accountability project.

A number of Oxfam staff were proud to report where they believed the cluster or Oxfam had put effort into being more accountable to affected people. In DRC, the UNICEF cluster coordinator worked to elaborate a five-point gender checklist for WASH engagement: *'Engagements pour la securite et la dignite des filles, des garcons et des femmes dans l'eau, l'hygiene, at l'assainissement.'* (see Box 2). The coordinator and the cluster do not want to be seen as accountability police. Instead, from 2010, the cluster will look to NGO partners to use a new survey format, in the form of a simple household questionnaire, at the beginning and the end of an intervention to get some measure the impact that has been made.

5 Conclusion

The research for this report, drawing on Oxfam's experiences with the WASH cluster, indicates that clusters are likely to be most successful when they:

- **Put effective, accountable response at the centre of decisions.** The WASH cluster has been most successful because it has, generally, benefited from reliable, predictable leadership. An effective focus on response requires:
 - ensuring individuals and organisations within the cluster remain dedicated to meeting the affected population's need for water, sanitation and hygiene;
 - allowing the cluster to work flexibly and to adapt to the context (which encourages a more engaged group of actors who believe their perspectives are heard);
 - guiding participants to find solutions, bringing the cluster together to ensure that there is a common agreed strategy;
 - putting the structures (sub-groups) in place that allow priorities to be determined by the needs of the population and not by the participants with the loudest voice;
 - facilitating linkages and joint consideration of the cluster's effectiveness and accountability through all the phases of a response, including preparedness and transition.
- **Provide a practical, useful forum and a useful service.** Clusters should solve practical problems and make the cluster relevant by creating practical sub-working groups based on implementation issues. Technical Working Groups (TWIGs) have proven successful in generating agreed minimum standards and working methods and contingency planning; Strategic Advisory Groups (SAGs) have proven to be an effective, neutral and transparent mechanism for decision making and planning. Participants must commit to taking part for the benefit of the cluster. Sensitive issues like making pooled funding recommendations can be determined using agreed selection criteria and mechanisms.
- **Are flexible.** The cluster works best as a mechanism which adapts to the situation. It should provide a useful forum for participants to feed into and raise issues and innovate ways of addressing concerns and issues. Those that have allowed innovative ideas to emerge, and that have adapted flexibly to different situations and contexts are better appreciated and more effective in finding solutions. Building on existing coordination mechanisms, inclusion and capacity development of local government, forward planning, and taking DRR into account have all added value to the sector as a whole. In particular, by building on UNICEF's long-term relationships, coordination mechanisms can include national and local government in order to support the sustainability of the clusters' efforts. The mode of operation and focus will necessarily change over the course of the response. The cluster should be able to adapt to this.
- **Have strong leadership that is enthusiastic, proactive and respected.** The clusters work most effectively with a dedicated and skilled coordinator and information manager. The WASH cluster has shown that good preparation and management of meetings, and good management of the information shared by the cluster participants is critical. Meetings need to be run efficiently, with an agenda and outcomes that have clear objectives and are relevant to most actors. The coordinator must create and sustain a forum that is guided by the participants and have an attitude that facilitates open discussion.

- **Have wide, deep outreach.** The sub-national clusters that are geographically spread out and are as close as possible to operational activities are more effective. Actors located in the far reaches of operations need to have objectives that include good coordination. The Principles of Partnership and humanitarian principles, which inform and frame the activities of the clusters, need to be embodied by the actors who are closest to the action to feed upwards. Governments, particularly local-level officials, should benefit from the cluster either through direct participation or through capacity building, awareness and understanding activities or joint planning exercises.
- **Ensure shared responsibility and collective independence from the lead agency.** There is now an expectation that where it is not possible for UNICEF or the RRT to assume the leadership of the WASH cluster, the leadership role will be taken up through mutual agreement by the cluster partner in the country, particularly on a sub-national level. There is a mutual agreement between UNICEF WASH actors and the NGOs, which is built on respect and trust. By taking a proactive role, these lead agencies are consciously accumulating the skills and institutional knowledge to lead more effectively in successive emergencies. This increasing independence needs to be acknowledged, and built upon. Both UN and NGO coordinators need to accept that the cluster approach needs to take priority above their agency concerns, which requires among other things the commitment to be transparent about decisions being made within the cluster.
- **Take a simple approach to accountability.** Cluster participants should accept that accountability is an important role of the cluster agencies. This involves transparency between participants and a realistic approach to what is achievable. Tools need to be simple and adaptable to context and useable by any organisation participating. The idea of accountability to populations needs to be mainstreamed in all activities, and within the cluster without creating an overly formal structure or 'policing' each other.

Notes

¹ See Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response', IASC, November 2006.

² See the website: www.humanitarianreform.org, for access to the 'Generic Terms of Reference for Sector/Cluster Leads at the Country Level' and the IASC 'Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response'.

³ For the cluster evaluation see: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/3820.pdf>. For the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform reports see: <http://www.icva.ch/ngosandhumanitarianreform.html>

⁴ The rationale for this is:

1) Being a Cluster Lead or Co-Lead does not represent a scale-up of OGB WASH in that country;

2) UNICEF now have a huge register of people that can do WASH Cluster Coordination;

3) If we second people to the WASH Cluster then we lose their vital support to the Oxfam programme;

4) In WASH, Oxfam aspires to be an organisation that is respected because of its work on the ground both operationally and with its partners, rather than just having a 'big voice' in coordination.

⁵ Oxfam staff at all levels are reluctant to make the WASH cluster the standard of a well-performing cluster, often pointing to other clusters that seem to be better organised and more focussed in specific instances.

⁶ This is sometimes extended to include 'when', thus becoming the 4Ws matrix.

⁷ See www.humanitarianreform.org

⁸ The Global WASH cluster has a number of on-going projects which are well represented on the www.humanitarianreform.org website. The hygiene promotion tools can be found at: <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=343>

⁹ J. Cosgrave, February 2009, 'Global Survey of Gaps in WASH capacities for Emergencies', commissioned by the Global WASH cluster.

¹⁰ Because of the division in the government between the responsibilities for provision of water and sanitation and provision of public health and hygiene, the government decided that two coordination meetings were needed. This was possibly the first and only time that this has happened.

¹¹ For a description of these responsibilities and the directive to implement them, see: 'Joint letter from Cluster Lead Agencies to their Directors/Representatives at Country Level'.

¹² Donors have sometimes exacerbated the confusion about the role of clusters by channeling funding through clusters. See, Oxfam Briefing Note, "Missing Pieces? Assessing the Impact of Humanitarian Reform in Pakistan", 1 October 2009.

¹³ There are 6 Regional Emergency WASH Advisors (REWAs) based in regional UNICEF offices. The REWAs are UNICEF staff and not WASH cluster staff, thus their mandates are to support UNICEF offices meet their WASH responsibilities. They were initially tasked with rolling-out the cluster, to support forward planning, support national planning and capacity building and conduct some training.

¹⁴ IFRC has made a commitment to provide leadership to the broader humanitarian community in Emergency Shelter but has committed to being a 'convener' rather than a 'cluster lead'. It has not committed to being 'provider of last resort' and is not accountable to any part of the UN system.

¹⁵ The project was completed in November 2009. The aim of the project was: 'Based upon consultation with WASH cluster members as to what will work best to inculcate accountable ways of working into their staff and their organisations, it will find practical, integrated, simple measures that WASH Sector agencies can all adopt to improve accountability in the programmes that WASH cluster members deliver. See <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/Default.aspx?tabid=740>.

Acknowledgements

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