

# The Humanitarian Coordination Architecture: Towards a New Hybrid Approach?

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## Question

How has the humanitarian coordination architecture adapted to highly restricted operating environments?

- *Is the existing Cluster Approach still appropriate or can it be adapted for better use?*
- *Is there evidence to demonstrate the value of area-based approaches to humanitarian action?*

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# 1. Summary

The global humanitarian coordination architecture seems to have more backing in terms of resources and support as well as knowledge and experience, than ever before. Despite this, on the ground, the humanitarian relief system continues to face challenges in the increasingly difficult operating environments whether it is protracted conflicts or other emergency situations causing mass displacement of populations (Healy and Tiller, 2014, p.4). This rapid review explores the following questions: *how (if at all), has the current system adapted to these highly restricted operating environments? More specifically, is the current cluster system still relevant in such cases or can it be adapted for better use? And is there evidence to support that area-based approaches might be better suited to conduct adequate humanitarian coordination and planning?*

The evidence gathered in this report is based on a mixture of academic, policy, and practitioner-based literature. Humanitarian coordination as an area of scholarly research has grown exponentially over the past decade and can be considered “a well-established and mature topic” now (Jahre and Jensen, 2021, 586). The evidence that emerges suggests the following:

- Since the introduction of the Cluster Approach in 2005, the humanitarian coordination architecture has gone through various changes. Over the last years the international community has made further commitments and engaged in further initiatives to better the existing cluster system (such as the Grand Bargain,<sup>1</sup> the Localisation Agenda,<sup>2</sup> the Development Nexus<sup>3</sup>) (Urban Settlements Working Group, 2020, p.6).
- Some have argued that more is needed to see the real changes necessary to further increase the effectiveness of the humanitarian coordination and planning operations (see Section 3). However, evidence presented here shows that the current structure has shown signs that it can adapt to meet the increasingly complex humanitarian situations and needs.
- Many of the cases discussed in this report (see Section 4) indicate the impending changes that are already taking place within the current system. The combined use of cluster- and area-based approaches is one such indication that at least in some cases, if not everywhere, the current system is adapting to the demands and the realities of the operational environment.
- On its own, the existing cluster system may no longer be appropriate to meet some of these complex needs, but it has capacity to change and adapt for better use. Most of its critics do not wish to be rid of the cluster system altogether but rather wish to see its transformation, perhaps into a “hybrid” system (see Section 5) which retains some of the important elements of the cluster system as well as introducing some of the more localised, area-focused elements of the area-based approaches.
- The cases discussed in this report all highlight the added value of the area-based approaches to humanitarian coordination. Their focus on a specific geographic area, multi-vector approach and the emphasis on participatory engagement all seem to be having positive impact on the cases under consideration and could be used more widely to achieve a bigger impact.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see: <https://had-int.org/blog/ingos-and-the-localisation-agenda/>

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see: <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/humanitarian-development-nexus>

## 2. The Humanitarian Coordination Architecture

### Brief Background

Coordination in humanitarian contexts, whether it is at a local, national, regional, or global level, is the key to a successful humanitarian action (Konyndyk, *et al.* 2020). Its main purpose is to enhance “the effectiveness of humanitarian response by ensuring greater **predictability, accountability and partnership**” among its multiple actors (ICVA, n.d., 1, emphasis in original). Humanitarian coordination and planning often involve a complex array of issues. With the occurrence of thousands of natural disasters and the emergence of ever challenging emergency situations across the world over the past decades, the humanitarian coordination system has grown significantly and has evolved over time to meet the requirements of the current challenges and growing needs for humanitarian assistance (Humphries, 2013, p.3). As a result, over the past two decades, several substantive changes have taken place in the way humanitarian relief is coordinated during emergency situations, including introduction of the Cluster Approach (ICVA, n.d., p.3).

The origins of the current international humanitarian coordination structure date back to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (Dec. 1991),<sup>4</sup> which saw the development of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Since then, a number of evaluations took place to improve humanitarian assistance and coordination, including the 2005 Humanitarian Reform. The latter introduced a few new mechanisms to humanitarian coordination, one of them being the Cluster Approach, or the cluster system (Humanitarian Response, n.d.).

### 3. Cluster Approach: Challenges and Lessons Not Learnt?

Clusters are groups of humanitarian organisations (UN agencies or other organisations) who are responsible for different sectors of humanitarian action. The Cluster Approach was introduced in the mid-2000s and was first applied in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan (Humanitarian Response, n.d.). Since then, the Cluster Approach has been evaluated twice. The 2007 evaluation<sup>5</sup> focused on the implementation strategy of this approach while the 2010<sup>6</sup> evaluation centred around the outcomes of the Cluster Approach. The learning outcomes of these evaluations resulted in the 2012 Transformative Agenda (TA) – “a series of actions aimed at simplifying processes and outcomes” of humanitarian assistance (Humanitarian Response, n.d.).

There are currently 11 clusters globally that can be activated on an *ad-hoc* basis at the national and sub-national levels. The main aim of the Cluster Approach “is to ensure a more coherent and

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<sup>4</sup> For the Resolution text, see:

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/GA%20Resolution%2046-182.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> For a full text of the 2007 Cluster Approach Evaluation, see:

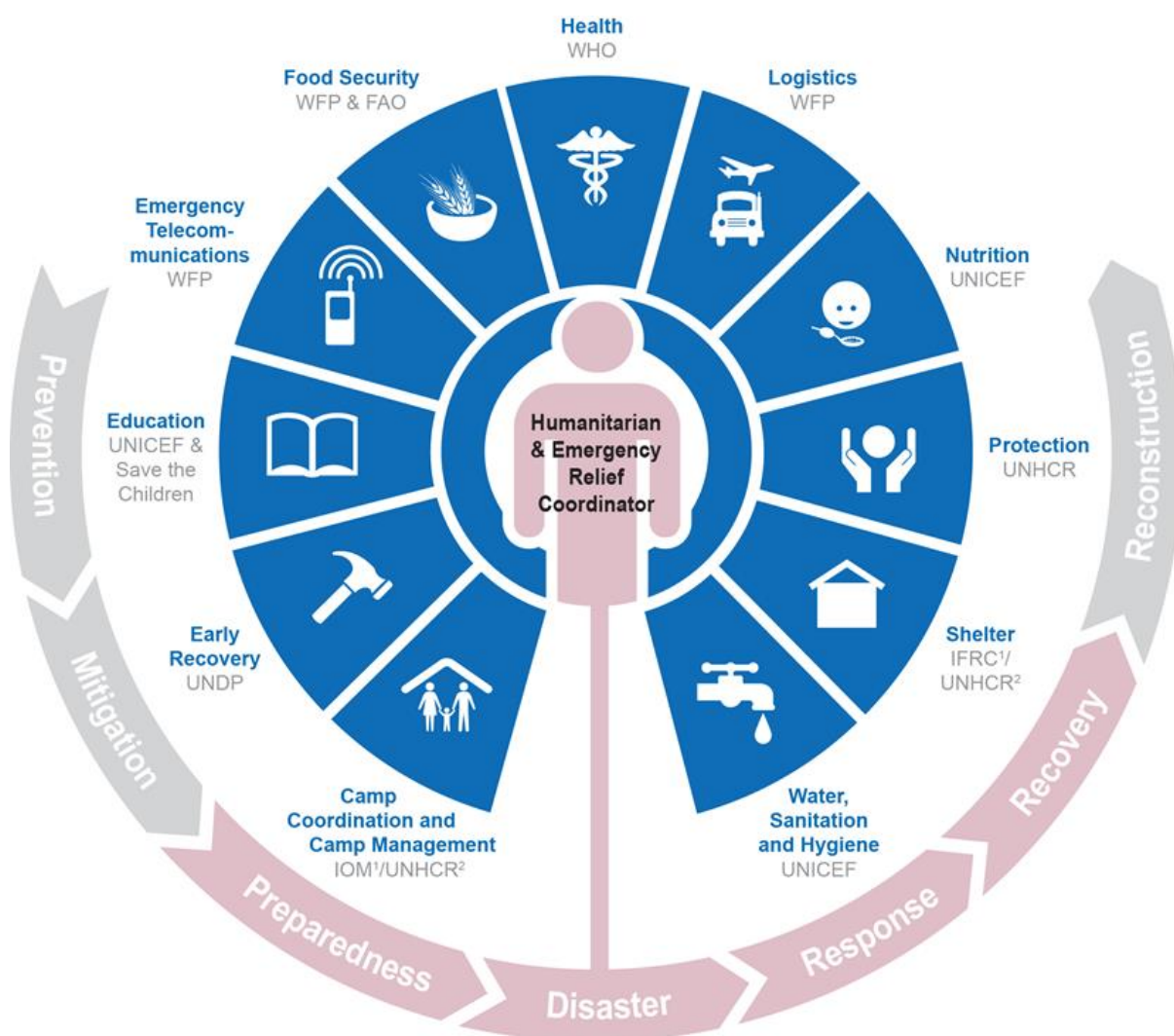
<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/Cluster%20Approach%20Evaluation%201.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> For a Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report, see:

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/Cluster%20Approach%20Evaluation%202.pdf>

effective response through mobilizing humanitarian actors to respond in a strategic way across all sectors, with each sector having a designated lead agency” (Humphries, 2013, p.7) (see Figure 1). Up to present time, the Cluster Approach remains the main pillar of the humanitarian coordination architecture although over the years it has attracted significant criticism too (Humphries, 2013, p.7).

**Figure 1:** 11 Clusters of the Humanitarian Coordination.



Source: Humanitarian Response, n.d. reproduced under CC-BY-4.0

In the 2013 study based on “a meta-analysis” of 18 existing major evaluations, as well as case studies of natural disasters and other emergencies, Humphries (2013, p.7) weighed strengths and weaknesses of the Cluster Approach and provided an overview of its effectiveness. Assessing its overall effectiveness, most evaluations that the author examined “find the Cluster Approach to be an effective instrument in coordinating humanitarian relief” (Humphries, 2013, p.11). Perhaps not surprisingly, the study found that clusters were most effective in those sectors that already had some presence in the countries concerned before the implementation of the cluster approach (for instance, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia,

Zimbabwe). However, despite overall effectiveness and the optimism about the future of the Cluster Approach, the study also outlined a few recurrent challenges (Humphries, 2013, p.12).

One of those challenges concerned “**predictable leadership**” of the humanitarian coordination. One of the main issues identified was a high turnover of coordinators amongst many of the cluster lead agencies which contributed to low institutional memory and negatively affected the overall humanitarian relief efforts (Humphries, 2013, p.14).

Another issue was that of “**partnership**” among various humanitarian actors involved. Findings of the study showed that the Cluster Approach had not been particularly successful in enhancing partnerships between the UN agencies on the one hand and national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on the other. It was argued that Clusters often failed to include national/local NGO perspectives and the latter often perceived their role in the clusters as passive (Humphries, 2013, p.16). As Humphries (2013, p.17) notes, “NGO perceptions of the Cluster Approach are often suspicious, criticizing the approach as being UN-centric, treating NGOs as subordinates”.

Yet another criticism of the Cluster Approach at the time concerned the issue of “**accountability**”. As the author points out, different actors engaged in the humanitarian relief efforts often competed over “resources and visibility”. As a result, “accountability to the donor often trumps accountability to the affected population” and this can often “lead to wasted resources and a duplication of efforts” (Humphries, 2013, p.20).

Nevertheless, it was believed at the time that the benefits of the Cluster Approach outweighed the costs. And as Humphries (2013, pp.21-22) argued, some of the key critical issues identified in her findings could “be addressed within the existing structure of the Cluster Approach” and that the latter was still “the most appropriate structure for relief coordination”.

More recent studies on the subject, however, have been more critical of the current humanitarian coordination structure. Healy and Tiller (2014) examine displacement emergencies in the conflict cases of South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Jordan throughout 2012-13, and further point out a number of issues, including that of funding. Emergency response funding often took several months “to get through the clusters” before it reached the population on the ground and was considered “inflexible” and “bureaucratic” (Healy and Tiller, 2014, p.17). Weak management and technical capacity of certain clusters was also a point of criticism (Healy and Tiller, 2014, p.17). Although, another issue noted by these authors was, in fact, avoidance of the Cluster Approach rather than using it. As Healy and Tiller (2014, p.26) observe, there were instances of some UN agencies preventing others from participating in relief activities by bypassing the existing cluster system.

In a 2016 report, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) also raised issues with the current humanitarian coordination structure. According to the report, despite a series of wide-ranging reforms over the years, the existing system was “simply not doing a good job” and that it was “time for the humanitarian sector to let go of some of the fundamental – but outdated – assumptions, structures and behaviours that prevent[ed] it from adapting to meet the needs of people in crises” (ODI, 2016a, p.1).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For a full report, see ODI (2016b).

While evaluating public health response in conflicting situations, a 2017 study by Spiegel also notes that “the humanitarian system is not just broke, but broken”. According to the author, it “was created for a different time and is no longer fit for purpose” (Spiegel, 2017, p.1). Discussing the Cluster Approach, Spiegel (2017, p.4) argues that the current system was “insufficiently adapted to constantly changing environments” and that it was “too cumbersome, bureaucratic, inadequate in terms of effect and accountability”.

## 4. Area-Based Approaches

In 2020 the Center for Global Development (CGD) produced a report in which the authors suggest an alternative approach that promises to address much of the above criticism directed towards the Cluster Approach. In it, Konyndyk *et al.* (2020, p.2) outline a new humanitarian coordination and planning architecture that would combine elements of the existing Cluster Approach as well as borrowing elements from area-based programming. As the authors note, “Area-based approaches address needs holistically within a **defined community or geography**; provide aid that is explicitly **multisector and multidisciplinary**; and design and implement assistance through **participatory engagement** with affected communities and leaders” (Konyndyk *et al.*, 2020, p.2, emphasis in original). They do not propose to discard the Cluster Approach altogether; rather, they opt for a “hybrid” version, that would shift “frontline delivery coordination ... from the top-down, sectoral logic of the clusters to a bottom-up, area-based logic” (Konyndyk *et al.*, 2020, p.2).

Konyndyk *et al.* (2020, p.4) also recognise the many positives that accompanied the introduction of the cluster system; as they note, “the cluster system made significant headway in addressing the “Wild West” coordination scene that it replaced”. However, the issues outlined above remain: marginalisation of local actors and weaker coordination at the field level; ineffective communication and uneven development between different clusters (Konyndyk *et al.*, 2020, pp.5-6). In addition, Konyndyk *et al.* (2020, p.7) also warn of an underlying conflict of interest within the cluster “business model” which involves close interlinkage of the cluster leadership and agency fundraising (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, pp.7-8).<sup>8</sup>

Area-based approaches<sup>9</sup> to humanitarian action offer an alternative to better the existing coordination structure by “making humanitarian program delivery more explicitly people-centered and comprehensive” (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.13). These approaches define “an area, rather than a sector or target group, as a primary entry point” (Urban Settlements Working Group, 2019, p.4). Thus, they tend to be more “demand-driven” rather than “supply-driven”, which is characteristic to the Cluster Approach (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.14).

Area-based approaches are not a new phenomenon. “Area-based initiatives” can be traced back to the 1960s and 70s when used by urban planners and developers working on community development projects in poorer urban areas (Sanderson & Sitko, 2017, p.6). While some organisations (and scholars) prefer to use certain terms and definitions that vary from one

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as their research uncovers, those UN agencies that also served as cluster leads were by far “the largest proposed funding recipients, at 77.4 percent” (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, pp.7-8).

<sup>9</sup> Other terms have been used interchangeably – “settlement-based approaches” (SKAT and IFRC, 2012) and “neighbourhood approaches” (USAID, n.d.) but as Parker and Maynard (2015, p.11) point out, these terms are, in fact, generally “used to describe an area-based approach at a certain scale”.

another to a certain degree (see footnote 6), there is much crossover between terms. For example, some of the main characteristics that the Urban Settlements Working Group (2020) outlines in their definition of the “settlements approach” can be applied to area-based approaches more generally. Specifically, these approaches are: 1) focused on a particular **area** and recognise “both physical and socio-cultural boundaries”; 2) **multisectoral** in their engagement and input; 3) characterised by engagement of **multiple stakeholders**; and 4) usually considering the needs of a **whole population** (Urban Settlements Working Group, 2020, pp.7,9).

## Brief Overview of Successful Case Studies

According to Worden *et al.* (2020), the current **COVID-19 pandemic** has further heightened the need to turn to area-based approaches since responding to global pandemics “requires a more locally tailored approach”. The **Ebola outbreak** in West Africa in 2014-15 is another good example (Konyndyk, 2019). As Worden *et al.* (2020) explain, in countries affected by the Ebola crisis – Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone – local, on the ground mechanisms to counter the outbreak necessitated a “co-ownership of the coordination structure between local leaders and international partners”.

However, area-based approaches also have success rates when applied to the conflict cases too. In **Afghanistan**, for instance, the National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP) had a long history (2002-2015). It targeted rural areas and built various infrastructure projects all over the country. District representatives and traditional local governance councils were engaged in selecting and planning these projects, “thus relying on local social capital, knowledge and identification of needs” (Haider, 2021, p.5). Norwegian Refugee Council’s (NRC) “Urban Displacement Out of Camps” project also utilised an area-based approach. It encompassed conducting “community-based assessment and mapping exercise[s]” in eight districts of Afghanistan (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.16). This allowed residents to establish local needs, identify core areas of engagement, and consider what services were already in place and what was lacking. Such an area-based “approach enabled a more holistic and population-driven intervention than is possible through traditional cluster-centered approaches” (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.16).

**Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** is another example where the central Humanitarian Country Team has worked through devolved, four regional level subnational coordination hubs (CRIOs). The latter, in turn, have worked at the sub-regional level through “area-based, sectorally integrated operational plans in their areas of responsibility” (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.18). This has even shaped the way funding has been allocated. This area-based (“hub-centered”) approach has allowed partner organisations working on the ground to focus on the “geographically specific needs” and be more flexible in terms of “shifting geographic priorities as conditions evolve” and distribute resources as the needs arise (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.18).

In 2016-17, an area-based approach was used in Mosul, **Iraq**. During the battle to recapture the city from the ISIS fighters, many internally displaced persons (IDPs) started relocating back to or around Mosul at a relatively high rate. The shelter cluster and its partners applied an area-based coordination model when assisting these IDPs. They identified five geographic areas within and around the city and organised service delivery “multi-sectorally” within these different areas (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.14). As Konyndyk *et al.* (2020, p.14) point out, “[t]his approach to

multisector delivery within a geographically devolved coordination model enabled better adaptation to local conflict dynamics and access opportunities as the frontlines moved inward during the city's liberation".

In **Lebanon**, CARE International has successfully applied an area-based approach to improve living conditions of the Syrian refugees who arrived in Tripoli as well as their host communities. By focusing on shelter, WASH and community governance, CARE concentrated on specific neighbourhoods in the city that were identified as particularly vulnerable. In addition to renovating existing communal infrastructure, emphasis was also put on the social cohesion of the communities affected. One of the important initiatives was also the introduction of "neighbourhood committees" which raised awareness to some of the sources of community tension, their resolution and prevention (Schell *et al.*, 2020, p.18).

The case of Mbera camp hosting refugees from northern Mali in **Mauritania** since 2012 is another notable example. Here an area-based approach was applied in order to address the needs of not only the refugees but also their host communities who often also lived in extreme poverty and lacked many of the resources provided to the camp residents. As a result, local residents were also allowed access some of the camp facilities, including water, sanitation, education, and health. An area-based approach in this case enabled the organisations involved to address "the needs and interests of all living within a particular location, across categories of refugees and host communities, and focusing on all institutions in a context" (González, 2016, p.379).

In **Somalia**, the case of Zona K – an informal settlement which formed as a result of the worsening IDP situation in Mogadishu during the 2011 famine is of particular interest. To address the situation, the UNHCR and the UN Habitat developed "a tricluster strategy (Shelter, WASH, and Health)" which was meant to support initiatives across different sectors. These agencies opted for an area-based approach as they acknowledged that none of the identified "priorities were attainable within the parameters of individual cluster activity" (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.16). As Konyndyk *et al.* (2020, p.16) note, starting out this "project across three sectors facilitated a 'culture of coordination' in the project", and a few years later the project extended further to include education and protection too.

Schell *et al.* (2020) demonstrate successful implementation of area-based approaches in a number of conflicting regions experiencing high levels of (urban) displacement. One such case is **Syria**, in particular, in the city of Ar-Raqqa in the North and East Syria region (NES). In partnership with local NGOs, a series of area-based, multi-sectoral assessments took place, which shaped subsequent response priorities. This was conducted in partnership with the local NES NGO forum and the cluster system sector leads (Schell *et al.*, 2020, p.17), further highlighting the possibility of the co-existence and co-habitation of hybrid area-based and cluster approaches.

An "Area Based Development (ABD) Approach" has also been used in the **Western Balkans**. In cross-border regions which have faced much poverty, social exclusion and ethnic tensions, calls for "inclusive, participatory and flexible interventions" have been particularly ripe (Haider, 2021, p.7). In the case of the Drina-Sava – a rural area that encompasses neighbouring municipalities belonging to three different countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia), several key areas were identified and a number of "participatory instruments and processes have been adopted to create the basis for a multi-stakeholder approach to local development" (Haider,



2021, p.7; see also Bogdanov and Nikolić, 2013, p.105). Some of these participatory mechanisms included Stakeholder groups, Delphi groups with a range of experts, and surveys of community representatives (Haider, 2021, p.7).

## 5. “Hybrid Coordination Architecture”: An Alternative?

Despite the Cluster Approach remaining the key mechanism in the global humanitarian coordination architecture, the above examples demonstrate the rising use of area-based approaches too. These cases highlight that the two approaches – area-based and cluster-based – have already been co-habituating relatively successfully in many conflict and other emergency situations.

In recent years there have been calls within the international humanitarian community “for a more integrated approach to humanitarian response, more tangible links between emergency and development interventions, and to empower local stakeholders to play a more prominent role in crisis responses” (Urban Settlements Working Group, 2020, p.6). With calls for more of a “place-based, community-based and multisector undertakings” (Urban Settlements Working Group, 2020, p.6). As mentioned above, there have already been articulations of some important initiatives and commitments from the international community that have urged further conversations on how to best coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable (Urban Settlements Working Group, 2020, p.6).

However, Konyndyk *et al.* (2020) go a step further and outline the “hybrid coordination approach” as an alternative to the existing humanitarian structure. Rather than suggesting stepping away from the current cluster “system” altogether, they suggest scaling back. They argue that the clusters must continue to play the roles in which they “have demonstrated the most value: providing technical guidance and quality assurance; maintaining a level of baseline ‘last resort’ implementation capacity within each cluster lead; supporting sector-wide common services (including the essential operational work done by the logistics and emergency telecom clusters); and eliminating duplicative technical coordination between agencies with overlapping mandates” (Konyndyk *et al.*, 2020, p.19). They acknowledge the value that the clusters bring and emphasise their importance, but in their hybrid model, the clusters would no longer lead field-based operations and would no longer be the key “force behind the humanitarian program and funding cycle” (Konyndyk *et al.*, 2020, p.19). Instead, some of these mechanisms would be diverted from the clusters to more decentralised and localised “subnational coordination hubs” and “operational zones” (Konyndyk *et al.*, 2020, p.19).

This would lead to a number of important changes in the humanitarian coordination process and programme cycle and would result in the following actions as outlined by Konyndyk *et al.* (2020, p.19):

1. Deepened local engagement
2. Stronger/more integrated subnational coordination
3. Context-centered needs analysis
4. Demand-driven rather than supply-driven planning
5. Enhancing alignment across sectors
6. Delinking cluster leadership from financing incentives

7. Improve coordination with development, peacebuilding, and refugee programs (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, pp.19-20).

In order to achieve this and pilot this new “hybrid” model, Konyndyk *et al.* (2020) propose the international humanitarian community takes the following steps:

- Establish and Empower the Hubs
- Context-Centered Needs Assessment and Planning
- Finance by Geography Rather than Sector
- Clarify Authority and Responsibility
- Be Candid About Power Dynamics (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, pp.23-28).

For the past 16 years the Cluster Approach has seen a lot of improvements and overall has had an undeniably positive impact on the way traditional humanitarian response mechanisms operate. However, despite significant efforts over the years to address some of the criticism directed towards the cluster system (see Section 3), “these shortcomings appear to be inherent features of the cluster approach, rather than perfectible flaws” (Konyndyk *et al.* 2020, p.30). As a result, as Konyndyk *et al.* (2020, p.30) point out, “[a] next-generation approach to humanitarian coordination is needed—one that retains the upsides of the cluster model while addressing its weaknesses”. Introducing area-based approaches in this “hybrid” model might be the key to unlocking the full potential of the international humanitarian coordination and planning architecture (Konyndyk *et al.*, 2020, p.30).

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## Key websites

- ALNAP: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/area-based-approach-in-humanitarian-response-and-recovery>
- Building a Better Response: <https://www.buildingabetterresponse.org/>
- Center for Global Development: <https://www.cgdev.org/project/rethinking-reform-toward-demand-driven-humanitarian-action>  
<https://www.cgdev.org/project/rethinking-reform-toward-demand-driven-humanitarian-action>
  - Addressing the Challenges Facing the Global Humanitarian System: A Conversation with Mark Lowcock, the UN's New Head of Humanitarian Coordination | Center For Global Development (cgdev.org)
  - COVID-19 and BLM: A New Era for Aid? Rethinking Humanitarianism Episode 1 | Center For Global Development (cgdev.org)
- ICVA – A Global NGO Network for Principled and Effective Humanitarian Action: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/>
- IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-transformative-agenda>
- IASC – The Grand Bargain: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>
- Humanitarian Academy for Development (HAD): <https://had-int.org/blog/ingos-and-the-localisation-agenda/>
- Logistics Cluster: <https://logcluster.org/>
- OCHA Services – Humanitarian Response: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/>
- OCHA Humanitarian Development Nexus: <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/humanitarian-development-nexus>
- Time To Let Go: <https://remake-aid.odi.digital/>

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