ALNAP

Exploring Coordination in Humanitarian Clusters

Discussion Starter

What are Clusters and what do they do?

Coordination is essential to the success of humanitarian response. In most crisis situations, a large number of organisations will be working to provide support in the same area. Under these circumstances, coordination allows all actors to get a better understanding of the situation and to share effective practices. It prevents dangerous gaps in assistance, and helps avoid wasteful duplication.

The IASC 'Clusters' are a formal humanitarian coordination forum bringing together agencies in a humanitarian response. Each cluster concentrates on a technical sector such as nutrition or protection. Although they follow the same broad terms of reference, they differ markedly in the activities they conduct and the degree of coordination they attempt.

The clusters undertake a variety of activities, including:

- sharing information
- reducing gaps and duplication between the programmes of different agencies
- building capacity of members and other stakeholders
- setting strategies and priorities for the response in 'their' sectoral area
- common problem solving
- advocacy
- establishing and promoting common standards or procedures

For more information on this study, please visit:

www.alnap.org/leadership

What is coordination?

The term coordination is often used quite loosely in the humanitarian sector, and describes a variety of different kinds of relationship. This research proposes a that between complete independence and full merger, there are three levels of coordination. As organisations move along this spectrum, they generally accept a greater amount of shared accountability, relationships become more formalised, and there is less scope for independent action.
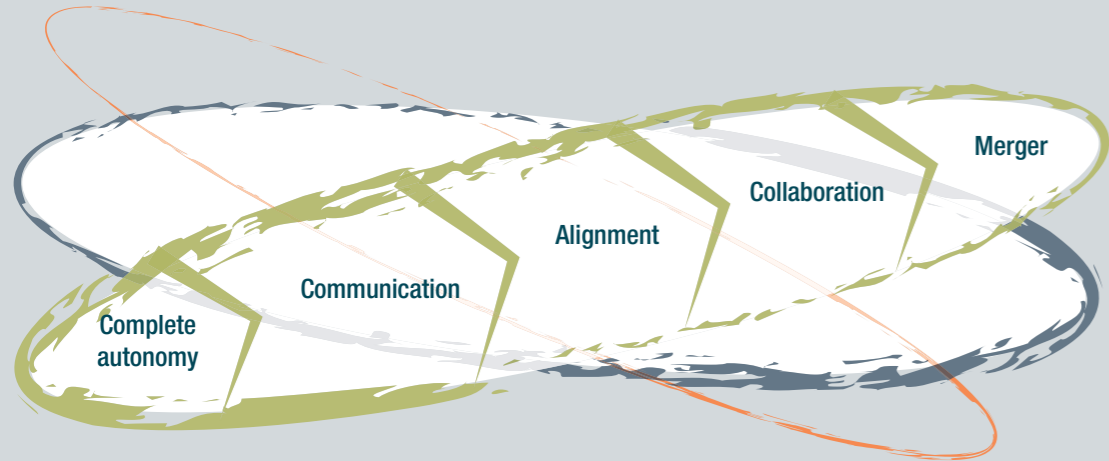

Predominantly, Cluster activities fall at the 'alignment' level. This means that humanitarian organisations have maintained a fairly high degree of organisational distinctiveness and autonomy, conducting separate programmes under – effectively – separate leadership structures, but have worked with one another to try and ensure these programmes complement one another, follow the same basic principles and cover sectoral and geographical.

What makes coordination successful?

Overall, it is clear there is no single factor, or single combination of factors, that can guarantee coordination will occur successfully. Different Clusters found different paths to success. Though there is no 'silver bullet' oordination is more effective in the Clusters where:

- Tasks meet individual organisations' needs;
- The Cluster operates independently from the Cluster Lead Agency;
- Participating agencies have clear and agreed roles and responsibilities;
- Effective information management systems are in place;
- Clear and agreed decision-making processes are in place;
- Cluster member organisations have common standards and procedures for frequently encountered operational work (such as assessment, logistics, distributions);
- There are high levels of trust.
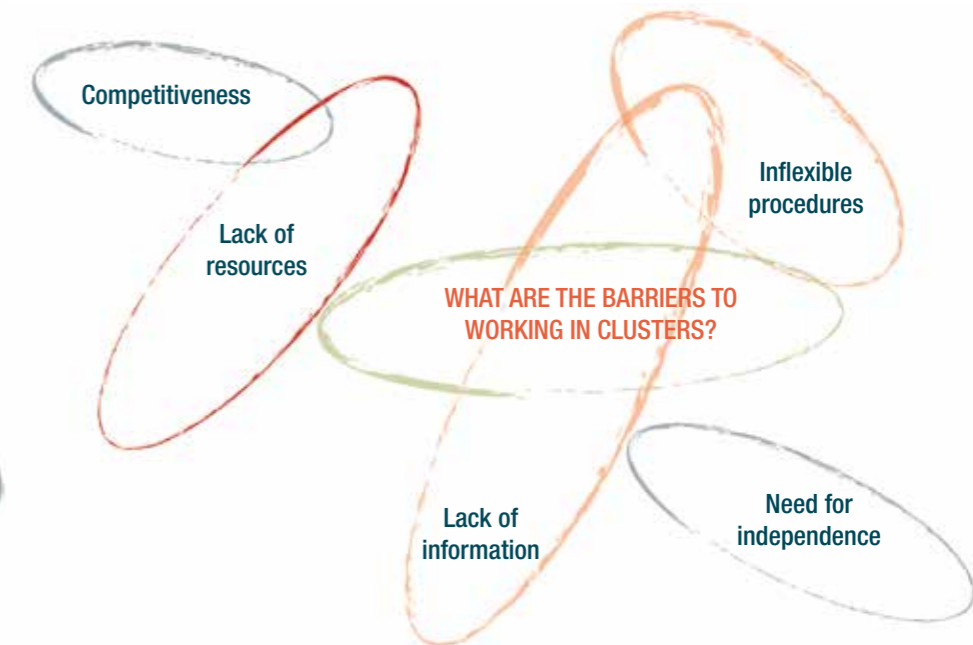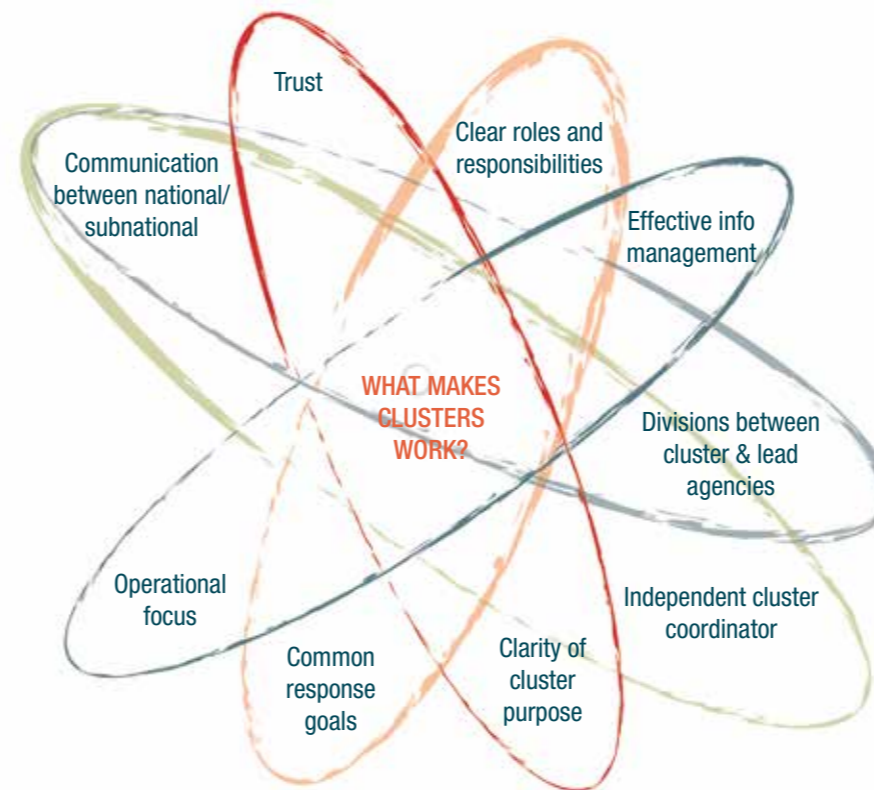
Three models of decision-making in a cluster

This research finds that decisions made by a group or with consultation tend to be of higher quality than decisions made by sole individuals in the cluster.
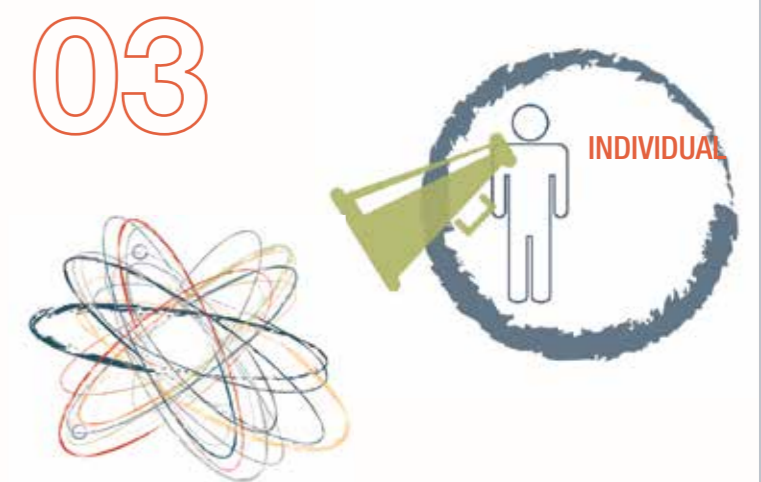
It also suggests that decisions made by individuals don't save time – decisions by groups or consultation are not more time intensive.
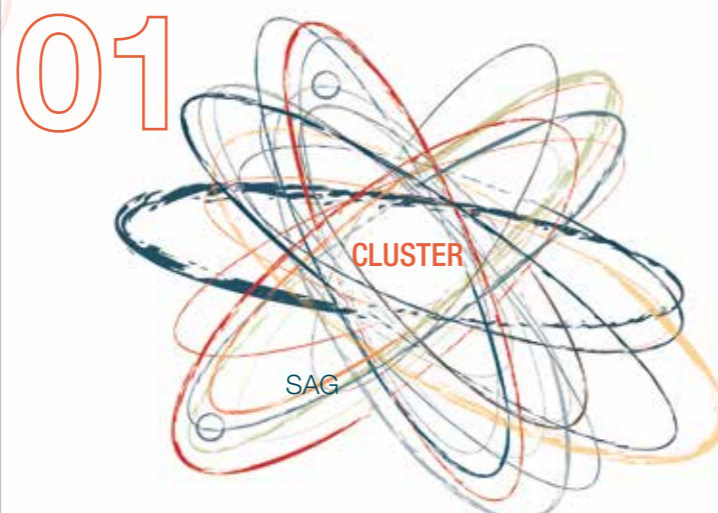
Whole Group: Decisions are made, either by majority or consensus, by the whole cluster membership.
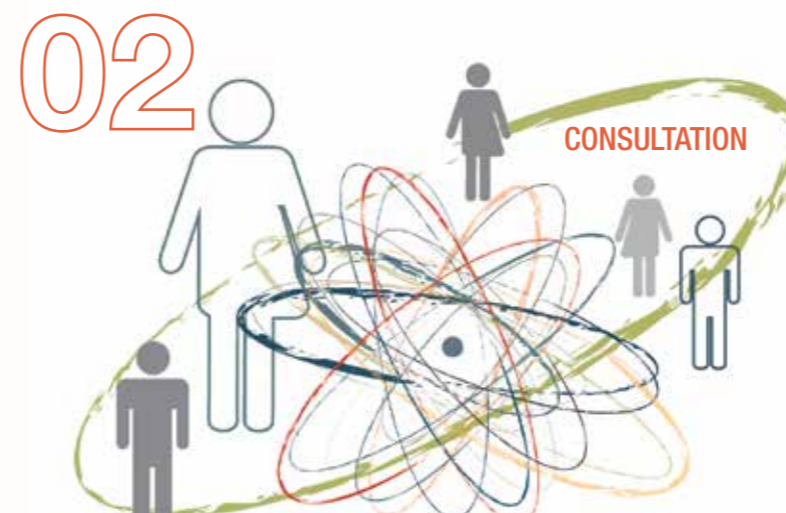
Small Group: Decisions are made in a small group, such as the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG).

Individual: An individual (often a Cluster Coordinator) makes important decisions, usually after consulting others within in the Cluster.

Recommendations and next steps

1. IASC may wish to further *clarify the degree of coordination the Clusters are expected to achieve.* Individual Clusters should also clarify their approach to coordination.

2. *Clusters should ensure their membership contains organisations operating in all areas affected by the crisis and obtains information on all vulnerable population groups within these areas.* This might be achieved by determining 'lead agencies' for specific geographical areas (as some Clusters already do).

3. Clusters can successfully develop emergency strategies only if they are aware of the effects of programmes and interventions on the course of the emergency. *Clusters should give more attention to monitoring the situation, and the effects of relief activities on this situation.*

4. *Clusters should agree among themselves on priority activities,* to allow the most effective use of time and resources.

5. Clusters will inevitably be requested to provide information and support to non-operational activities. *External actors should minimise these requests; explain the way information provided by the Cluster has been used and the effects that it has had; and be prepared to provide additional resources* for information collection and analysis.

6. *Clusters should aim to have clear criteria for membership.* Clusters might also consider 'tiered' membership, with different expectations for members that participate in larger meetings and members that participate in the SAG.

7. The inclusion of national NGOs in coordination mechanisms can significantly improve the quality of information and situation analysis available to Cluster members and help to develop long-term relationships of trust that underpin successful coordination. However, there are many constraints to national NGO participation. *The criteria for membership of the Cluster should consider these issues, with a view to determining how national and local civil society organisations can best be represented.* Clusters may find it useful to work with NNGO networks.

8. Where the state has some coordination capacity, and is not seen to compromise on humanitarian values and principles, *further consideration should go into establishing long-term, standing mechanisms under the leadership of government actors.*

9. When establishing Clusters or similar coordination structures, *subnational Clusters should be built into information management and other systems from the start.* More radically, it may be worth considering coordination systems that are scalable and built up from the field.

10. Clusters are more effective at supporting coordination *where the Cluster CLA plays an 'arm's-length' role.* At the least, this should entail funding the Cluster from a separate budget line, ensuring CLA staff attend Cluster meetings (and not expecting the CC to represent the CLA) and ensuring decisions are made by a group representative of the broader Cluster membership.

11. The research suggests decisions made by groups are no slower than those made by individuals. They are also of better quality, and more likely to be supported by the group. With this in mind, *all Clusters should ensure decision-making involves the Cluster membership, either as a whole group or by establishing decision-making bodies that are representative of participating agencies*.

12. Information management processes lie at the heart of the work of the Cluster. Currently, *Clusters are attempting to manage up to seven discrete types of information. Clusters should clarify which types of information are most important for their members. They should ensure their information management processes address (and are resourced to support) all phases of information management, not just information collection.*

13. Clusters are more effective where their members have similar approaches (procedures) to the provision of emergency support services. The research suggests *Clusters should focus on establishing fairly broad, 'simple rules', developed on the basis of existing organisational guidance,* which participating organisations can adopt voluntarily.

14. Cluster members highly value the 'providing a bigger picture' function, but it can be accomplished only when Clusters have a complete understanding of needs and resources on the ground. *Donors in particular can support this process by ensuring that, where funding is given outside of Cluster/pooled funding mechanisms, Clusters are made aware of these activities.*