QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

The ongoing process of Cluster Simplification within the Humanitarian Reset

April 2025

1. What is the humanitarian reset?

The humanitarian reset is an exercise that a large part of the humanitarian system is undertaking as it redefines its work to match the reality of funding. While it addresses requests for modernisation, more agile decision-making, and light structures, it implicates making hard decisions to prioritise lifesaving support. Its implementation will advance during Q3 2025, including changes to the UN coordination architecture, reductions in activities, and a streamlined organisational structure. More information is available in the Humanifesto by Tom Fletcher and on the OCHA Website.

2. What is the rationale behind cluster simplification?

The cluster simplification process is part of the broader humanitarian reset aimed at modernising coordination systems, making decision-making more agile, and enhancing efficiency. It aligns with the IASC Principals' agreement that coordination should be field-driven and context-specific. There is recognition that the cluster approach remains necessary but should be lighter and more flexible to adapt to changing operational environments.

The ERC letter to IASC on the Humanitarian Reset (11th March 2025) urges reimagining and renewing our mandates and finding new funding sources. It also recommends prioritising national partners and pooled funds, shifting towards cash-transfer programming, accelerating inter-agency community feedback, and swiftly assessing how country-based pooled funds and the emergency fund (CERF) can be strategically aligned.

3. How does cluster simplification relate to broader humanitarian reforms?

Cluster simplification is one aspect of the humanitarian reset, which also includes:

- The differentiation approach, identifying the locations and types of crises where a cluster approach is needed (and which ones need to be activated) for a given time as part of the humanitarian response cycle and its support structure.

- Strengthening localization by increasing support to national and local actors.

- Aligning funding mechanisms to ensure more predictable and sustainable support for coordination functions.

- Exploring efficiency measures, such as consolidating information management functions across sectors.

4. What are the key changes expected from the humanitarian reset?

Key aspects related to the simplification process include:

- A shift towards greater decentralization in decision-making, with more authority given to Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs).

- Exploration of inter-sectoral mergers where relevant.

- Streamlining coordination functions, focusing on essential outputs such as standard setting, needs assessments and strategic prioritization.

- Strengthening localized coordination and reinforcing the role of national actors, particularly sub-national programme coordination.

- Going forward, it is likely that fewer countries will have HNPs or HNRPs.

- Formal inter-agency coordination mechanisms may be reduced while maintaining sectoral coordination functions.

5. **How will the cluster simplification process affect UNICEF's role as a Cluster Lead Agency (CLA)?**

Until any different formal decision is made, UNICEF retains its CLA responsibilities, ensuring the leadership of Nutrition, WASH, Education (coleader with Save The Children) and the Child Protection Area of responsibility.

The UNICEF Country Office Guide on Cluster Lead Agency Accountabilities and Humanitarian Coordination indicates that[1]:

"*Coordination is one of the overarching commitments established in the CCCs: the organization "Support[s] the leadership and coordination of humanitarian response, along with national and local stakeholders, and in compliance with humanitarian principles." "As a global humanitarian organization, UNICEF has committed to the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) to lead/co-lead four of the clusters/AoR that constitute the current humanitarian architecture: child protection, education, nutrition, and WASH; this global leadership is replicated at a country level. In addition to countries in which clusters have been formally activated, UNICEF plays a coordination role in other humanitarian contexts, by supporting national and sub-national sector coordination, leading or co-leading sectors or other coordination mechanisms, and providing coordination support in its areas of programmatic responsibility*".

However, due to funding constraints, different approaches are emerging at the Country level, including transitioning towards double-hatting or nationalizing coordination roles.

UNICEF must ensure that any changes align with its strategic priorities and mitigates any disruption of coordination effectiveness. UNICEF guidelines, commitments and SOPs still apply, and any updates will be promptly communicated. Before changing positions or responsibilities for cluster capacity at COs, EMOPS needs to be contacted to ensure alignment, as established in the Prioritization Interagency Note.

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[1] UNICEF Country Office Guide on Cluster Lead Agency Accountabilities and Humanitarian Coordination Page 4.

6. **What are the main concerns raised by field Coordinators regarding cluster simplification, and what is the intermediary response to them?**

Field coordinators have expressed concerns that:

- The process is being implemented without adequate consultation with those directly involved in coordination.

- There is a perception that clusters are unfairly blamed for inefficiencies in the broader humanitarian architecture.

- Decisions are being made without a clear understanding of what has worked well and what has not.

- A lack of clear guidance from UNICEF could lead to inconsistent approaches across different countries.

- Double-hatting and nationalisation may lead to loss of institutional knowledge and reduced effectiveness.

These concerns are acknowledged, and anybody can contribute inputs through their sections to UNICEF's leadership in the process. The final managerial decisions will be based on feedback and the rationale for simplification driven by shrunken resources and the need for its optimisation. UNICEF upholds its commitments and recognises that cluster approach is a good system but can be enhanced and improved.

7. **How does funding impact cluster coordination structures?**

There is a risk to cluster capacity to be downsized. Additionally, some countries are witnessing shifts in reporting lines, the removal of dedicated positions, and the appointment of personnel without prior coordination experience. Understanding that prioritisation should not systematically exclude coordination, which is so crucial for an efficient response:

- CO should prioritize funding for cluster/AoR roles.
- Ensure that budget for coordination roles and CLA accountabilities is included in proposals to donors, in HRPs and in HAC.
- Resources for cluster/AoR coordination should include, in addition to post costs, funding of activities in support of cluster coordination functions (travel, equipment, core coordination and leadership activities)
- Elements and criteria for decision making is available to help CO take decisions base on basic considerations, typology of crisis and complexity.

8. **What guidance is available to country offices regarding cluster simplification?**

UNICEF has emphasized that:

- UNICEF will engage and position to maintain leadership in coordination – even under different coordination arrangements.

- Under UNICEF's Core Commitments to Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs), UNICEF has an Overarching Commitment to Coordination to "*Support the leadership and coordination of humanitarian response, along with national and local*

stakeholders, and in compliance with humanitarian principles."[2] If there are changes proposed that might lead to changes in UNICEF's global cluster coordination commitments and accountabilities (including transferring these to another entity) at the national or sub-national level, please consult EMOPS GCCS team as soon as possible.

- Existing guidance and standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the UNICEF Country Office Guide on Cluster Lead Agency Accountabilities and Humanitarian Coordination remain in effect until new directives are issued.

- Advocacy efforts should highlight the value-added of effective coordination, with consolidated achievements of the clusters globally in support of populations in need and the risks associated with abrupt changes.

9. What steps are being taken to ensure that coordination structures remain effective?

- Efforts are being made to document and communicate the achievements of clusters to demonstrate their continued relevance.

- Alternative coordination models, such as co-coordination and Area Based Coordination (ABC), are being explored to maintain effectiveness while adapting to financial constraints. Still not enough evidence is available about their effectivity or impact. OCHA will release a report on May 2025, based on ABC experiences in some contexts.

- Continued engagement with the IASC Principals, EDGs and OPAG chairs along the humanitarian reset process, ensures that the cluster coordinators' voices are heard in decision-making processes.

- Continued engagement with HC, HCT, ICCG, OCHA at country level along the humanitarian reset process, ensures that the cluster coordinators' voices are heard in decision-making processes.

10. What should Coordinators do while new guidance is being considered?

- Maintain current coordination structures and functions as existing UNICEF and IASC guidelines.

- While more flexible coordination structures may be needed, UNICEF remains committed to accountability and leadership role in the areas of Child Protection, Education, Nutrition, and WASH in cluster activated emergencies, particularly in L3/L2 countries. In a resource-limited environment, the system may need to consider 'dual

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[2] "Whether the cluster approach is activated or not, UNICEF plays a key role in both global and country-level inter-agency coordination for its areas of programmatic responsibility.
Where clusters are not activated, UNICEF is accountable for its respective sectors to support coordination mechanisms. This includes supporting coordination functions, the development of assessment and information management systems and tools, capacity-building and prepositioning of supplies." – https://www.corecommitments.unicef.org/ccc-toc

function' by combining sectoral and cluster coordination duties or allowing 'double hatting,' with confidence that measures are in place to maintain objectivity.

- Engage with regional and global coordination bodies to stay informed about ongoing discussions.
- Document challenges and best practices to contribute to future guidance and decision-making.
- Cluster/Sectoral coordinators can play a key role in the prioritization exercise aligning partners and UNICEF.

11. What are the next steps in the cluster simplification process?

- The OPAG chairs are expected to lead the cluster simplification process and provide clearer directives by June 2025.
- Consultations will be held with the broader humanitarian community, including cluster lead agencies and OCHA.
- Any significant decisions regarding cluster restructuring, will be made at the level of the IASC Principals.

GCCS and Cluster Leads are available to receive further questions as this process is ongoing, and they are here to provide support.

Country Offices are encouraged to contact their Regional Emergency Advisors and UNICEF's Global Cluster Coordination Support team at EMOPS for further updates and guidance.

Links to resources:

- UNICEF Country Office Guide on Cluster Agency Accountabilities and Humanitarian Coordination
- Humanifesto
- OCHA Website
- ERC letter to IASC
- Note on prioritization Interagency- UNICEF
- UNICEF Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action