Country-level Cluster Terms and Definitions
Endorsed by the GCCG on 24 March 2023

The Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG) developed this index of terms and definitions to clarify cluster-related coordination structures, agency leadership roles and individual functions[1]. The terms and definitions are based on a review of IASC policy and guidance and experience from the use of the cluster approach since 2005. This document will be reviewed every two years[2] from the date of the GCCG's endorsement, or sooner at the request of a GCCG member, to take into account operational practice.

Coordination Structures

1. **Cluster:** A cluster is a temporary international coordination mechanism formally <u>activated and deactivated</u> by the IASC[3] in a humanitarian emergency, based on a written request from the RC/HC in consultation with the HCT. It is established or activated by the IASC when (i) response and coordination gaps exist due to a sharp deterioration or significant change in the humanitarian situation, and (ii) national response or coordination capacity is unable to meet needs in line with humanitarian principles. Clusters are closed or deactivated by the IASC when one of these two criteria no longer applies. The IASC has categorized humanitarian action into 11 clusters, each led by one to two humanitarian organizations[4]. A cluster is required to fulfil all six core functions[5] and ensure accountability to affected people. Usually based in the capital, it may function in subnational locations deemed necessary by the HC/HCT; in such cases, the cluster at the national-level provides support and direction to the subnational-level(s) and the accountability lines and ways of working between the two levels of the cluster are formalized in terms of reference (ToRs). More information may be found in the [IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level](#) *(2015)[6]*.

2. **Area of Responsibility**: The Global Protection Cluster includes four specialized coordination bodies called Areas of Responsibility (AoRs), which may be replicated at field level as required. These include: Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Mine Action, and Housing, Land and Property (HLP). Functioning as integral parts of the Global Protection Cluster, AoRs contribute to commonly defined goals and outcomes and fulfil equivalent responsibilities as the cluster in their specialized areas.

3. **Strategic Advisory Group:** This body provides advice and guidance on the strategic direction of a cluster[7], including its strategic framework, priorities and workplan. Its establishment is determined by the cluster coordinator(s) in consultation with cluster members[8]; some clusters may not have a Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) if cluster membership is limited. A SAG is chaired by the cluster coordinator(s) and usually consists of a few key cluster members to allow for effective and efficient functioning. Its establishment is formalized in ToRs, which outline its purpose, composition, responsibilities and ways of working. A SAG is expected to ensure regular, two-way flow of information with the broader cluster membership.

4. **Technical Working Group[9]:** This group is small, task-oriented and time-limited. It is established by cluster coordinator(s) only if there is a need to support specific technical or thematic areas of work within and/or between clusters (e.g. to develop minimum standards). The deliverables of a Technical Working Group (TWG) are typically set out in ToRs; the group dissolves when these are completed.

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[1] Initially, the index was developed to guide the annual, country-level coordination mapping exercise.
[2] These terms and definitions will be included as an annex in the next revision of *the IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level.* It is expected that the revised Module will be reviewed and endorsed by the IASC Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG).
[3] As of December 2021, with agreement from the IASC Principals, the ERC delegated this responsibility to the IASC Emergency Directors Group.
[4] The 11 IASC-agreed clusters are as follows: Camp Coordination and Camp Management, Early Recovery, Education, Emergency Telecommunications, Food Security, Health, Logistics, Nutrition, Protection, Shelter, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. The Protection Cluster includes four Areas of Responsibility focused on Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence, Mine Action, and Housing, Land and Property.
[5] The six cluster core functions are: service delivery; informing HC/HCT strategic decision-making; planning and implementing cluster strategies; advocacy; performance monitoring and reporting; and national capacity building in preparedness and contingency planning.
[6] In some politically sensitive contexts, IASC activated clusters are referred to as 'sectors'. Despite the name, all other aspects of these coordination structures are identical to the cluster approach and the terms and definitions included in this document apply. However, if the national authorities refer to government-led coordination structures as 'clusters', these structures are outside of the scope of this document.
[7] For the sake of conciseness, the term *'cluster'* in this document should be understood to include AoRs.
[8] For some CLAs and Global Clusters, the term 'cluster members' refers only to those entities which go through a formal membership application process, are official signatories to a strategy, or provide direct delivery of activities included in the cluster response plan. For them, the term 'cluster partners' refers to any entity that engages in humanitarian action and attends clusters meetings.
[9] Technical working groups also can be known as 'sub-groups'. The term 'sub-group' also can be used to refer to the cluster at subnational levels. When using the term 'sub-group', it is important to further specify which meaning is being applied.

5. **Sector**: While the term sector can refer to a broad range of coordination structures, for the purposes of this document[10], it is a national coordination mechanism led by a government line ministry or national agency[11]. The government is accountable for the functioning of the sector, for the quality of the response and for acting in accordance with international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles. Sectors generally are longer-term, with their duration defined by national policies and declarations.

Leadership Roles of Agencies/Partners[12]

6. **Cluster Lead or Co-lead Agency (CLA)[13][14]:** One or more humanitarian organizations endorsed by the IASC to lead or co-lead a country-level cluster, based on the recommendation of the RC/HC following consultations with the HCT. The Country Representative/Director of the CLA is accountable to the RC/HC for the cluster's functioning and for serving as *Provider of Last Resort*[15]. This includes ensuring that the cluster has adequate resources at both national and subnational levels[16]; at the minimum, the CLA appoints a national-level cluster coordinator and information management officer (IMO). For co-leads, shared accountability as well as roles, responsibilities and ways of working are detailed in a memorandum or letter of understanding (MoU/LoU).

7. **Cluster Co-Coordinating Partner (CCP)**: One or more humanitarian organizations or government entities that is selected by the CLA through a consultative process[17] to provide leadership support to the cluster at national and/or subnational levels. This optional role can strengthen cluster leadership but does not replace the core accountabilities and responsibilities of the designated CLA as noted above. This means that the CCP is not accountable to the RC/HC for the cluster's functioning or for discharging the *Provider of Last Resort* responsibility. It is recognized as a good practice that this role is carried out by a national or local actor. The responsibilities and resourcing of this role are formalized in a MoU or LoU[18].

Individual Functions[19]

8. **Coordinator:** A person appointed by the CLA[20] to coordinate the day-to-day work of the cluster, including ensuring the fulfilment of the cluster's six core functions and accountability to affected people. The responsibilities of the coordinator are detailed in ToRs. S/he reports to the CLA's Country Representative/Director (or delegate) and is accountable to cluster members and affected people. While the CLA may provide additional staffing, this dedicated position – along with the information management officer – is one of two minimum staff requirements of the CLA and is fundamental to the effective functioning of the cluster.

9. **Information Management Officer**: A person appointed by the CLA to establish, operate and maintain information systems for strategic and operational decision-making, including cluster member reporting, data analysis, gap identification, severity mapping, cluster member mapping and other cluster information products. The information management officer reports to the cluster coordinator. While the CLA may provide additional staffing, this dedicated position – along with the cluster coordinator – is one of two the minimum staff requirements of the CLA and is fundamental to the effective functioning of the cluster.

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[10] The term 'sector' can be used interchangeably with the terms 'sectoral working group' or 'sectoral coordination mechanism'. It also can refer to a variety of coordination structures, beyond the definition provided in this document, including those led or co-led by humanitarian organizations. Possibilities include, but are not limited to, transitional mechanisms leading to a cluster's activation or following its deactivation; informal groups established to coordinate technical areas of the response on an *ad hoc* basis; and, coordination mechanisms under UNHCR's refugee coordination model. For more information, please see Annex I of the *IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level*.

[11] As per General Assembly resolution 46/182, the national authorities have the primary responsibility for taking care of those affected by natural disasters and other emergencies that occur on their territory. In-country humanitarian organizations or the relevant Global Cluster may provide government-led sectors with capacity, technical support and/or guidance, if resources and capacity allow.

[12] If a sector has been activated by the IASC and follows the principles of the cluster approach, the word 'cluster' is replaced by 'sector' for these leadership roles.

[13] In this document, CLA refers to a cluster lead agency, cluster co-lead agencies and AoR lead agency.

[14] The IASC may designate a UN agency, NGO, or IFRC/National Society to this role. Country-level CLAs generally mirror global arrangements. However, the RC/HC may propose other organizations that are in a better position to lead or co-lead a country-level cluster after considering organizational capacity, operational presence, and scale-up ability. In some contexts, a government line ministry or national agency may refer to itself as a lead or co-lead but it is not accountable to the RC/HC for the functioning of the cluster.

[15] *Provider of Last Resort (PoLR)* is a commitment by CLAs to call on all relevant humanitarian partners to ensure the provision of services to fill crucial gaps in the response and if this fails, to commit itself to fill the gap itself (or advocate for resources or access to do so). For more information, please see the *IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level (2015)* and the *IASC Operational Guidance on the Concept of 'Provider of Last Resort' (2008)*.

[16] This may include staffing provided by CCPs.

[17] The selection process may include a request for nominations, voting by cluster members, or consultations with the HC/HCT.

[18] Previous versions of this document referred to this role as 'co-chair' which is how some CLAs internally call this role.

[19] If a sector has been activated by the IASC and follows the principles of the cluster approach, the word 'cluster' is replaced by 'sector' for these individual functions.

[20] If a cluster is co-led, both CLAs may appoint coordinators and refer to them as 'co-coordinators'. The term 'co-coordinator' also refers to a person appointed by the CCP, usually a NGO. When using the term 'co-coordinator', it is important to further specify which meaning is being applied.

10. **Co-coordinator[21]:** A person appointed by the CCP to support the day-to-day work of the cluster[22] in collaboration with the cluster coordinator. The co-coordinator reports to the CCP's Country Representative/Director (or delegate). The responsibilities of the co-coordinator, which is normally a dedicated function, are detailed in ToRs. The relationship (and reporting lines) between the cluster coordinator and co-coordinator varies among CLAs and CCPs; it is recognized as good practice that the division of responsibilities and ways of working between the coordinator and co-coordinator are defined in a joint workplan and are governed by the Principles of Partnership[23]. It also is recognized as good practice that the co-coordinator is officer-in-charge on response coordination matters, when the coordinator is absent; administrative and other CLA-specific matters are handled by staff from the CLA.

11. **Subnational Coordinator or Focal Point:** A person identified by the CLA or by the CCP in consultation with the CLA[24] to coordinate the work of and/or provide information management support to a cluster in a specific subnational location. S/he reports to the hiring organization and on cluster issues, to the national-level cluster coordinator. A subnational coordinator or focal point can be a full-time dedicated position or a part-time role carried out by staff based in the area.

12. **SAG member:** An organization selected to be part of the body advising and guiding the cluster's strategic direction; selection processes vary across clusters. SAG membership is limited to a few key cluster members based on criteria such as: active participation in the cluster; operational relevance; technical expertise; demonstrated capacity to contribute strategically and to provide practical support; and commitment to contribute consistently. Permanent SAG members include the cluster coordinator, co-coordinator (if present), and a technical staff member of the CLA. Selected individuals commit to represent the interests of the cluster's membership and not their own organisation's interests.

13. **TWG chair/co-chairs:** One or more persons selected by the cluster coordinator and/or members to lead a technical working group of the cluster based on technical knowledge at individual or agency levels.

14. **Cluster members[25]:** Local, national or international organizations which participate in a cluster at national or subnational levels and adhere to the minimum commitments for cluster participation, as outlined in the *IASC Reference Module on Cluster Coordination*[26]. In particular, cluster members commit to actively participate in the cluster; contribute to the cluster's response plan and activities; work cooperatively with other cluster members; take on leadership responsibilities, as needed; and adhere to humanitarian principles, the Principles of Partnership, cluster-specific guidance and internationally recognized programme standards, including the Secretary-General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse – among a range of commitments.

15. **Observers:** Local, national or international organizations which may engage but do not formally participate in a cluster, contribute to its work or coordinate with the UN due their mandate or independent nature of their functioning (for example ICRC or Médecins Sans Frontières). Observers also can include entities which are not operational in the technical area (for example, donors, academia, private sector companies, OCHA or even other cluster coordinators). They may be invited to cluster meetings on the basis of the unique expertise or perspective they bring and are not required to adhere to all of the minimum commitments for cluster participation, as outlined in the *IASC Reference Module on Cluster Coordination*[27].

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[21] Some CLAs refer to this function as co-facilitator or co-chair. See also footnote 20.
[22] It is recognized as good practice that the CCP carries out the selection process jointly with the CLA or at the minimum, consults the CLA on the shortlisted candidates. Under some arrangements, the CCP may provide technical staff or another function such as the chair of a TWG.
[23] Please see https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/principles-partnership-global-humanitarian-platform-17-july-2007.
[24] It is recognized as good practice that the CCP carries out the selection process jointly with the CLA or at the minimum, consults the CLA on the shortlisted candidates. Under some arrangements, the CCP may provide technical staff.
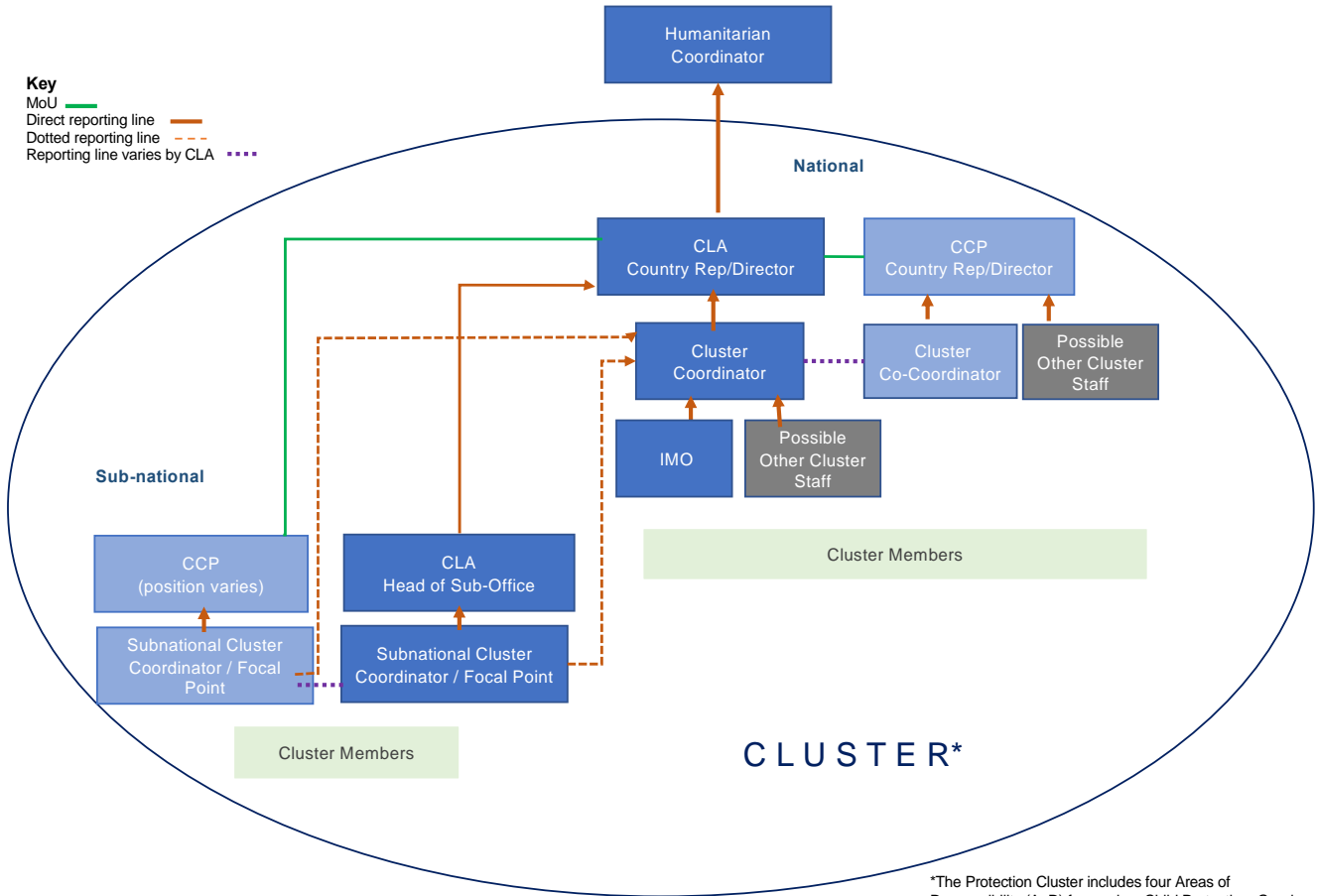[25] Please see footnote 8 for additional information on this definition.
[26] Please see pages 24-25.
[27] Please see pages 24-25.

Visualization of Cluster Leadership Roles, Individual Functions and Reporting Lines

Key
MoU
Direct reporting line
Dotted reporting line
Reporting line varies by CLA

Humanitarian Coordinator

National

CLA
Country Rep/Director

CCP
Country Rep/Director

Cluster Coordinator

Cluster Co-Coordinator

Possible Other Cluster Staff

IMO

Possible Other Cluster Staff

Cluster Members

Sub-national

CCP
(position varies)

CLA
Head of Sub-Office

Subnational Cluster Coordinator / Focal Point

Subnational Cluster Coordinator / Focal Point

Cluster Members

CLUSTER*

*The Protection Cluster includes four Areas of Responsibility (AoR) focused on Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence, Mine Action, and Housing, Land and Property.