

Guidance

CLUSTER SIMPLIFICATION AND ADAPTING IN-COUNTRY COORDINATION

IASC Humanitarian Working Group (HWG)

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endorsed by IASC Principals

Cluster Simplification and Adapting In-Country Coordination

consolidated by the IASC Humanitarian Working Group (HWG) and endorsed by the IASC Principals

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I. Background and purpose

This note follows [interim messages on cluster simplification](#) which were circulated to Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and country operations in September 2025. It recognises clusters' central role for accountable and predictable humanitarian response – by providing structured, sector-specific coordination, engaging vast numbers of national actors, as well as technical standards and advocacy. At the same time, it considers the need for clusters and the wider humanitarian architecture to evolve – by reinforcing national systems and transition planning, engaging local actors more meaningfully, and strengthening multisectoral planning and response, including by supporting area-based coordination (ABC) models.

This note specifically:

- provides further recommendations for adapting in-country coordination to context and reaffirms underlying principles, including on the Provider of Last Resort (PoLR);
- clarifies global lead and accountability arrangements for consolidated global clusters (Shelter, Land, and Site Coordination Cluster; Protection Cluster; and Logistics and Telecommunications Cluster) as well as next steps for the transformation of the Global Cluster on Early Recovery;
- contains principles on how ABC and other coordination structures interact, including terms of reference for ABC groups.

II. Principles for adapting coordination to context

- HCs and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) lead and have flexibility in adapting the country-level coordination setup to ensure it is fit for context. This includes determining which clusters to (de-)activate and/or consolidate, if ABC models are needed and where, and which enabling services may be required.¹
- Simplification must be guided, at all levels, by humanitarian principles and the IASC commitment to the centrality of protection (including upholding International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Human Rights Law (IHRL), and refugee law) to ensure that affected populations, especially the most vulnerable groups, are protected and that assistance is delivered impartially

¹ Enabling services, including the Logistics and Telecommunications Cluster, underpin the effective functioning and delivery of humanitarian operations. This includes facilitating the safe, timely, and efficient delivery of humanitarian programmes and services to affected populations. These services are leveraged by partners to reinforce the necessary infrastructure for response at the local and national levels. As such, enabling services can be leveraged by HCTs, Inter-Cluster Coordination Groups (ICCGs), and ABC groups.

and effectively. Any restructuring should ensure the collective capacity of HCTs to uphold the centrality of protection² and prioritise the needs and rights of civilians in humanitarian crisis, across age, gender, and diversity considerations.

- When taking decisions on adapting in-country coordination, HCs and HCTs should consult with relevant stakeholders – such as local and national actors (LNAs, including non-state civil society and community-based actors as well as state authorities at national and local level), clusters at both country and global level, and Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs) – and factor in coordination needs, capacity, sector-specific needs, and opportunities for improved efficiency.
- Any context-tailored coordination structure should ultimately:
 - preserve a principled, accountable, and predictable humanitarian response;
 - focus on yielding tangible protection outcomes, in line with the IASC commitment to the centrality of protection in humanitarian action and related policy;
 - recognise LNAs as first responders and among them, national and local authorities as primary duty-bearers;³
 - devolve decision-making power and leadership toward frontline and community-level actors, including adequate and diverse representation as well as (co-)coordination roles of LNAs in core structures such as HCTs, clusters, and ABC mechanisms, by default;
 - enhance integrated and multisectoral responses which adhere to technical quality standards and are aligned with preferences expressed by communities, as supported by IASC-wide [standards and tools](#) on Accountability to Affected People (AAP), and informed by systematic consultation with communities;
 - leverage collective capacity and expertise to maximise the quality, reach, and cost-effectiveness of the response;
 - leave behind stronger, more resilient systems that can effectively manage future crises with reduced external support; sustainability considerations should guide decisions on tools, structures, roles, and processes, ensuring they are contextually appropriate and can be maintained beyond the immediate emergency phase.

III. Recommendations

When adapting in-country coordination, HCs and HCTs may consider the following:

Recommendation 1: Simplify cluster coordination to fit operational context

Proposed steps:

1. Initiate alignment with the simplified global cluster setup of 8 clusters (or less, if not all clusters are activated at country level) to advance simplification at country level while preserving predictability and accountability, including via streamlined global support.
2. Determine what technical, operational, and surge support is needed to maintain compliance with sectoral quality standards (e.g., Sphere, Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS)) and achieve collective protection outcomes.
3. Document rationale for adjustments, new governance proposals, and regularly review whether the coordination setup remains fit for purpose – including via annual coordination architecture reviews by HCTs, with results shared with global CLAs and Global Clusters for learning/support.⁴

Guidance to support decision-making:

- Simplifying cluster structures may involve deactivating specific clusters, consolidating existing ones, or ensuring that clusters only remain activated for shorter, response-specific periods.
- Additional cluster consolidation can be informed by the following elements:

² See [IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) (2016) and [related benchmarks](#).

³ See UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991).

⁴ The Transformative Agenda set out a requirement for country operations to carry out periodic Coordination Architecture Reviews – immediately and then again at 3 months for new emergencies, and annually for protracted crises. See [IASC Cluster Coordination Reference Module \(2015\)](#) for further details.

- similar or complementary objectives and/or related issues, including where linked to programmatic mandates of the same CLA (if same as global CLA);
- technical expertise required for a specific type of response;
- prevalence or severity of issues covered by the concerned clusters, as guided by established sectoral standards and parameters;
- common partners and participating organisations;
- similarity in expertise and capacity (improved integration and reduced duplication);
- same counterparts at government level (line ministries) and/or opportunity to align with authorities' internal coordination structures, where appropriate;
- same delivery services and/or distribution mechanisms;
- same target population in terms of age, gender, and specific needs;
- shared resources or common sources of funding;
- improved operational efficiency by pooling resources/efforts (cost-benefit analysis).
- In case additional clusters are considered for consolidation at country level (beyond those already consolidated at global level), establish clear roles and responsibilities to uphold accountability in relation to cluster core functions,⁵ with pre-identified guardrails and escalation pathways where appropriate.
- Ensure that country-specific CLA arrangements are informed by organisations' operational and technical capacity to assume CLA responsibilities and accountabilities, including performing Provider of Last Resort (PoLR) functions (see text box below).
- Build on and strengthen existing national coordination structures and systems when possible.
- Co-locate cluster coordinators and cluster coordination teams where feasible and beneficial, with a view to strengthening multi-sector analysis, planning, response coordination, and monitoring. Pooling data and IM capacities should also be considered in this context.
- Experience sharing between countries is encouraged and will be supported by tracking of key Reset metrics [(currently under development by the IASC Humanitarian Working Group (HWG))].

Endorsement process:

- Before being endorsed by HCTs, proposed adjustments to in-country clusters specifically – for example, any cluster consolidations beyond the global setup and/or cluster (de-)activations – should be consulted with global cluster support teams to ensure adequate support.
- As per current practice, HC/HCTs should continue to put forward final proposals to the IASC Emergency Directors Group (EDG) for endorsement.

⁵ Six cluster core functions: supporting service delivery, informing strategic decision-making, planning and strategy development, monitoring and reporting, advocacy, and contingency planning/capacity-building, *ibid*.

Reaffirmed Principles on the Provider of Last Resort (PoLR)

- **Definition:** “In addition to supporting the six core functions of the cluster, the designated Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) is the PoLR. This means that, where necessary and depending on access, security and availability of funding, **the cluster lead, as PoLR, must be ready to ensure the provision of service required to fulfil critical gaps identified by the cluster and reflected in the HC-led HCT Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan.**”⁶
- The global CLA is accountable⁷ for ensuring predictable PoLR arrangements and agreement on PoLR responsibilities at global level, based on cluster/sectoral standards for service provision, designation, and triggers.
- Organizations designated as global CLAs for the following clusters will continue to serve as PoLRs at global level: WHO for Health; UNICEF for both Nutrition and WASH, respectively; WFP and FAO for Food Security; UNICEF and Save the Children for Education; and WFP for Logistics and Telecommunications.
- For the recently integrated Protection Cluster, UNHCR is the global CLA and global PoLR for Protection. Global PoLR responsibilities for specific programmatic areas of the Cluster rest with the following agencies: UNICEF for Child Protection, UNFPA for Gender-Based Violence, and UNMAS for Mine Action (see Annex 1 for details).
- For the recently integrated Shelter, Land, and Site Coordination Cluster, IFRC and IOM are the global CLAs and global PoLRs, with NRC acting as global PoLR for the Housing, Land and Property (HLP) thematic area (see Annex 1 for details).
- Country-level CLA and PoLR arrangements are determined by the HC/HCT and do not need to mirror global-level arrangements.⁸ The organization with PoLR responsibility at global level should be prepared to perform PoLR functions at country level, unless the HC/HCT designates another organization to assume PoLR responsibilities at country level.
- While country-level cluster co-ordination by local and national actors (LNAs) should become the default where feasible and appropriate, *in principle* an organization that is an LNA and a cluster co-coordinating partner is not required to discharge PoLR responsibilities, as these remain distinct from coordination leadership functions. Decisions on whether LNAs are able to also assume country-level PoLR responsibilities, e.g. via a ‘cluster co-lead’ arrangement (see Recommendation 2 and Annex 4 for definitions), should be taken through consultation and mutual agreement in each context.
- Invoking PoLR support to fill critical gaps is based on a sequence grounded in the subsidiarity principle:
 - Response efforts should be led by LNAs, including local authorities, wherever possible. PoLR functions are designed to support and complement, not replace, national systems and locally-led response.
 - If critical gaps in response remain, the country-level CLA and/or the agency with PoLR responsibility mobilises local and international partners, advocates for additional support, access, and funding, and provides technical coordination support.

⁶ IASC Cluster Coordination Reference Module (2015)

⁷ As per the IASC Cluster Coordination Reference Module (2015), PoLR responsibilities at global level are linked to cluster leadership and accountability. The global CLA remains accountable to the ERC for ensuring predictable response arrangements, including PoLR, whether exercised directly or through agreed sharing arrangements. PoLR responsibilities at global level include: maintain resource pipeline, advocacy, and preparedness, including surge capacity as required, to support the country-level PoLR; proactively engage to strengthen the capacity of the local PoLR; step in to provide life-saving delivery, including at last mile, as feasible by access/context.

⁸ At country level, the CLA is accountable to the HC for cluster leadership and for ensuring that PoLR responsibilities are fulfilled. PoLR functions may be carried by one or more agencies that are not the CLA, without transferring overall accountability from the CLA. PoLR responsibilities at country level may include: coordinate with sectoral/intersectoral/ABC mechanisms to detect the most critical gaps in response and service provision early; step in to provide life-saving delivery of assistance and services, including at last mile, as feasible by access/context; if unable to do so, seek timely support from the global PoLR.

- If critical gaps persist at country-level, as partners are unable or unwilling to address them, and affected populations face significant risks, the country-level CLA and/or the agency with PoLR responsibility, provides time-bound and focused live-saving support, conditional to access and resources. When direct action is not feasible, the CLA and/or the agency with PoLR responsibility must continue advocacy and resource mobilisation efforts.
- When these efforts have been exhausted, invoking PoLR action by the global CLA and/or agency with PoLR responsibility serves as a safety net, ensuring continuity of critical services.
- Amongst others, this means that at country level, a shared understanding of “critical gaps” and triggers for PoLR recourse should be:
 - consulted at all relevant coordination levels (ABC groups, clusters, inter-cluster coordination groups, HCT) to uphold Reset ambitions towards ‘locally led and globally supported’ coordination and response;
 - discussed with the global CLA/PoLR in order to inform coordinated response preparedness, early action, and long-term planning for reducing needs and risks;
 - based on globally agreed standards such as SPHERE, etc.;
 - shared at global level through the CLA, to support system-wide learning, preparedness, and accountability for PoLR implementation.
- CLAs, with agencies carrying PoLR responsibility, should develop and maintain mechanisms ensuring transparency and systematic reporting on the fulfilment of PoLR responsibilities at both country and global levels.
- CLAs should adopt innovative, cost-efficient approaches — such as shared capacities and services — to strengthen PoLR capabilities amid persistent underfunding and ensure as multisectoral and coordinated responses as possible. CLAs should also proactively engage with development actors so that structural causes leading to persistent gaps in response are reduced.
- CLA responsibilities related to cluster coordination capacity and technical leadership/sectoral expertise remain as previously established under the [IASC Cluster Coordination Reference Module \(2015\)](#).

Supporting documents and tools:

- Previous [interim messages](#) outlined the consolidation of 11 clusters and 4 areas of responsibility (AoR) to 8 clusters at global level.
- See Annex 1 for **lead/accountability arrangements** and **proposed implementation steps at country level** for globally consolidated clusters: (1) **Protection**, (2) **Shelter, Land, and Site Coordination** (SLSC), and (3) **Logistics and Telecommunications**.

Recommendation 2: Ensure local and national actors (LNA) co-coordinate clusters by default, wherever feasible and appropriate⁹

- Work towards establishing LNA co-coordination of clusters at national and subnational level, with effective decision-making authority, in accordance with cluster governance principles.¹⁰
- Advocate for and prioritise flexible, multi-year, and predictable funding to LNAs, including for local NGOs, small Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and Women-led Organisations (WLOs), which can cover coordination and operational costs.
- Establish capacity exchange (institutional and technical), mentoring and coaching, and other forms of support from the global level (for advocacy, fundraising, etc.) as needed.
- Prioritise representation and leadership roles of WLOs and Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) in all clusters and Strategic Advisory Groups (SAG) through practical measures to address participation barriers for smaller or specialized organizations (e.g. language, connectivity, meeting formats, data requirements).
- For sharing cluster leadership with LNAs, options include that of a 'cluster co-coordination' arrangement (no PoLR responsibility) or a 'cluster co-lead' arrangement (entailing shared accountability, including PoLR responsibility); see Annex 4 for further information on terms and definitions.

Supporting documents and tools:

- See [practical examples](#) on promoting LNA co-coordination throughout the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) and cluster processes.
- See Annex 4 for a **glossary of key coordination terms** developed by the Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG).

Recommendation 3: Enable and scale up area-based coordination (ABC) at sub-national level, where relevant

- The recommendations below are based on Terms of Reference for ABC (Annex 2) which were drafted by the GCCG and revised by the HWG, with feedback from country operations. More detailed guidance on the interlinkages between ABC and clusters, sectors, ICCGs, and national systems is being co-created with country operations and will be shared in the course of 2026; it will also address issues related to resourcing and support; information management considerations; and linkages with development actors and other coordination systems.
- In the interim, when adapting coordination, HCs and HCTs should consider that ABC and cluster coordination models differ in purpose, scope, and function. Depending on crisis setup and resources, both models should co-exist and complement each other:
 - ABC models are operational and used to coordinate multisectoral response in a specific geographical area at subnational level (typically administrative level 2 to 4; see definition below), drawing from the work done in sectors and clusters; ABC groups should be led and co-led by national and local NGOs by default, where feasible and based on operational presence and capacity;

⁹ Wherever and whenever possible, national, and subnational authorities should lead or co-lead sectoral and intersectoral coordination mechanisms. However, acknowledging that many of the prioritised humanitarian response contexts are highly complex emergencies, where non-state armed groups control some/significant parts of the country, the role of civil society in holding government to account, leading and/or participating is equally important. In the contexts where authorities are willing and able to uphold humanitarian principles, coordination structures should act in support of national/subnational efforts, with a view to a full transition and deactivation of clusters as soon as possible.

¹⁰ Cluster coordinators and co-coordinators do not take decisions unilaterally. Their role is to inform, guide, and facilitate collective decision-making with cluster members, in line with agreed governance arrangements. Strategic decisions may also involve the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG), depending on country-level governance structures and the type of decision required.

- Clusters coordinate partners and support technical standards; analysis, planning, technical oversight, monitoring; and advocacy for their respective sectors and for the humanitarian response at crisis-wide/national level and, as required, at sub-national level. In addition, clusters work across sectors to develop joint strategies, protection risks analyses, operational guidance, and standards that enable coherent and integrated approaches, typically supported by inter-cluster coordination.
- Both coordination models offer a range of complementary tools that can be leveraged in a practical and flexible way, depending on context. They are not mutually exclusive and at the same time, they need to be closely interlinked to work hand in hand and achieve results.

With the above in mind, *in principle*:

- **HCs/HCTs should:**
 - Decide when and where ABC structures are needed based on humanitarian priorities, protection risks, and operational realities, including the number and partnership structures of humanitarian actors in specific geographic areas (administrative level 2-4).
 - Endorse the geographic coverage, expected duration, and core functions of ABC groups through a clear concept note or ToR.
 - Set expectations for how ABC structures and (sub-)national coordination bodies such as HCTs, clusters, and ICCGs interact.
 - Provide strategic oversight and resource mobilisation to enable ABC functionality and sustainability.
 - Ensure that community feedback, channelled through ABC and/or clusters, directly informs ICCG and HCT discussions and decision-making.
- **Inter-Cluster Coordination Groups (ICCGs) should:**
 - Within the frame set by the HCT, support the definition of technical modalities for information exchange, joint analysis, including protection risk analyses, and planning between ABC and both cluster and inter-cluster mechanisms, especially if and where ICCG and/or cluster structures exist at sub-national level.
 - Ensure ABC priorities feed into national analysis, planning, and funding processes, maintaining two-way information flow.
 - Support harmonisation of crisis-wide contingency and response planning processes.
 - Establish and maintain adequate representation of ABC actors in inter-cluster/agency coordination structures, particularly when the latter exist at sub-national level.
- **Clusters/Sectors should:**
 - Provide technical standards and sectoral/multi-sectoral guidance to partners and ABC groups for quality assurance, including supporting operational decision-making on levels of service packages, managing referrals, and establishing counter-referral mechanisms.
 - Coordinate sectoral response at subnational level (administrative level 1) when needed, ensuring adherence to humanitarian principles and close coordination with ABC groups.
 - Ensure sectoral needs assessments and protection risk analyses are timely, comprehensive, and aligned with inter-cluster assessment methodologies, meet agreed quality standards, include affected populations' perspectives, and feed directly into response analysis and prioritization.
 - Facilitate and share sectoral data and service mapping – including with ABC groups to enable integrated, multi-sectoral response.
 - Integrate area-level priorities into crisis-wide cluster/sector strategies and support joint assessments and planning where relevant.

- **ABC Groups should:**

- Coordinate multi-sectoral operational response and risk mitigation within their defined geographic area (administrative level 2- 4), ensuring adherence to humanitarian principles and inclusion of local authorities where possible and in coordination with clusters.
- Conduct joint needs assessments, multi-sectoral analysis, and contingency planning aligned with national strategies and (cluster/sectoral) standards, with technical support from clusters as required.
- Report any identified sectoral gaps and priorities to relevant (sub-national) clusters/sectors, particularly where these inform resource allocation, response scale-up, or escalation decisions.
- Implement two-way communication with affected communities and channel feedback to ICCGs, clusters, and HCTs.
- Liaise with clusters/sectors for technical guidance/support and, where possible, development actors present in their area of operation to inform transition planning.
- Ensure close consultation with local authorities, wherever possible.

Definition of Area-Based Coordination:

For the purposes of humanitarian coordination under the IASC, area-based coordination (ABC) is defined as a light, operational coordination and response structure or mechanism focused on a distinct subnational geographic area. It is chaired by an organisation which is present in the geographic area; has the capacity to coordinate other actors to deliver a humanitarian response that is principled, accountable, well-coordinated, and context-specific; and can interact with local authorities. At its core, ABC is multi-sectoral and participatory, ensuring the subnational response is tailored to local needs. An ABC group is linked to relevant IASC coordination structures in the country, ensuring alignment with, and support from, the wider in-country coordination system. It is primarily focused on coordinating the identification of needs, protection risks, and the delivery of goods and services in response to priorities and preferences of affected people. It leads operational humanitarian planning relevant to that geographic area and contributes to national strategic planning (i.e. HNRP), in close coordination with clusters/ sectors.

Supporting documents and tools:

- See Annex 2: **Terms of Reference** for ABC
- See Annex 3: **Frequently Asked Questions** on ABC

Recommendation 4: Plan for transitions from day one and regularly assess the need for cluster deactivations

- Clusters may initiate transitions and eventually be deactivated at different times based on context. Transition planning must ensure protection and preparedness capacities are not weakened, with residual humanitarian needs and protection risks clearly monitored during and after handover to avoid response gaps. Beyond technical cluster de-activation, structured transitions may imply continued inter-agency coordination and support to government-led response to address residual needs/risks over specified timeframes.
- Annual humanitarian coordination architecture reviews, led by HCs, are critical for (re-)assessing the need for retaining in-country clusters and the feasibility of transitioning coordination structures using institutionalised benchmarks. Annual country-level cluster coordination performance monitoring (CCPM) may feed into this process.
- Beyond clusters, the Annual Review of Operations by the Emergency Directors Group (EDG) will also be leveraged to discuss required changes to in-country coordination structures.

- Government and other local and national actors should be engaged early in leadership roles to build ownership and ensure sustainability of coordination structures. Capacity sharing, exchange, and mentoring must be built into transition plans and given enough time prior to deactivation. Ensuring LNA co-ordination of clusters may be one of the benchmarks in transitioning planning.
- HCs remain accountable for initiating cluster deactivation by consulting the HCT, CLAs, development actors and national authorities, ensuring alignment with humanitarian principles and the HNRP.
- Deactivation requires a phased, well-communicated handover, including transfer of information management systems and responsibilities.
- Transitions can take place in contexts where humanitarian needs might persist and where programming continues under different coordination arrangements. In such cases, cluster deactivation should not lead to programmatic de-prioritisation, and efforts to link with peace and development mechanisms should be strengthened and operationalised.

Supporting documents and tools:

- [IASC Guidance on Cluster Transition and Deactivation](#) (2015)
- [IASC Cluster Coordination Reference Module \(revised 2015\)](#), particularly pages 33-41
- Additional resources, such as a checklist and a sample deactivation letter, can be provided by OCHA.

IV. Annexes

- [Annex 1: Lead and Accountability Arrangements for Consolidated Clusters](#)
- [Annex 2: Standard Terms of Reference for Area-Based Coordination](#)
- [Annex 3: Frequently Asked Questions on Area-Based Coordination](#)
- [Annex 4: Country-Level Cluster Terms and Definitions](#)
- **Annex 5: Global Clusters and Cluster Lead Agencies (visual), p. 10**

Annex 5: Global Clusters and Cluster Lead Agencies

