Evaluation of UNICEF’s Cluster Lead Agency Role in Humanitarian Action (CLARE)

Under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee cluster approach, UNICEF is the global lead agency for nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene and, with Save the Children, co-lead agency for education. UNICEF is also the focal point agency for the child protection area of responsibility and, with UNFPA, co-focal point agency for the gender-based violence area of responsibility.

Launched in 2005, the cluster approach seeks to address gaps in emergency response and improve the quality of humanitarian assistance through greater predictability and accountability, and stronger partnership among humanitarian actors. In 2010, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) initiated the Transformative Agenda to further improve the cluster system.

In emergencies where the cluster approach is applied, UNICEF is requested to lead coordination efforts in certain sectors or areas of responsibility (AORs). At the global level, UNICEF has the responsibility for establishing broad partnerships and promoting greater accountability for cluster results. At the country level, UNICEF is committed to ensuring there is an effective coordination mechanism operational for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), nutrition, education, child protection, and gender-based violence.

Together, the five clusters and AORs led or co-led by UNICEF represent one-third of the IASC cluster system.

To undertake these responsibilities, UNICEF has invested significant time and resources, and as an institution, UNICEF needs to understand how it is performing as a Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) and how it could improve.

Evaluation question
The evaluation of UNICEF’s CLA role primarily addressed the following overarching question:

How well does UNICEF carry out its CLA role and what should it do for the future?

The evaluation was conducted from January to June of 2013 by external evaluators.

For more information, visit: www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_CLARE.html
Objective and rationale
The objective of the evaluation was to assess, as systematically and objectively as possible, the performance of UNICEF as a CLA. The evaluation followed a rigorous methodology to collect and analyse data. Questions were designed to assess criteria related to relevance and appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, coverage and sustainability. Eight country case studies were selected to cover a diversity of capacity levels and operating contexts including: Burkina Faso, El Salvador, Haiti, Nepal, the Philippines, South Sudan, the State of Palestine, and Tajikistan. The findings and recommendations seek to enhance learning by drawing lessons, identifying opportunities and providing information for UNICEF to improve its capacities, systems and approaches for exercising its CLA role at the country and global levels.

Evaluation findings
Overall, the evaluation found evidence that UNICEF has invested significantly in implementing its CLA role since the IASC cluster system was setup and is increasingly implementing its CLA roles well.

The evaluation concluded, however, that UNICEF’s ability to carry out its CLA role is limited because it is undertaking its activities in more situations and over a prolonged period of time above and beyond the role that activated clusters are designed to play. This cluster “mission creep” stretches resources by spreading efforts and resources over more countries. There are no clear, established priorities that are based on risk, and this limits the ability of Global Clusters to provide high-quality support.

This cluster “mission creep” is driven by internal and external stakeholders, including donors and national governments with competing interests, and contextual factors such as gaps in non-cluster systems for preparedness and sectoral development coordination. While this is linked to how the overarching system has employed clusters, UNICEF’s own lack of consistency in advocating for cluster rationalization at country level is also a factor.

Key area 1: External coordination performance
External coordination performance was reviewed against three essential elements:
- Overall effectiveness
- Coverage
- Partnership

The main findings were:
- Partners believe UNICEF is broadly effective at exercising its country cluster coordination responsibilities.
- Human resources, institutional support and leadership are the primary factors influencing UNICEF effectiveness as a CLA.
- UNICEF clusters are having positive effects on geographic and thematic coverage. Subnational coordination structures have been established, although concerns were noted about their financial and staffing sustainability. Operations research and advocacy have improved thematic coverage.
- The partnership aspects of UNICEF clusters are strongest at country level. UNICEF adheres to principles of partnership at country level, while Global Cluster/AOR members raised concerns regarding transparency and clarity of roles and responsibilities. Country-level partners had questions regarding UNICEF representation of clusters at humanitarian country teams distinctly from its institutional interests.

Figure 1: External Coordination Performance

87% of respondents across clusters say UNICEF is ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ effective.

Key area 2: Internal CLA performance
Internal CLA performance was reviewed against four key elements:
- Establishment of the Global Cluster Coordination Unit (GCCU)
- Policy and performance monitoring
- The role of regional offices
- Comparative advantages of UNICEF

The main findings were:
- There are clear indications that the consolidation of Global Cluster staff under the GCCU is beginning to yield positive results across all of UNICEF’s cluster operations.
- UNICEF’s policies and systems have increasingly integrated the CLA roles, but CLA performance monitoring systems remain limited. Country office reporting remains voluntary and limited to capturing inputs and outputs.
- The role of regional offices related to CLA responsibilities remains unclear. UNICEF policies articulate a coordination mandate, but have not led to clear regional accountability mechanisms.
- UNICEF’s CLA roles were found to broadly match its comparative advantages in programming. However, Global Cluster members question UNICEF’s programme strengths and ability to leverage its coordination skills.
**Figure 2: Internal CLA Performance**

70% of UNICEF country staff surveyed say they have seen moderate or substantial improvement in global coordination and leadership.

**Key area 3: Human resources performance**

Human resources (HR) performance was reviewed against two main elements:

- Surge capacity and recruitment systems
- Cluster coordination capacity development

The main findings were:

- **Surge capacity and recruitment systems for clusters have improved since 2010.** However, surge capacity systems remain fragmented and there is no overarching strategy.
- **Double-hatting (the practice of performing several organizational functions) remains prevalent and diminishes effectiveness.** In active clusters, only 28 per cent of staff work full time on cluster activities.
- **Cluster coordinator capacity development is limited** to classroom-based awareness training and no systematic efforts are in place to build awareness and consistency of practice among country office representatives.

**Figure 3: HR Performance**

Surge capacity and recruitment systems have improved since 2010, but fragmented management and double hatting diminish effectiveness.

**Key area 4: Scope and boundary**

Scope and boundary issues were reviewed against two key elements:

- The scope of UNICEF’s cluster responsibilities
- The operational role of UNICEF’s clusters and AORs

The main findings were:

- **Effects on lasting coordination and national response capacity is limited** by a lack of guidance on transition, decentralized authority and funding, and an unclear role for clusters.
- **Clusters are increasingly filling gaps beyond emergency coordination.** Of the 34 UNICEF clusters active in 2012, only 14 are operated fully in line with the IASC cluster objectives and guidelines (time bound and emergency focused).
- This is cluster “mission creep” and significantly affects UNICEF’s ability to perform well as a CLA in terms of relevance, predictability, partnership, efficiency and sustain-ability.

**Figure 4: Scope & Boundaries**

Clusters increasingly fill gaps beyond emergency coordination. Of 34 UNICEF clusters active in 2012:

- 14 were operated fully in line with IASC cluster guidance.
- 10 were correctly activated but operated as a long term sectoral coordination mechanism.
- 10 were activated in place of sectoral coordination, with no formal IASC activation.

**Key area 5: Cost-effectiveness, value for money and efficiency**

Cost-effectiveness, value and efficiency were reviewed against three key elements:

- Cost-effectiveness and value for money
- Linkages with other internal and external initiatives
- Co-leadership arrangements

The main findings were:

- **Staff and partners strongly perceive that the outcomes of cluster work justify their organization’s investment.**
- **Cross-cluster coordination was found to be insufficient and integrated programming approaches remain the exception rather than the rule.**
- **Co-leadership arrangements have generally improved since 2012,** although some challenges remain due to members’ expectations and capacity imbalances.

**Figure 5: Cost Effectiveness**

In surveys, 83% of UNICEF country staff and 84% of country partners state cluster outcomes justify their investments.
The way forward

In a system as decentralized and with as many diverse stakeholders as the cluster system, inertia and fragmentation can be key challenges.

There are some positive trends in UNICEF’s performance as a CLA, and the efforts behind these areas of improving performance should be continued.

In the areas where UNICEF is doing less well as a CLA, additional efforts are required. Some are fully within UNICEF’s control, while others require UNICEF to promote change within the IASC and the humanitarian teams at country level.

Evaluation conclusions and recommendations on potential areas for improvement

- Develop a “cluster-ready” initiative to increase country office preparedness for cluster activation in high-risk countries.
- Strengthen UNICEF-wide management systems to support the CLA role, including strengthening the role of regional offices and better connecting country representatives to a global CLA strategic management structure.
- Develop an integrated strategy for human resources surge capacity and UNICEF coordination staff development.
- Increase coherence (interpretation and articulation) and then fidelity (understanding and consistent application) through UNICEF CLA policy and practice.
- Mitigate the use of clusters in inappropriate scenarios by developing models and tools for non-cluster coordination, including transition points for country offices, and establish clarity on the role of clusters, if any, for national capacity-building to ensure efficient and fit-for-purpose coordination approaches.