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A REFLECTION FROM THE IFRC

Inter-agency Coordination in Humanitarian Responses

The IASC cluster system — its origins, the Humanitarian reforms, its strengths and weaknesses, and principled action and localisation

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies · SLSC Cluster co-led globally by IFRC and IOM

What is the IASC?

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee is the longest-standing and highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system. It unites the executive heads of 19 UN and non-UN organizations and consortia to set policy, agree strategic priorities and mobilise resources in response to humanitarian crises.



THE ONLY FORUM THAT BRINGS TOGETHER:

UN agencies

OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, IOM, UNDP, FAO and others

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

IFRC and ICRC

International & Local NGO & Consortia

ICVA, InterAction and SCHR, etc

World Bank

Bridging humanitarian and development

The principles that hold it together

All IASC actors, the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and NGO are bound by four core humanitarian principles.

Humanity

The need to act in order to prevent and alleviate human suffering. Respect for human dignity and helping people, regardless of who and where they are—is paramount to everything we do.

Impartiality

Makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. Relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

No side taken in hostilities or engagement at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

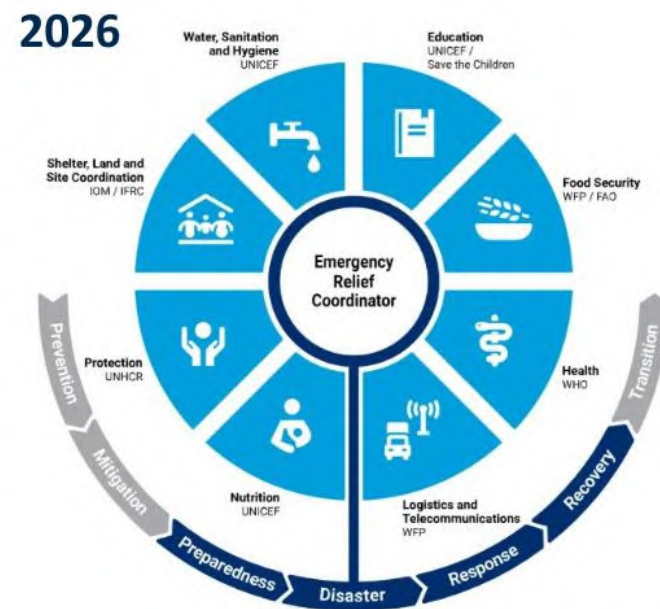
The principle of independence means that the actors must resist any interference—be it political, ideological or economic—capable of diverting it from embodying the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality.

Not theoretical: these principles preserve the “humanitarian space” needed to negotiate safe access with all parties to a crisis.

Cluster system - an inter-sectoral approach

Created in September 2005 through the Humanitarian Response Review, after crises such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Darfur exposed fragmented, duplicated response and weak engagement with national actors.

- 1 Predictability**
A named lead agency for each sector, so roles are clear and no critical gap goes unfilled (PoLR).
- 2 Accountability**
Clear lines of responsibility for coordination and results — to the HC/HCT, to partners and to affected people.
- 3 Responsibility**
The lead acts as Provider of Last Resort — harmonising standards, avoiding duplication and gaps.
- 4 Partnership**
Brings the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs together, grounded in the Principles of Partnership.



IASC, 2026.

The Humanitarian Reset (2025)

Phase One

Saving Lives

Regroup around saving lives, streamline coordination, and renew humanitarian leadership.

Phase Two — four priorities

Define focus on the greatest needs

Deliver timely, streamlined response

Devolve put people & local actors at the heart

Defend principles, civilians, humanitarian space

Nepal — a full handover to national leadership

Cluster-like mechanisms were inherited from the 2015 earthquake activation. After co-led transitional arrangements (2016–2021), a 2022 request moved to local leadership: the Nepal Red Cross Society now co-leads the Shelter Cluster-like mechanism with national authorities, backed by IFRC and the Global Shelter Cluster — coordinating earthquake and flood responses, including preparedness and contingency planning.



Sectorial Coordination in Practice



< 1% → 100%

Coordination is under 1% of overall response cost — yet 100% of delivery depends on it. It is not a cost to be minimised; it is the infrastructure that makes every other euro work.

67%

of partners identify response gaps through the platform

30–40%

less duplication in shelter / NFI distributions

40%

shorter planning through joint assessments

Activation and preparedness

Clusters activate at the request of the Humanitarian Country Team, together with the government. On activation, agencies scale up funding, pooled funds are put in place, and more actors are able to engage.

IN RECURRING OR PROTRACTED CRISES, CLUSTERS STAY ACTIVE YEAR-ROUND

- Contingency planning ahead of hurricane and typhoon seasons
- Preparedness and prepositioning of relief stocks
- Building the response capacity of actors
- Systems ready to scale the moment early-warning alerts trigger



7 Core Cluster Functions

1 Supporting service delivery

A central platform where all partners can meet align priorities, discuss technical challenges, disseminate information, liaise with other sectors etc.

2 Informing strategic decisions

Coordinated joint assessments of needs, gaps and priorities to guide the HC/HCT.

3 Planning & implementing strategy

Strategic framework, technical standards, and resource mobilisation (incl. pooled funds).

4 Monitoring & evaluating

Track implementation and results; recommend corrective action.

5 Building national capacity

Preparedness, contingency planning and disaster risk reduction.

6 Supporting robust advocacy

Key messages, campaigns and legal issues, community communication.

7. Accountability to affected people

Feedback and complaints mechanisms; community participation throughout.



IN PRACTICE — SRI LANKA

IFRC led Shelter Cluster in Sri Lanka used advocacy and joint data analysis to guide HC/HCT advocacy and change a Ministerial decree, and increase the Government disaster response package to include communities initially excluded from the emergency housing scheme.

Impact: over 150,000 people will benefit from this collective advocacy conducted by the Cluster.

Civil–military coordination

Humanitarian organizations, State security forces and non-State armed groups increasingly operate in the same space in emergencies. OCHA and UN Civil-Military Coordination formalises this essential dialogue and coordination space to protect and promote humanitarian principles, when appropriate, pursue common goals. It also reduce the risk of misunderstandings or conflicts between military and civilian personnel, and ensure that humanitarian assistance is provided in a way that is coordinated and consistent with international humanitarian law. This interaction ranges from coexistence to cooperation. Good coordination between the humanitarian community and the military requires information sharing and a clear sense of the division of tasks.

Facilitating humanitarian access

1

Effective dialogue between these entities is critical to obtain and maintain humanitarian access to people in need and ensure their protection.

Information sharing

2

Exchange real-time data on security threats, access issues, road-infrastructure damage and port status.

Protecting civilians

3

Ensure military operations do not inadvertently hinder or endanger humanitarian relief efforts.

Policy guidance

4

Formalises the essential dialogue between humanitarian operational partners and armed actors. The objective is to protect and promote humanitarian principles, maintain humanitarian access, and preserve the civilian character of humanitarian assistance

Cross-border responses – IASC and IFRC approaches

The cluster system is built for in-country crises. When people cross a border, a parallel model applies. IFRC and movement wide response on route based approaches and cross-border situation.

IASC Cluster system · UN-OCHA-led

For internally displaced people (IDPs) and disaster-affected populations inside their own country. Sector leads, predictability and Provider of Last Resort.

Refugee Coordination Model · UNHCR-led

Activates when people cross a border and become refugees. Where both models coexist, OCHA and UNHCR agree which one prevails.

CROSS-BORDER: MULTIPLE SYSTEMS UNDER ONE UMBRELLA

In cross-border and regional crises, umbrella arrangements have merged coordination systems — for example the Whole of Syria approach and the Venezuela regional platform (R4V).

IFRC CROSS-BORDER APPROACH

The IFRC has a [Global Route-Based Migration Programme](#) operationalization cross border response and coordination, which connects the efforts of member RCRC National Societies. Instead of isolated country-by-country responses, it tracks and supports migrants across entire geographic routes, ensuring continuity of care, humanitarian assistance, and legal protection regardless of legal status.

Conclusions

Critical areas for effective inter-sectoral & inter-agency coordination

- Inter-agency & inter-sectoral platform creating: one stop shop for coordination
- One space & one voice with governments connecting different levels of national to local government
- Information management as a shared “control room for response gaps and avoids duplication
- Harmonised standards across many actors

- Red Cross Red Crescent Movement Coordination
- Cross-border : Global Route-Based Migration Programme
- Life saving coordination needs to link into long-term needs, building systems and structures
- Whole-of-society reach, national to local





Thank you

