Implementation of the WASH Cluster Approach
Good Practice and Lessons Learned

Final Draft Version

The Global WASH Learning Project
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Summary

As the roll-out of the cluster approach gains pace in the humanitarian aid sector, this paper takes stock of the main achievements and challenges experienced in the first emergencies to utilise the cluster approach in the WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene promotion) sector. The research has considered the effectiveness of coordination processes and resultant benefits, such as collective management of programming and improved quality of service delivery. This paper includes some analysis of achievement of the objectives of the cluster approach - to enhance leadership, accountability, predictability and partnership. However, there is insufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the impact of the WASH clusters on the overall effectiveness of humanitarian response.

Drawing on evaluations of the WASH clusters at country and global level, this paper draws a number of important conclusions:

- Cluster coordination capacity has clearly been developed in the WASH sector
- Information Management is still an important challenge
- Development of effective partnerships at country level is critical
- Coherent roll-out needs strong global – country linkages and increased inter-cluster coordination
- Operation & Maintenance of initiatives at global and country levels is a major consideration

These conclusions form the basis of recommendations for the continued roll-out of the cluster approach in the WASH sector.

Introduction

This paper forms part of a learning initiative by the Global WASH Cluster with the aim of supporting increased use and effectiveness of the ‘cluster approach’ within the sector. It provides a synthesis of good practices, lessons learned and recommendations for the roll-out of the cluster approach in the WASH sector. The analysis draws upon performance reviews carried out by the Global Cluster Learning Project, self-evaluations, independent evaluations, internal and peer reviews.

About the Cluster Approach

The ‘cluster approach’ was introduced shortly after the publication of the 2005 Humanitarian Response Review, as one of the ‘three pillars’ of Humanitarian Reform, aimed at strengthening the humanitarian coordination system, humanitarian financing and the effectiveness of humanitarian response, with an emphasis on partnership to support each of these areas of reform. The IASC (Inter-Agency Standing Committee) principals agreed that the cluster approach should be used in all major new emergencies and that there should be a phased ‘roll-out’ of the cluster approach in on-going emergencies. The WASH Cluster is one of eleven clusters used in emergency response.

As stated in the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) Terms of Reference for the Cluster Lead at country level, the overall aim of the cluster approach is to strengthen the effectiveness of humanitarian response through specific objectives to enhance leadership, accountability, predictability and partnership within the sector. The Global WASH Cluster aims to provide guidance and support to country level WASH clusters through strengthening system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies.
UNICEF is the WASH Cluster Lead agency at global level and the default Lead at country level. UN agencies, INGOS active in WASH sector emergency response, as well as representatives from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are represented in the Global WASH Cluster. The same actors, along with Government representatives, other INGOs and national NGOs present in a specific context, are represented at country level. Although it has not been common, actors other than UNICEF can sometimes take the lead role at country level.

The Time is Right to Capitalise on Lessons Learned

The use of the cluster approach has extended to over twenty countries in the first three years. This number is set to double by the end of 2009 (see Figure 1 below), providing a good indication that the inception phase is over and full roll-out of the cluster approach has now commenced. The Learning Project has carried out seven reviews and synthesised WASH learning from three external reviews / self-evaluations, totalling a good sample of learning from ten country reviews, including both rapid-onset emergency and chronic emergency contexts. This learning can be very valuable to support the continued roll-out of the cluster approach.

It should be noted that the time lag between roll-out at country level and implementation of Global WASH projects has had negative consequences that can be seen throughout the following sections, as we consider performance at country and global level. However, the time is now right to focus on positive strategies to operationalise the cluster approach, actively disseminating learning and ensuring good practices are shared and duplicated for the benefit of all countries utilising the cluster approach.

Figure 1: WASH Cluster Activity (Projected to 2009)

WASH Cluster reviews organised in Countries highlighted in red, Information from countries in bold used in this report.
This paper presents a meta-analysis of WASH Cluster performance in seven countries, including three roll-out countries (Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic) and four rapid-onset emergencies (Indonesia and Bangladesh). Reviews were carried out in each of these countries, using an inter-agency approach where possible, and assessing performance in the following areas:

- Did the Cluster Approach strengthen accountability, predictability and partnership within the sector?
- Did the Cluster approach allow improved management of programming and procedures for improved quality of service delivery in the WASH sector?
- Did it improve Coordination processes in the sector?

The performance measures were developed with reference to the IASC Generic Terms of Reference for Cluster / Sector Leads and have been incorporated within the WASH Performance Review Tool. Figure 2 provides a summary of findings from the reviews and the next sections provide an analysis of successes, good practices and common challenges, based on these findings.

**Figure 2: Strengths and Weaknesses of Country WASH Clusters**

Successes and Good Practices at Country Level

The analysis shows that coordination mechanisms have improved in all five countries, with national / local agencies involved in the majority of cases. There have been some important developments with regard to the formalisation of governance structures. For example, in Bangladesh a representative coordination system has been established, including a Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) and Technical Working Groups (TWIGs).

The capacity of the cluster to raise funds for the sector was often effective, with advocacy effectively utilised to support fundraising. For example, in DRC the WASH Cluster managed to significantly increase funds raised by presenting clear objectives and priorities to donors.

There are a number of examples of good practices emerging through use of the cluster approach in the WASH sector. For example, one of the most significant achievements of the country WASH Clusters is that some aspects of the cluster approach have been institutionalised by local agencies, consolidating partnerships within the sector. In Uganda, existing Governmental coordination mechanisms have been adapted as a result of being integrated with the WASH Cluster. In Bangladesh, the Department of Public Health Engineering has recognised the value of the cluster approach in strengthening service delivery and has incorporated aspects of the cluster approach into its emergency preparedness plans. Figure 3 provides examples of practical ways in which WASH Clusters have derived benefits from the cluster approach.

Figure 3: Good Practices Emerging through the WASH Cluster Implementations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Description of Good Practice</th>
<th>Reference Point</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordination mechanisms</td>
<td>A formal Coordination Model, introduced by the Shelter Cluster, is now been promoted in the WASH sector for rapid onset emergencies. It includes the following key elements.</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A Strategic Advisory Group (SAG): a reduced and manageable group of key actors, accountable to the Cluster members, and in charge of proposing and formulating Strategic Orientations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Early introduction of a Strategic Operational Framework (SOF), for which a standard structure exists</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Use of short-lived Technical Working (TWIGs) Group to address specific issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>At district level, the WASH Cluster is integrated with the local government system and the integration has generally worked well. No parallel system was setup but the Cluster approach was supporting the existing Government system. This has proven to be an effective approach to gaining buy-in and ownership with regard to implementation of the cluster approach, consolidating partnerships within the sector.</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In Pakistan, more than one province has adopted the cluster as the WASH sectoral coordination forum outside of emergency contexts. For example, Punjab used the cluster for promotion of the International Year of Sanitation, 2008, thus raising the profile of the Cluster.</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>Appointment of a full-time Cluster Coordinator and full-time Information Manager has been of great benefit to the WASH Cluster.</td>
<td>Bangladesh, Uganda, Union of Myanmar, Pakistan (NWFP)</td>
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### Area

### Description of Good Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cluster Coordinators</td>
<td>Cluster Coordinators have a high level of management capacity, relational skills (capacity to integrate, motivate, moderate) and a good understanding of the WASH sector and country context. For example, in Pakistan (NWFP) the dedicated Cluster Coordinator for the recent emergency is a local, experienced and well known individual who speaks the local dialects and has been successful in enhancing the engagement of local NGOs at a time when entry into the conflict area by foreigners is severely restricted.</td>
<td>DRC, Bangladesh, Uganda, Pakistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information management</td>
<td>In Union of Myanmar, a dedicated Information Manager has been appointed and a web based information management system has been developed, enabling agencies to search and access relevant information for the response, including digitalised maps showing operational agencies by geographical area.</td>
<td>Union of Myanmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-cluster coordination</td>
<td>Regular cluster lead meetings are chaired by the UN Area Coordinator. These meetings serve as an important forum for discussing cross-cutting issues and facilitating dialogue between the Health, Shelter and WASH clusters.</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs assessment</td>
<td>A comprehensive inter-cluster needs assessment was carried out. The PONJA (Post Nargis Joint Assessment) was led by the Tripartite Core Group (the Association oof Southeast Asian Nations, the United Nations, and the Myanmar Government), with technical support from a range of humanitarian and development partners. The assessment was completed in less than five weeks.</td>
<td>Union of Myanmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy and planning</td>
<td>The sector strategy has been developed after effective consultations with partners within the Clusters and most of the key stakeholders in the sector, including donors.</td>
<td>DRC, Union of Myanmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency preparedness</td>
<td>As a result of the experience of working with the WASH Cluster for the cyclone response, the Department of Public Health Engineering can see some advantages in embedding aspects of the coordination in its preparedness for future emergencies. A learning and emergency preparedness workshop was used to mobilise the sector to strengthen emergency preparedness mechanisms.</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
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</table>

The good practices emerging through utilisation of the cluster approach differ across countries and contexts. However, there is scope for all the examples outlined in Figure 3 above to be applied in other contexts and a need to ensure that adequate mechanisms are in place to ensure capture and sharing of good practices and lessons learned.

**Common Challenges at Country Level**

Monitoring, quality of service delivery, and clear definition of role and responsibilities are areas of poor performance across the majority of countries included in the analysis. The analysis reveals that although these areas were identified as concern areas since the inception of the cluster approach, the majority of Global WASH Cluster initiatives to address them are not yet operational.

**Information management**

Information management in the context of humanitarian emergencies involves the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of information, for use in management, decision making on priorities and gaps, performance monitoring and evaluation. Issues identified through the reviews relate to lack of common formats for data collection (resulting in incompatible data for collation purposes); inconsistent or inaccurate monitoring and report-
ing; and a reluctance to share information amongst cluster partners. Poor information management has had the following programmatic impacts,

- Lack of comprehensive needs assessment and gap analysis to inform strategic planning
- Lack of monitoring and evaluation to support strengthened accountability and evidence based management

Use and timely dissemination of common analyses are strong incentives for cluster partners to share information. Indeed, monthly dissemination of synthesised sector achievement in Uganda was very much appreciated by the actors of the sector and useful for impact assessment. The Humanitarian Action Plan in DRC, used as a programming road map (as opposed to just funding documents) and combined with a common funding mechanism, was a strong incentive for a system for more consistent monitoring in the WASH sector.

“Quality” is under-prioritised against “management”
The meta-analysis shows that utilisation of the cluster approach has included very little emphasis on the quality of service delivery (most of the focus has been on coordination and management of programming). Improved coordination and partnership within the clusters should provide a basis for tackling these issues in the future. The Global WASH Cluster also has a number of projects in development to support improved service delivery, for example,

- Hygiene Promotion
- Emergency Materials
- Training for Capacity Building
- Disaster Risk Reduction
- Environment and WASH
- Accountability
- Context-specific Technical Learning Projects
- Technical Support Services

However, there is a need to consider standard setting and monitoring at country level and the challenges that this presents. Realistic expectation setting, reporting and technical support are key. However, the question of capacity and resource is paramount; both for the cluster lead agency and operational actors that are often struggling to allocate time to contribute to the common issues.

Responsibilities and accountability
Cluster partners, including line ministries, international and national NGOs and UN agencies, often lack clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities within the cluster. Reviews frequently reported lack of awareness and understanding of the cluster approach and the wider Humanitarian Reform at country level, including amongst UN personnel. Lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities coupled with poor monitoring and reporting has been a major constraint to strengthened accountability in the sector, as well as a potential risk for the roll-out of the cluster approach. Issues such as Cluster actors Terms of References are emerging but also controversial with NGO concerns about maintaining independence. This paper argues that this issue should be addressed in a consistent way, with policy guidelines developed at the highest level.
The Global WASH Cluster

The aim of the Global WASH Cluster is to support the country clusters with system-wide preparedness, technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies, greater predictability and more effective inter-agency responses. Figure 4 provides an overview of the five strategic areas of Global WASH Cluster activity.

Figure 4: Global WASH Cluster Strategic Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WASH STRATEGIC Area 1</th>
<th>WASH STRATEGIC Area 2</th>
<th>WASH STRATEGIC Area 3</th>
<th>WASH STRATEGIC Area 4</th>
<th>WASH STRATEGIC Area 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WASH Sector Coordination and Advocacy</td>
<td>Information Management and Standards Policy</td>
<td>WASH Sector Capacity for Humanitarian Response</td>
<td>WASH Sector Preparedness</td>
<td>WASH Sector Best Practice, Learning and Accountability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Successes of the Global WASH Cluster**
The Global WASH Cluster is praised for its inclusive approach. Figure 5 below demonstrates that some of the Global Cluster projects are responding to key gaps identified at country level. To some extent, global cluster projects have therefore been able to adapt their services to the lessons learnt at country level.

Figure 5: Learning within the Global WASH Cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improvement Area</th>
<th>Issue identified through reviews and evaluations</th>
<th>Action taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cluster Coordinators</td>
<td>Cluster Coordinators often unable to effectively carry out the role in addition to their other commitments.</td>
<td>The need for dedicated cluster coordinators was identified as a major gap and priority for the Global WASH Cluster. Dedicated cluster coordinators have been appointed following the majority of the recent rapid onset emergencies, including receiving training by the Global WASH Cluster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information management</td>
<td>Information management is a major constraint to the achievement of the objectives of the cluster approach.</td>
<td>The Global WASH Cluster has implemented a two phase Information Management project, including development of ideas for population based surveys. The Global WASH is advocating for dedicated WASH Cluster Information capacity to be appointed for large-scale emergencies. This principle has been piloted in several countries.</td>
</tr>
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### Learning within the Global WASH Cluster continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improvement Area</th>
<th>Issue identified through reviews and evaluations</th>
<th>Action taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring and evaluation</td>
<td>Monitoring and evaluation have historically been a glaring deficiency in humanitarian response and has not been seen to improve under clusters.</td>
<td>The Information Management project has produced a proposed approach for monitoring and evaluation at programme level, which should help to promote results-based management in the WASH sector. The WASH Cluster Learning Project has produced a Performance Framework and toolkit, which ensures robust performance assessment and structured learning for rapid-onset and on-going emergencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>The cluster approach only includes for accountability to the Humanitarian Coordinator and not accountability to beneficiaries and other stakeholders.</td>
<td>An Accountability project has been initiated by the Global WASH Cluster, led by Oxfam, which advocates for strengthened accountability mechanisms towards beneficiaries within the sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASH Cluster awareness</td>
<td>Many WASH sector actors reported a low level of awareness about the cluster approach.</td>
<td>The Global WASH Cluster has engaged the UNICEF Regional Emergency WASH Advisors (REWAS) to support roll-out of Global WASH Cluster tools and implementation of the cluster approach. WASH Cluster awareness workshops are taking place, facilitated by REWAs and the UNICEF Global Cluster Advocacy &amp; Support Team (CAST). However, lack of information and awareness by Cluster agencies and their country management teams remains a continuing problem at country level.</td>
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### Global WASH Cluster Challenges

The most important challenge for the Global WASH Cluster is to be able to effectively support country roll-out that is tailored enough to specific country-level needs. The regional strategy by UNICEF, in the lead agency role, has enabled more specific WASH Cluster support, awareness raising and capacity building. However, comments from the 2007-2008 country reviews highlight that there is still a significant gap in provision of guidance and support to meet country-level needs.

Poor sequencing of activities is a major issues in this regard, since the WASH cluster roll-out at country level commenced well before the establishment of the Global WASH Cluster (as illustrated in Figure 1). Indeed, the implementation of many of the Global WASH Cluster projects is occurring almost three years after the first use of the cluster approach in Pakistan in 2005. There have also been concerns raised about the number of activities and projects being attempted by the Global WASH Cluster, including:

- The capacity of the global actors to keep the momentum after the 2007-2008 heavy funding periods to promote sustainable outcomes; and
- The capacity and funding for regional / country roll-out of the Global WASH Cluster outputs

Coordination between global clusters / sectors is another major area for concern. Although the WASH cluster is very connected to both the Health and Nutrition Clusters through the TRI-Cluster forum, it is not clear to what extent WASH cluster initiatives have actually been coordinated and cross cutting issues addressed between the numerous global clusters / sectors. The issue of sequencing is again apparent, with a number of Global WASH Cluster initiatives further progressed than similar initiatives in other clusters / sectors. This is a particular constraint where outputs from different global clusters overlap (e.g. assessment tools, performance frameworks). The predicted risk that the cluster approach might intensify sectoral partitioning of the humanitarian sector has proven true and this remains a major challenge.
Meeting the Challenges of Implementation

**Key Achievements, Gaps and Recommendations**
As roll-out of the cluster approach gains pace, lessons learned from the reviews and their respective findings and recommendations are invaluable. The last section of this learning paper aims at identifying the main achievements and challenges across the WASH clusters and suggests ways forward.

**Cluster Coordination Capacity has clearly been developed in the WASH sector**
A roster of potential coordinators has been developed and a series of cluster coordinator trainings have taken place. The Global WASH Cluster has been very active in advocating for dedicated cluster coordination capacity and this model has been adopted in several countries. Regional Emergency WASH Advisors (REWAs), acting on behalf of the WASH Cluster, have raised awareness and built regional capacity, some being deployed as Cluster Coordinators following major rapid-onset emergencies. A Rapid Response Team has also been established.

**Information Management is still an important challenge**
The Global WASH Cluster has developed flexible but robust systems for information management. There is increasing consensus that dedicated cluster information management capacity is needed at country level for large scale emergencies. However, all country-based reviews showed that there is still an important challenge in terms of information sharing culture.

- Funding for training & deployment of information management capacity and systems should be accompanied with incentives for better information sharing (see below partnership).

**Development of effective partnerships at country level is critical**
The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) refers to five ‘principles of partnership’, including equality, transparency, result-oriented approach, responsibility and complimentarity (see Annex 1). In order to strengthen partnerships, and therefore effectiveness of the Humanitarian Response, lessons learned from the country WASH Cluster reviews lead to the following recommendations:

- Establish a participative approach to defining and agreeing criteria for the prioritisation of funds at country level, to improve transparency and help to encourage inclusion of local NGOs in the process.

- Participatory definition of strategies as practiced in the DRC by the WASH cluster, or early establishment of a WASH Strategic Operational Framework (SOF) as in Bangladesh, are good practices to be duplicated.

- Develop clear and jointly agreed roles and responsibilities to encourage commitment of cluster actors. It is recommended to further provide the cluster actors with some joint responsibilities (local coordination, technical group coordination, joint project management...), whilst acknowledging that Government and NGO resources are limited.

- The opportunity for drafting ToR for Cluster members at country level, as a way to reinforce accountability, needs to be discussed at policy level to develop guidelines for implementation at country level (rather than on an ad hoc basis).

**Coherent roll-out needs strong global – country linkages and increased inter-cluster coordination**
Most reviews showed that there was a low level of awareness about the cluster approach and the Humanitarian Reform in general, as well as the Global WASH Cluster projects, their value and expected outputs. There are concerns about the number of Global WASH Cluster projects in relation to the resources available to support their implementation at country level. There are also concerns about duplication across global clusters. Whilst
duplication of effort between clusters at global level is difficult to avoid, there is a need to maintain the global cluster capacity to engage with other clusters for shared learning and integration of initiatives.

- UNICEF Regional Emergency WASH Advisors (REWAs) are playing an important role in linking the country clusters with the global WASH initiatives, supporting roll-out of Global WASH Cluster tools and implementation of the cluster approach. Continued dedicated regional capacity is essential to support awareness raising and coherent and consistent roll-out of the cluster approach in the sector.

- Intercluster coordinaton should be reinforced in order to avoid duplication and promote convergence. Global intercluster networks e.g. information management, learning, capacity building, emergency preparedness, could be initiated to promote joint working and integration of approaches.

Operation, maintenance and funding of initiatives at global and country levels is a major consideration
A large number of projects have been launched at global level, most of which will produce tools, guidelines, and knowledge to be used and disseminated at country level. The roll-out of this information is an important challenge but its maintenance and update are also key factors for impact and sustained use of material developed at global level. Good practices will keep being developed at country level and there is a need to capture and share these to optimise the effectiveness of the WASH clusters.

- A field accessible WASH Knowledge Management System should be developed in order to share, update and review WASH knowledge. This should be accompanied by mechanisms to promote continued learning and improvement at country and regional levels. A clear strategy for continued resourcing of the initiative, both at country and global levels, is urgently required.

Conclusion

This paper highlights a number of examples of good practices emerging through use of the cluster approach in the WASH sector, including many which could be applied in other contexts to strengthen the emergency response. The analysis also reveals a number of critical issues which must be addressed in order for the cluster approach to achieve its objectives in the WASH sector. As the roll-out of the cluster approach gains pace, continued evaluation of the WASH Clusters is imperative to ensure learning is incorporated throughout the roll-out and development of the cluster approach.
Annex 1: Principles of Partnership

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Principle of Partnership</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Equality requires mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of size and power. The participants must respect each other’s mandates, obligations, independence, and brand identity and recognize each other’s constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organizations from engaging in constructive dissent.</td>
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<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Transparency is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communications and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organizations.</td>
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<td>Result-oriented approach</td>
<td>Effective humanitarian action must be reality-based and action-oriented. This requires result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Humanitarian organizations have an obligation to each other to accomplish their task responsibly, with integrity and in a relevant and appropriate way. They must make sure they commit to activities only when they have the means, competencies, skills, and capacity to deliver on their commitments. Decisive and robust prevention of abuses committed by humanitarians must also be a constant effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementarity</td>
<td>The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantage and complement each other’s contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and build on. It must be made an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


Luff R (2008). Lessons Learnt on WASH Cluster Coordination in Bangladesh Cyclone SIDR.


