

**EVALUATION  
REPORT**

**EVALUATION OF  
UNICEF'S CLUSTER LEAD  
AGENCY ROLE IN  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION**

**Executive Summary**

**EVALUATION OFFICE  
DECEMBER 2013**

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children



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# **EVALUATION OF UNICEF'S CLUSTER LEAD AGENCY ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Evaluation Question

The evaluation of UNICEF's Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) role in humanitarian action has primarily sought to address the following overarching question:

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

The evaluation was commissioned by the UNICEF Evaluation Office (EO) and was conducted from January through June of 2013 by independent evaluators from Avenir Analytics. Based on the terms of reference (ToR) (see Annex 1) the evaluation sought to generate credible evidence regarding the results achieved or not achieved by UNICEF in undertaking its CLA role.

## Objective

The objective of the evaluation was to assess, as systematically and objectively as possible, the performance of UNICEF as a CLA and area of responsibility (AOR) focal point at global and country levels.

The evaluation sought to generate evidence regarding the results achieved or not achieved by UNICEF in undertaking these roles. It is primarily intended for use by UNICEF senior management to make improvements in how it undertakes its CLA and AOR roles within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) cluster system.

The evaluation is anticipated to serve the dual purposes of learning and accountability. Its primary emphasis is forward-looking – seeking to enhance learning by drawing lessons, identifying opportunities and providing information for UNICEF to improve its capacities, systems and approaches for exercising its CLA and AOR roles.

## Rationale for the evaluation

The IASC initiated the cluster approach in 2005 to enhance coordination during emergencies in the context of broader humanitarian reform. The approach was intended to improve humanitarian response by increasing predictability, accountability and partnerships across actors.

Together, the five clusters and AORs – led or co-led by UNICEF – represent responsibility for approximately one third of the IASC cluster system. To undertake these responsibilities, UNICEF has invested significant time and resources. As an institution, UNICEF needs to understand how it is performing as a CLA and how it could improve. During the evaluation inception phase, six uses of the evaluation output were identified through consultation with internal and external stakeholders:

1. Provide a benchmark for measuring CLA performance.
2. Contribute to ongoing UNICEF planning processes (office management plans, the medium-term strategic plan and cluster work planning).
3. Provide UNICEF with unfiltered critiques and information on how partners view its implementation of the CLA role towards improving its approaches.
4. Contribute to influencing the IASC on unresolved cluster system issues.
5. Share information with partners regarding good practice and capacity required.
6. Provide evidence on UNICEF performance to key internal and external stakeholders, including donors.

## Evaluation approach and methodology

### Design

Based on the terms of reference developed by UNICEF's Evaluation Office, over 100 lines of enquiry were reviewed and further refined during the inception phase of the evaluation. Questions were organized to look at UNICEF's ability to meet performance criteria based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee criteria, namely, relevance and appropriateness, effectiveness (further split into predictability, accountability and partnership), efficiency, coherence, coverage and sustainability.

Seventy-two indicators were developed to measure how well UNICEF is performing in its CLA roles and to identify patterns suggesting areas for future improvement. Eight countries were selected by the Evaluation Office for case studies to reflect the diversity of capacity levels and operating contexts where UNICEF clusters are operating. These were Burkina Faso, El Salvador, Haiti, Nepal, the Philippines, South Sudan, the State of Palestine and Tajikistan.

Data collection instruments were designed to allow the evaluators to collect information from multiple sources for each of the 72 indicators and to allow for triangulation. The data collection instruments supported face-to-face and remote interviews, focus groups, online surveys, observation and formal documentary research.

Interview guides and surveys were translated into French and Spanish to facilitate participation.

The output of the evaluation design was an inception report. This was presented to the Evaluation Office, to internal and external focus group members for

feedback, and it was approved before data collection began.

### Data collection

Data collection took place through six country visits and in-person visits to Copenhagen, Geneva and New York, as well as remote interviews and desk research over a period of three months with a team of eight evaluators. The evaluators collected data from more than 1,000 people, including 282 UNICEF staff and 779 staff from partner organizations, as well as 790 documents. Data were captured in the form of original notes then summarized per interview, focus group or observation against each of the evaluation indicators. The output of this stage was a deep repository of data for each case study and at global level.

### Data analysis

The data from the more than 1,000 reference points were synthesized by group and location. The results were summarized for each case against the indicators, consolidated into 33 outcome and capability factors, and then a quantitative measure was applied to provide an overall indication of how well UNICEF meets the key outcomes and evaluation criteria.

Per case findings and global findings were analysed and synthesized to produce overall preliminary findings. These findings were then organized based on emergent trends and major issues under the following five key areas related to how well UNICEF carries out its CLA role and what it needs to do for the future:

- **External coordination performance**
- **Internal CLA performance**
- **Human resources performance**
- **Scope and boundary issues**
- **Cost-effectiveness, value for money and efficiency**

Findings, analysis and potential recommendations have been presented to case study country offices and regional offices, as well as global UNICEF staff and partners in participatory workshops (in person and online) before the report was completed.

## Findings, analysis and recommendations

The findings have been analysed against the future likely requirements of the key stakeholders.

Recommendations were then developed related to improvements UNICEF can make to strengthen implementation of CLA roles.

The outputs are (i) a set of points that describe how well UNICEF is carrying out its CLA role and what it is not doing so well, and (ii) a set of recommendations that link directly to the identified weaknesses that, if implemented, will facilitate the required improvement.

## Findings

### Findings for key area 1: External coordination performance

External coordination performance was reviewed against three essential elements:

1. Overall effectiveness
2. Coverage
3. Partnership

The main findings were:

- **Partners believe UNICEF is broadly effective at exercising its country cluster coordination responsibilities** across surveys, interviews and focus groups. This is supported by other

recent evaluations.<sup>1</sup> Stakeholders noted UNICEF generally does the best that can be expected within the complex country and overarching coordination contexts.

- **Human resources, institutional support and leadership are the primary factors influencing UNICEF effectiveness as a CLA** according to data from interviews, focus groups, surveys and the document review.
- **UNICEF clusters are having positive effects on geographic and thematic coverage** according to surveys, interviews and focus groups. Subnational coordination structures have been established, although concerns were noted about their financial and staffing sustainability. Clusters and AORs have had positive effects on thematic coverage through increased operations research and advocacy, particularly in the Education Cluster and Gender-based Violence (GBV) AOR.
- **The partnership aspects of UNICEF-led clusters and AORs are stronger at country level than for Global Clusters.** Country-level partners agree UNICEF adheres to principles of partnership, while Global Cluster/AOR members raised concerns particularly regarding transparency. Roles and responsibilities are reportedly unclear among global survey respondents, although documents and observation show Global Cluster Coordinators (GCCs) making significant efforts to develop shared responsibility. Country-level partners had questions regarding UNICEF representation of clusters at humanitarian country teams (HCT) distinctly from its institutional interests.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, *UNICEF's Response to the Emergency in the Horn of Africa, 2011–2012: Lesson-learning exercise*, Final Report, Evaluation Office, June 2012.

## Findings for key area 2: Internal CLA performance

Internal CLA performance was reviewed against four key elements:

1. Establishment of the Global Cluster Coordination Unit (GCCU)
2. Policy and performance monitoring
3. The role of regional offices
4. The comparative advantages of UNICEF

The main findings were:

- The evaluation found 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. More than 70 per cent of UNICEF staff surveyed and the majority of staff interviewed in case-study countries stated that they had seen moderate or substantial improvements in global coordination and leadership as a result of the GCCU's creation, despite this organizational change being only one year old.
- **UNICEF's policies and systems have increasingly integrated the CLA roles but CLA performance monitoring systems remain limited.** Country office reporting under the Humanitarian Performance Monitoring Toolkit<sup>2</sup> is voluntary and limited to a series of "yes/no" questions regarding inputs and outputs, rather than quality and outcomes.  
**The role of regional offices related to CLA responsibilities remains unclear.** While the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs) articulate a coordination mandate, they have not been translated into clear responsibilities and accountability mechanisms at regional

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<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, 'Humanitarian Performance Monitoring – Toolkit and Guide', June 2011.

level. Based on previous evaluations<sup>3</sup> and internal documents<sup>4</sup> this may stem from a more systemic confusion within UNICEF on roles, accountabilities and authorities between headquarters, regional offices and country offices. This is significant because regional offices are the only formal link in UNICEF's accountability chain between country offices and headquarters.

- **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 and capacities.

## Findings for key area 3: Human resources performance

Human resources performance was reviewed against two key elements:

1. Surge capacity and recruitment systems
2. Cluster coordination capacity development

The main findings were:

- **Surge capacity and recruitment systems for clusters have improved since 2010**, as evidenced by the difference in findings between evaluations of the Haiti<sup>5</sup> earthquake and Horn of Africa<sup>6</sup> responses. Management of surge capacity systems remains fragmented, however, and there is no overarching strategy.

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<sup>3</sup> UNICEF's Response to the Emergency in the Horn of Africa, 2011–2012.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, 'Cluster Issues Matrix: Internal', Internal Working Document, Programme Division, December 2010.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, 'Independent Review of UNICEF's Operational Response to the January 2010 Earthquake in Haiti', Evaluation Office, September 2011.

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF's Response to the Emergency in the Horn of Africa, 2011–2012.

- **Double-hatting (the practice of performing several organizational functions) remains prevalent and diminishes effectiveness.** Even in ongoing emergency situations or 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.

#### Findings for key area 4:

##### Scope and boundary issues

Scope and boundary issues were reviewed against two key elements:

1. The scope of UNICEF's cluster responsibilities
2. The operational role of UNICEF's clusters and AORs

The main findings were:

- **The effects of clusters on lasting coordination and national response capacity systems is limited** by a lack of guidance on transition, decentralized authority and funding, and an unclear role for clusters in capacity-building.
- **Clusters are increasingly filling gaps beyond emergency coordination.** Indicatively, of the 34 UNICEF clusters active in 2012<sup>7</sup> only 14 are operated fully in line with the IASC cluster objectives and guidelines (time-bound and emergency-focused). Ten of the remaining 20 may have been correctly activated, but are currently operating as long-term sectoral development coordination mechanisms. The others were activated in place of sectoral

development coordination, with no formal IASC activation.

- **This is cluster “scope creep” and significantly affects UNICEF’s ability to perform well as a CLA** in terms of relevance, predictability, partnership, efficiency and sustainability.

#### Findings for key area 5:

##### Cost-effectiveness, value for money and efficiency

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

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

The main findings were:

- **Staff and partners strongly perceive that the outcomes of cluster work justify their organization’s investment.** In surveys, 83 per cent of UNICEF country staff and 84 per cent of country partners stated that cluster outcomes justify their investment. This needs to be critically reviewed against the findings in key area 4.
- **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.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, Internal Working Document and Database, ‘A Survey of the Operational Status and Staffing of UNICEF-led and Co-led Clusters and AORs in the Field’, Final Report and Annexes, July 2012.

## Conclusions and recommendations

### Key area 1: External coordination performance

UNICEF strengths in cluster coordination performance, coverage and country level partnership practice should be maintained and replicated. The key areas for improvement are (i) weaknesses in cluster coordinators' abilities to identify gaps and solve problems, (ii) challenges in UNICEF representation of cluster members at HCTs and (iii) a lack of clarity on coordination roles and responsibilities externally with partners.

The key recommendation is to develop a "cluster-ready" initiative with regional offices and/or the GCCU, using globally developed capacity assessment and enhancement tools. In short, this means increasing the preparedness of country offices in high-risk areas so they can activate and disengage from the appropriate cluster mechanism when necessary. This ensures that clusters provide effective and efficient support to vulnerable communities within the humanitarian system.

### Key area 2: Internal CLA performance

UNICEF's positive efforts to consolidate cluster support under the GCCU and integrate the CLA role into its policies should be maintained and built upon. The key areas for improvement are (i) a lack of clarity on internal coordination responsibilities and roles, (ii) unclear regional office roles and (iii) no systematic approach to ensure country representatives consistently implement CLA roles.

The key recommendation is to strengthen management systems to support the CLA role, including performance measurement, strengthened regional office roles and better connecting country representatives

to a global CLA strategic management effort.

### Key area 3: Human resources performance

Investments in UNICEF surge capacity arrangements have been positive and should be further enhanced. The main areas for improvement are (i) a fragmented human resources approach and the lack of a career path for coordination staff and (ii) the fact that staff capacity development for cluster work is limited to classroom-based basic awareness training across the organization.

The major recommendation is to develop an integrated strategy for surge capacity and a UNICEF-wide effort for developing coordination staff.

### Key area 4: Scope and boundary

UNICEF has implemented its CLA role in an increasing number of contexts in response to demand for coordination services. The most important area for improvement is in the lack of organization-wide cluster guidance and the inconsistent application of IASC policies, which makes it difficult to meet divergent stakeholder expectations.

The primary recommendation is to establish UNICEF policy and guidance to clearly interpret and articulate CLA policy (coherence) and disseminate it to ensure consistent application (fidelity), with focus on the most critical emergency situations, and management of stakeholder expectations.

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

UNICEF should maintain and build upon its strengths in perceived partner value and co-leadership arrangements. The key area for improvement is over-investment in use of clusters at field level to fill gaps

in long-term sectoral or humanitarian coordination.

The key recommendation is to mitigate the use of clusters in inappropriate scenarios by developing models and tools for non-cluster coordination, including transition points for country offices, and to establish clarity on the role of clusters for national capacity-building to ensure efficient and fit-for-purpose coordination approaches.

### **Key success factors**

Some of the evaluation findings and recommendations are similar to those found in the following documents:

- *Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report*, GPPi and Groupe URD, 2010.
- *Synthesis of Cluster Lessons from UNICEF's response to the Pakistan Floods*, 2011.
- *Implementing the Cluster Approach: A synthesis of documented lessons 2006–2010*, Programme Division, UNICEF, 2011.

- 'Independent Review of UNICEF's Operational Response to the January 2010 Earthquake in Haiti', Evaluation Office, UNICEF, 2011.
- *UNICEF's Response to the Emergency in the Horn of Africa, 2011–2012: Lesson-learning exercise*, Evaluation Office, UNICEF, 2012.

The following six actions can be taken to support successful implementation of the evaluation recommendations:

- Engage senior leadership across UNICEF.
- Implement recommendations as a package.
- Engage partners in developing strategies for the future.
- Engage IASC bodies in discussions based on the evaluation.
- Organize discussions with donor organizations to discuss how their funding shapes CLA implementation.
- Engage national governments before and at the beginning of cluster operations to establish and agree clear scope and transition points.

**Table 1: Summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations**

Summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations				
Key area	Findings - what UNICEF is doing well	Findings - what UNICEF is doing less well	Conclusions	Recommendations
<b>External coordination performance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High perception of overall effectiveness.</li> <li>• Increasingly robust cluster coordination services.</li> <li>• Strong country-level partnership performance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Weaknesses in global partnership performance.</li> <li>▪ Lack of clarity on coordination roles and responsibilities: internally across units and externally with partners.</li> <li>▪ Gaps in cluster coordinators' abilities to identify gaps and solve problems.</li> <li>▪ Challenges in UNICEF representation of cluster members at HCTs.</li> </ul>	UNICEF is increasingly effective at cluster coordination, but it needs to address lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities with partners, variance in partner expectations and gaps in coordinator abilities to ensure continued improvement.	Develop a "cluster-ready" initiative to increase country office preparedness for cluster activation in high-risk countries.
<b>Internal CLA performance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CLA role well integrated at the broad policy level.</li> <li>• Improvements in coordination and leadership due to creation of GCCU.</li> <li>• Initial efforts to develop CLA strategy and information management function.</li> <li>• Broad match between UNICEF comparative advantages and CLA roles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities internally across units.</li> <li>• Unclear regional office roles and no systematic approach to ensure country representatives consistently implement CLA roles.</li> </ul>	UNICEF has instituted positive changes in its global approach to managing the CLA roles, but has not yet established the clarity on roles and responsibilities across internal units and ensured a chain of accountability that would enable consistency and quality across country offices.	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.
<b>Human resources performance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant improvement in cluster surge capacity with increased ability to deploy coordinators in a timely fashion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fragmented HR approach and lack of a coordination career path.</li> <li>• Continued prevalence of double-hatting reduces effectiveness.</li> <li>• Capacity development limited to basic awareness</li> </ul>	UNICEF's ability to rapidly deploy coordinators has improved but continued fragmentation, lack of an integrated HR strategy, continued prevalence of double-hatting and limited approach to coordinator capacity development reduce	Develop an integrated strategy for human resources surge capacity and UNICEF coordination staff development.

		training.	the consistency and quality of its cluster human resources.	
<b>Scope and boundary issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active participation in IASC and Transformative Agenda work and global efforts to clarify cluster policies and guidance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of organization-wide cluster guidance and inconsistent application of IASC policies.</li> <li>• Lasting effects on coordination and national response capacity limited by lack of guidance on transition and national capacity building, decentralized authority and funding.</li> <li>• Clusters increasingly filling gaps beyond emergency coordination.</li> </ul>	Cluster “scope creep” significantly affects UNICEF’s ability to perform well as a CLA in terms of relevance, predictability, partnership, efficiency and sustainability.	Increase coherence (interpretation and articulation) and then fidelity (understanding and consistent application) through UNICEF CLA policy and practice.
<b>Cost-effectiveness, value for money and efficiency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High by staff and partners that outcomes justify investments.</li> <li>• Investment in CLA role not excessive.</li> <li>• Co-leadership arrangements have generally improved since 2012.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much investment at field level in long-term sectoral coordination contexts.</li> <li>• Cross-cluster coordination is insufficient and integrated programming approaches remain the exception rather than the rule.</li> </ul>	Overall UNICEF investment in implementing its CLA role is not excessive and staff and partners agree cluster outcomes justify their investments, but investments in clusters to fill gaps in long-term sectoral coordination offer opportunities for cost savings or realignment.	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.

