

# WASH Coordination in Humanitarian Response

Evidence Summary | October 2019



**WASH Cluster**  
Water Sanitation Hygiene





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## Executive Summary

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Providing water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) to emergency-affected populations is necessary for dignity and disease control. Coordination, via the 'cluster approach', is key to WASH program success. We summarized the outcomes and impacts of WASH cluster coordination using a mixed-methods approach, including literature review, summary of UNICEF documents, and key informant interviews with experienced cluster staff. Across these three data sets, consistent themes were identified, including: the cluster approach as a cost-effective 'best-fit' model that evolved over time; the importance of cluster staff with technical and coordination skills; the importance of context to cluster success; and, the trade-offs of cluster participation. Additionally, consistent intractable challenges were identified, including how to: incorporate and be accountable to beneficiaries; coordinate across clusters; work with national governments; manage sub-national clusters; and, transition from the emergency phase. Previous and current methodologies used to evaluate cluster coordination were subjective and do not address cluster challenges of the future. There is thus critical need to develop monitoring and evaluation tools for WASH cluster coordination that collect outcome and impact level data. This work culminated in development of a theory of change for WASH cluster coordination that can be incorporated into future research on the cluster approach.



**Authors:**

Travis Yates<sup>1</sup>, Hur Zannat<sup>1</sup>, Nabila Khandaker<sup>1</sup>, Dominique Porteaud<sup>2</sup> Franck Bouvet<sup>2</sup>, and Daniele Lantagne<sup>1</sup>

1: Tufts University, School of Engineering, 200 College Avenue, Medford, MA, 02155, United States of America, [travis.yates@tufts.edu](mailto:travis.yates@tufts.edu)

2: UNICEF, Cluster Advocacy Support Team, Geneva 5-7 Avenue de la Paix 1211 Geneva, Switzerland

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## Acronyms

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Accountability to Affected Populations'	AAP
Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance	ALNAP
Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring	CCPM
Cluster Advocacy and Support Team	CAST
Cluster Coordinator	CC
Cluster Lead Agency	CLA
Development Assistance Committee	DAC
Field Support Team	FST
Global WASH Cluster	GWC
Gender Based Violence	GBV
Humanitarian Coordinator	HC
Humanitarian Country Team	HCT
Humanitarian Response Plan	HRP
Information Manager	IM
Inter-Agency Standing Committee	IASC
Joint Monitoring Mission	JMM
National Coordination Platforms	NCP
National Humanitarian WASH Coordination Platform	NHWCP
Non-governmental Organization	NGO
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's	OECD
Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	OCHA
Periodic Monitoring Report	PMR
Rapid Assessment Team	RAT
Rapid Response Team	RRT
Regional Emergency Coordination Advisors	RECA
Standard Operating Procedure	SOP
Strategic Response Plan	SRP
Water Sanitation and Hygiene	WASH

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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Humanitarian emergencies are occurring at increasing rates and affecting a growing number of people. Natural disasters (i.e. earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding events, disease outbreaks, or droughts) affected more than 60 million people in 2018 [1]. Climate change is expected to increase the scale and frequency of natural disasters, while the rapidly expanding urban and slum populations in disaster-prone regions mean a larger number of people may be impacted by natural disasters. Conflict and violence threatens more than 1.5 billion people, and at the end of 2017, there were 68.5 million displaced persons worldwide, the highest number ever recorded [2]. Lastly, disease outbreaks have increased in number and diversity, impacting more than 44 million people in more than 200 nations [3].

With a growing number of people at risk, evidence-based strategies to provide interventions to affected populations are needed to prevent and control a variety of communicable diseases [4-6], as well as establish access to potable water and adequate sanitation. Systematic reviews on the efficacy/health impact of WASH interventions in emergencies [7,8] concluded that there is a lack of data to establish firm evidence for implementing WASH interventions in emergencies. More recent research including outcome and impact metrics found WASH interventions consistently reduce both the risk of disease and the risk of transmission, with program design, community engagement, and beneficiary preferences being important considerations to ensure WASH intervention effectiveness [9]. The reviews highlighted inconsistent programming, communication gaps with beneficiaries, and logistic delays by responding organizations. Technical and non-technical components (e.g. timing, linkages, communication methods) are critical to WASH program effectiveness in humanitarian response. The importance of linkages within and between programs is apparent; thus, a key component of effective humanitarian response is, coordination.

### 1.1 Coordination Timeline

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance, established in June 1992 in response to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 [10]. In 2004, then IASC lead Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland commissioned an independent Humanitarian Response Review due to the “perception that humanitarian response does not always meet the basic needs of the affected population” [11]. One recommendation from the review was the establishment of a ‘cluster approach’, as “the time has come for the humanitarian community to work collectively towards an inclusive system-wide coordination mechanism to which all stakeholders can feel a sense of belonging.” In 2005, in response to the review, the IASC initiated a humanitarian system reform, based on four pillars: leadership, humanitarian financing, partnership, and coordination (in particular, the cluster approach) [12]. The cluster approach generally refers to core functions to be expected for each cluster, including: support service delivery, inform the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) or humanitarian Country Team’s (HCT) strategic decision-making, plan and implement cluster strategies, monitor and evaluate performance, build national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning, and support



robust advocacy. The cluster approach operates at two levels: globally, the aim is to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies by designating cluster leads and ensuring that there is predictable leadership and accountability; and, at the country level, the aim is to ensure a more coherent and effective response by mobilizing groups of agencies, organizations and NGOs to respond in a strategic manner across sections, as organized by a cluster lead [13].

Over time, the cluster approach has remained, and incorporated the Transformative Agenda (2011) reforms for reinforcing the humanitarian response system. The Transformative Agenda set parameters for responding to major humanitarian crises to large-scale Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation (L3 Response) to “deliver a rapid, concerted mobilization of capacity and systems to enable accelerated and scaled-up assistance and protection over a short and focused duration” [12]. In November 2018, the model was further expanded by creating SCALE-UP, for contexts where exceptional measures are needed due to the gravity of the humanitarian situation, which justify system-wide mobilization, beyond standard levels, to respond to critical humanitarian needs [14].

The Global WASH Cluster (GWC), based in Geneva, is one of eleven clusters used in emergency response. UNICEF is the designated Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) for WASH, with clusters being a partnership of response organizations [15]. The GWC sets global strategic goals and provides support at the country level to “National Humanitarian WASH Coordination Platforms” (NHWCP). The cluster approach may be formally ‘activated’ or not, but the goals and expectations remain the same, with or without activation of the cluster. Most NHWCP are organized with two primary positions, at the national level: a Cluster Coordinator (CC) who leads coordination meetings among partners, advocates for needs and funding, and coordinates with other clusters; and, an Information Manager (IM) who collects and disperses data and maps of activities from partners to assist coordination efforts and reporting. In large-scale contexts, local sub-national coordination can also take place. In all contexts, NHWCPs may request additional support from the GWC.

## 1.2 Objective

The cluster approach is now over a decade old, as humanitarian needs continue to increase, resources for response are constrained, and there is interest in documenting the outcomes and impacts (including cost-effectiveness) of the cluster approach. To our knowledge, there is no existing summary of the outcomes and impacts of coordination of WASH provision in humanitarian response. Thus, in this work, we aimed to summarize the outcomes and impact of coordination by collating lessons learned and expert feedback. The goal of the work is to improve GWC and NHWCP, ultimately creating a more inclusive, strategic, and effective humanitarian response.

## 2 METHODS

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A mixed-methods quantitative and qualitative approach was used to collate lessons learned relevant to coordination in humanitarian WASH, which included: 1) desk review related to assessing coordination, assessing WASH coordination in specific, and humanitarian coordination in general; 2) desk review and analysis of UNICEF documents on coordination; 3) key informant interviews with experienced GWC and NHWCP staff; and, 4) using the information gained from above, development of theory of change for WASH NHWCP.

### 2.1 Desk Review of Humanitarian Coordination

The desk review for documents related to coordination occurred using three methodologies, a review of provided documents, a grey literature search, and a peer-reviewed literature search. First, UNICEF GWC staff collated and sent documents relevant to coordination for review; documents that were considered “general documents” were included in this section. Second, a literature review was completed that involved searching websites and repositories known to contain information on humanitarian coordination: Google Scholar (‘cluster coordination’, top 100 documents; ‘humanitarian coordination’, top 100 documents), Evidence Aid (‘coordination’), 3ie (‘coordination’); Humanitarian Response (‘coordination AND evaluation’); ODI.org (‘coordination’, filtered ‘publication’, ‘evidence and policy’, ‘monitoring, evaluation, and learning’), Google (‘evaluate coordination between organizations’, ‘assess the strength of coordination between organizations’ top 100), and ALNAP HELP library (‘coordination’ by ALNAP since 2015). Third, the peer-reviewed literature was search using the terms “humanitarian coordination cluster” in the search engine PubMed.

All files were reviewed for meeting the inclusion criteria of ‘having qualitative or quantitative information relative to humanitarian coordination and/or humanitarian WASH coordination’ present, and if so information was extracted, summarized for writing, and presented. Please note that: 1) this was not a systematic review, as much of the relevant documentation is grey literature and not systematically available; and, 2) the information contained in the documents was so disparate that comparisons were not possible; instead information is described chronologically, and summarized by themes.

### 2.2 Desk Review and Analysis of UNICEF Reports

UNICEF GWC staff collated documents from GWC and NHWCP contexts for the Tufts research team. The documents included reporting from the current Field Support Team (FST), the former Rapid Response and Rapid Assessment Teams (RRT and RAT), and reports of former Regional Emergency Coordination Advisors (RECA) and Joint Monitoring Missions (JMM) that were held between UNICEF and its partners in different countries, and other general coordination documents. Please note ‘general documents’ were incorporated into the coordination review above in the previous section of these methods. All documents (aside from ‘other documents’) were first listed in an Excel spreadsheet and then assessed in a two-stage assessment: 1) to determine if there were outcomes or impacts

listed in the documents; and, 2) if so, for the documents to be included in review, and coded and analysed using Nvivo software (Doncaster, Australia) to develop themes, extract quotes, analyse, and write-up data.

### **2.3 Key Informant Interviews**

A GWC representative identified a list of 15 persons with substantial Cluster experience at the GWC or NHCWP level (Cluster Coordinator, Information Manager, or Regional Emergency WASH Specialist) and provided that list to Tufts researchers. Each identified person was contacted by Tufts research staff at least three times to schedule an interview, after which the person was considered to 'opt out' of being interviewed. Tufts research staff developed a key informant interview questionnaire consisting of 25 questions on the topics of: experience and roles, stakeholder involvement, and reflection on impact. Interviews were intended to last about one hour, were audio recorded, and then transcribed using Temi software (San Francisco, USA). After completion of all interviews, the Tufts research team collaboratively developed a list of themes that organically evolved during analysis, using Nvivo software (Doncaster, Australia). The Tufts University Institutional Review Board approved the methodology (#1811019).

### **2.4 Theory of Change Development**

A theory of change (ToC) was developed to represent activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts of humanitarian WASH coordination. The Minimum Requirements, set up by the GWC based on IASC minimum requirements, 104 were used as a foundation for ToC development, including: 1) support service delivery; 2) inform the HC/HCT's strategic decision-making; 3) plan and implement cluster strategies; 4) monitor and evaluate performance; 5) build national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning; 6) support robust advocacy, and with the +1 of 'accountability to affected populations' (AAP) [16]. Please note that specific key activities and outputs associated with each core function in the Minimum Requirements documents were not detailed. The Tufts research team initially created a ToC, that was then critiqued and refined with the GWC staff in an iterative process with three email-based reviews and one in-person discussion.

## 3 Results

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Results are presented by method, including: desk review of humanitarian coordination, desk review and analysis of UNICEF documents, key informant interviews, and theory of change development.

### 3.1 Desk Review of Humanitarian Coordination

In total, 28 documents were included in this desk review of humanitarian coordination, organized into the themes of general coordination documents, WASH coordination documents, and theory-based coordination documents.

#### General Coordination Documents

As initially defined, the cluster approach is a coordination system where at a global level a lead organization strengthens global preparedness and develops global guidance, then at a country level, develops Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) with partner organizations, and acts as provider of last resort (CLA must be ready to ensure the provision of services required to fulfil crucial gaps identified by the cluster and reflected in the HC-led Humanitarian Response Plan) [17]. Two phases of evaluation were planned at the inception of the Cluster Approach: on processes (Phase 1) [18] and on outcomes at the country level (Phase 2) [19].

In 2007, the Phase 1 evaluation supported continuing the Cluster Approach, in general, finding “The first two years of the cluster approach have been a mixed and often difficult experience, which on balance has demonstrated positive progress and some tangible added value [18]. Most evident were improvements made in filling gaps and extending capacity. Predictability of leadership was also considerably enhanced by lead agencies accepting responsibility for the totality of their sectors. The least progress of all, however, was seen in realizing ultimate accountability for performance, largely because lead agencies insufficiently institutionalized their cluster commitments. Smaller gains were also seen in improving the quality of partnerships and strengthening surge capacity. This evaluation suggests that the approach should be continued and expanded to other countries.”

In 2010, the Phase 2 evaluation found the cluster approach contributed to improving, at the country level: coverage of humanitarian needs, gap analysis and targeting, humanitarian actor learning through peer-review mechanisms and discussion, clarity of leadership, partnership between UN and international agencies, the strength of the humanitarian identity, and planning and quality of proposals for major funding appeals [19]. In particular, “almost all humanitarian actors agree that coordination has improved through the introduction of the cluster approach.” Challenges to the cluster approach were lack of: inclusion of national and local actors and pre-existing coordination mechanisms, transition and exit strategies, participatory approaches, consideration of humanitarian principles, quality cluster management leading to process- not action-orientated leadership, and inter-cluster coordination. These challenges led to an overall “weakened national and local ownership and capacities.” The evaluation concluded that:

*“five years into that process and based on largely qualitative evidence collected in six countries, the evaluation team concludes that these investments are beginning to pay off as the benefits generated by the cluster approach to date already slightly outweigh its costs and shortcomings. Provided that improvements are made, the approach has significant potential for further improving humanitarian response and thereby enhancing the well-being of affected populations.”*

Of particular relevance to this review is that the authors of the Phase 2 report spoke of the need for, developed, and used as their evaluation framework, a logical framework for the Cluster Approach.

In 2015, IASC further clarified the 6+1 Cluster functions in the Cluster Coordination Reference Module [20], which were incorporated by the GWC into evaluation via the Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring (CCPM) [16,21]. The IASC recommends CCPMs should take place 3-6 months after emergency onset and every year thereafter; the CCPM includes surveys of both Cluster coordinators and partners. Survey questions are answered on a weighted scale of weak to good, based on how respondents feel the Cluster is performing specific actions related to core functions. There are limitations of the CCPM methodology, including that it is a cross-sectional snapshot, stakeholders may not be engaged, not all stakeholders may understand the Cluster-specific terminology used in the survey tools, high turn-over of the humanitarian staff, and results may be subjective. Additionally, a periodic monitoring report [22] (PMR) is already used to regularly coalesce evidence on how the humanitarian response is going, and provide recommendations to the Humanitarian Coordinator / Humanitarian Country Team. Lastly, the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), a member of IASC, now recommends a new evaluation method, completing data mapping reports.

In 2016, OCHA conducted an overview of cluster arrangements globally, with data from mapping reports and CCPMs from 27 countries, including a total of 194 cluster/sectors, although results were not systematically stratified by sector [23]. OCHA found generally high cluster activities: 91% had ToRs; 91% had cluster plans that support the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP); 97% had an up-to-date list of partners; 97% had up-to-date meeting minutes; 87% had a 3Ws-type mapping in place, 90% participated in inter-cluster joint assessments; and, 94% had a joint sectoral analysis. However, cluster reporting was less: 81% reported producing regular progress or monitoring reports; and, 35% had completed CCPM in the past year. Additionally, just over 50% had preparedness plans in place, and only 31% had transition plans.

The Grand Bargain was established in 2016, and with the goal of raising additional funding for humanitarian response, and ensure 25% of total funding is allocated to local and national actors [24]. As part of this, OCHA is planning to establish adaptable and fit for purpose coordination systems, support NGO efforts to identify national NGO advisors and ensure their integration into formal coordination systems, reduce humanitarian terminology and language barriers to ensure local actor contribution in coordination settings, and strengthen capacities of national and local responders in coordination, humanitarian principles, standards, needs assessments, implementation, planning and monitoring [25]. This includes trainings at regional and country levels for national and local responders.

Another type of evaluation mechanism for the cluster approach in countries is the relatively new Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs). IAHEs are triggered automatically with the declaration of a level-three (L3) system-wide emergency as per the 2011 Transformative Agenda [26]. In 2016, three L3 responses were evaluated

(Philippines, South Sudan, and CAR). It was found that the inter-agency response was comprised of harmonized and coordinated distinct organizational responses, as opposed to a unified response ‘guided by a single strategic planning process and managed within a joint strategic framework’. The evaluation found: 1) strong leadership and commitment to Strategic Response Plans (SRPs, now called the Humanitarian Response Plan), which were seen as a fundraising and advocacy document; 2) coordination processes tended to be resource-intensive and time consuming, including that the demand for data for information products were considered “heavy”; and, 3) variable effectiveness across contexts. The Philippines were well-funded and rapidly established coordination mechanisms with “no evidence of serious, sustained coverage gaps” were established, although there was duplication with government systems. In CAR and South Sudan, coordination mechanisms “lacked the human resource capacity to address important areas of their mandate, such as monitoring, quality control and avoiding gaps in services.” No evaluation provided a cost-effectiveness analysis. Lack of WASH technical expertise was specifically noted in South Sudan.

In 2013, a UNICEF evaluation to systematically and objectively assess UNICEF as a CLA across five sectors (including WASH) at global and country level was conducted [27]. A total of 72 indicators were developed by the evaluation team, using the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria as a framework, including: relevance and appropriateness; effectiveness (including predictability, accountability and partnership); efficiency; coherence; coverage; and, sustainability [28]. Evaluators collected data from more than 1,000 people, including 282 UNICEF staff and 779 partner organization staff, and 790 documents. Results were presented in five themes: 1) external coordination performance, which was found to be “broadly effective,” with human resources, institutional support, and leadership as primary factors influencing effectiveness; 2) internal CLA performance, with >70% of UNICEF staff surveyed and the majority of staff interviewed stating that they had seen moderate or substantial improvements in global coordination/leadership due to the Global Cluster creation; human resources performance, with increases in surge capacity, limitations of cluster coordinator capacity development to classroom-based awareness training, and the prevalence and negative impacts of double-hatting (the practice of serving a coordination/IM function with the cluster, in addition to performing services for UNICEF) noted; scope and boundary issues, scope creep of cluster responsibility harming effectiveness; cost-effectiveness, with 83% of UNICEF country staff and 84% of country partners stating cluster outcomes justify the investment. Please note the investment was 17.9 million, 54% funded by UNICEF. The evaluation authors themselves noted their results were similar to previously described herein cluster evaluations.

### WASH Specific Coordination Information

In an early evaluation of the WASH Cluster, it was found that: cluster coordination capacity has clearly been developed, information management remained a challenge, effective partnerships at country level are critical, coherent roll-out needs strong global-country linkages and increased inter-cluster coordination, and operation, maintenance, and funding of initiatives is a major consideration.

In 2013, the UNICEF CLA evaluation also released a specific WASH coordination report [29]. The vast majority of respondents (86-89%) found UNICEF somewhat to very effective in WASH coordination with two-thirds of country level respondents rating WASH Cluster Coordinators highly for technical knowledge and coordination skills despite only 28% of staff work full time on cluster activities. Cluster coordination was described as being responsible for

increasing coverage of hard to reach areas/people and 78-85% of respondents stated that the WASH cluster coordination outcomes justify their organization's investments.

In 2014, three separate evaluations were carried out to establish evidence of impact and collection lessons learned from the field support teams (FSTs), including RATs (rapid assessment teams) and RECA (regional emergency cluster advisors) were added. The RECA reevaluation found that GWC concepts could not be implemented in all countries in the regions uniformly, due to contextual difference and needing to adapt existing global or country tools [30]. Additionally, the degree of participation in the Cluster Approach depended on the value of the collective to the organization while addressing barriers to NGO and INGO participation. The RAT evaluation found that RATs improved the quality of WASH sector assessment, utilized a variety of assessment methods, and informed future assessment efforts [31]. However, a random review of the RAT assessments revealed that the overall quality of RAT assessments was mediocre to unsatisfactory, and opportunities for more effective multi-sector assessments were missed. Clarification of the RAT role and prioritization of activities was highlighted. The Field Support Team evaluation used OECD/DAC criteria (as described above) and found "GWC's support to national coordination platforms to be strong [32]. Variations in effectiveness were attributed to: context, experience and soft skills of FST members, and difficulties in coordination with larger structures beyond GWC influence. The report also states: "There is no theory of change for the cluster framework" and "the lack of a clear theory of change tied to the GWC strategy, and related monitoring and evaluation mechanisms makes it more difficult to assess total performance and show value for money."

Lastly, in 2017, the GWC conducted two knowledge management surveys, on coordination and technical concerns [33,34]. The 31 respondents to the coordination survey noted the most important issues they needed help with were, across eight categories: preparing country to scale up, assessment skills/capacities tools, development of standard operating procedures SOP/HRP, accessing funding, developing indicators and monitoring tools, developing transition strategies, accountability to affected population, and piloting monitoring tools and indicators [34]. The 63 respondents to the technical survey noted what (with the capacity building category) they needed program management including monitoring and evaluation, effective planning, and capacity building [33].

### Theoretical Underpinnings to Coordination

The majority of the above information focuses on defining, or evaluating, what the Cluster system is supposed to do, the actions. There is little discussion about what coordination is, or should be.

In 1999, van Brabant outlined a framework on understanding, promoting, and evaluating humanitarian coordination [35]. van Brabant proposed that better collaboration and coordination "starts from the premise that coordination is not an end in itself but an attempt to enhance the quality and impact of the humanitarian response." van Brabant states the concept of 'coordination' encompasses many things, some sharply defined (e.g. integrated planning, common standards, common positioning and others less so (e.g. "working in 'orchestrated' ways that 'converge', are 'coherent', 'informed of and by each other', and stimulate learning from the collective experience"). Coordination is thus an ongoing activity, a process, rather than a blueprint, with a key to success of intellectual leadership, not institutional leadership. Another concept raised by van Brabant is that understanding coordination in either/or terms of 'coordination by command' or 'coordination by consensus' is not entirely helpful, as consensus between large groups is a 'misplaced objective' and that 'more realistically the coordination process seeks to create a 'critical mass'

of leading agencies, whose improved analysis and increased effectiveness makes them more influential in the debates and decisions about interventions.”

The theoretical side of cluster coordination has been a research focal point of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) since 2014. ALNAP has moved the coordination discussion forward by: hosting global level meetings and workshops [36], publishing briefing papers on key issues (including improving humanitarian coordination [37], involving national actors [38], decision-making in humanitarian response [39], and information management [40], and defining the state of the humanitarian system [41], and leading exploratory research into improving coordination [42] and exploring coordination [43]. The reader is referred to the ALNAP website for all the research, in this review the last three are discussed as most relevant.

In the “State of the Humanitarian System,” which is the only document to date that included beneficiaries as a point of data collection discussed this far, “improvements were noted in coordination, and in quality of leadership and personnel in major emergencies” between 2012 and 2015 [41]. It was also noted that there was a lack of coordination between emergency and development partners.

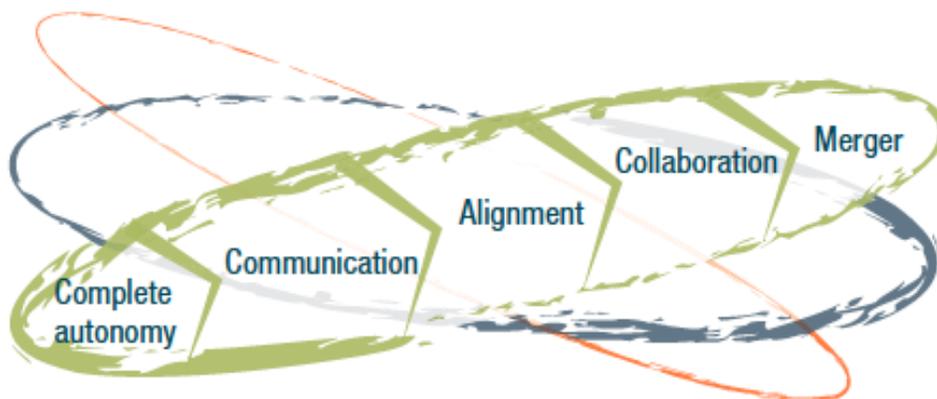
In the Improving Coordination document, it was stated “before investing more in the coordination system, it is important to clarify what this system is expected to actually do” [42]. To improve coordination, it was recommended there should be: mutual trust among agencies, to allow for non-directive, voluntary coordination systems that work effectively; clarification of roles of different elements of the coordination system; increasing the amount and quality of training to improve subnational coordination; increasing participation and influence of national and local civil society organizations; and, improving information management. It was also noted that, in situations where the cluster approach had not been officially instituted, international actors had largely recreated it, suggesting the cluster approach is an appropriate, ‘best fit’ model.

In the Exploring Coordination document, it was found that effective coordination is when cluster(s): address tasks members self-identify as common problems; address problems beyond the capacity of single organization to address; link discussions with donor actions; member organizations embrace a commitment to coordination, have similar culture, and share common goals; receive strong support from the CLA; are independent from the CLA; are well resourced, with effective communication, clarity on roles, and integration of actions between national and subnational levels; take time to develop roles and responsibilities of Cluster members; have an effective Cluster Coordinator who is clear about their role, develops relationships over time, has strong facilitation and communication skills, is proactive and impartial, and has good context and technical knowledge; have strong support from members; have adequate resources, including human resource capacity and funds; have clear and effective information management and decision-making processes; and, have developed trusting relationships [43]. Additionally, clusters can be effective at all states of response, size of the cluster does impact outcomes, clusters have failed to adequately include national non-governmental organizations, and decision-making quality is higher when done by group, rather than individually.

Lastly, the report notes that “there does not seem to be a single, agreed on understanding of what humanitarian coordination actually entails” and proposes a spectrum of coordination, from merger to independent action, stating that it seems ‘alignment’ is the location where the cluster approach can operate (Figure 1) [43]. “In general, when deciding whether and how much to participate in coordinated activities, cluster members weigh the costs of

participation (time, loss of autonomy and of competitive advantage) against the benefits (access to guidance and information, opportunities to build relationships and see the bigger picture, increased legitimacy for activities). For example, alignment may include several organizations voluntarily aligning their activities and outputs with one another while still maintaining their own projects; collaborations have formalized relationships between organizations and less individual autonomy. This research suggests that, for most cluster members, the benefits of a looser, ‘alignment’ level of coordination outweigh the costs. With some exceptions (such as advocacy) the costs of achieving a collaborative level of coordination are too high. It seems that ‘alignment’ is the best fit for coordination in the Clusters.”

**Figure 1 Layers of Coordination [43]**



### Peer-reviewed Manuscripts

First, the work of the ALNAP report was published in peer-reviewed format in 2018 [44]. We identified an additional 12 peer-reviewed manuscripts related to cluster coordination.

Three manuscripts identified challenges to health cluster implementation after the Haiti earthquake, including: 1) challenges in establishing a health surveillance system for IDPs due to rotating staff, followed by recommendations to reinforce the role of international NGOs in clusters, facilitate national and local NGOs participation and, improve mechanisms to deal with multidisciplinary issues and inter-cluster gaps [45]; 2) challenges as the health cluster may have excluded oral health services and equipment from the response, with PAHO (the local partner) stepping into guiding integrating oral health with the primary health care system [46]; and, 3) recommendation to address limitations including inconsistent attendance, poor dissemination of information, and perceived lack of benefit, with logistical support, leading to improved efficiency and outcomes for those affected by disasters [47].

An additional manuscript described challenges with the health cluster, in Uganda, where long-term health cluster staff recommended that clusters should: see coordination as a means to an end and not an end itself, show partners benefits of participating in the cluster, invest in ensuring partners understand and respect the mandates of each other, ensure decision making is transparent, evidence-based and consensus-based, involve governments and donors, particularly for staffing, respond to changing humanitarian environments, develop a transition plan, follow the transformative agenda framework, and develop clear exit strategies [48]. A challenge with the food security cluster in

Somalia was also identified, as, due to political reasons, the CLA could not be the provider of last resort in this context, and thus there was inadequate food security [49].

Successful coordination mechanisms were identified in Nepal and Pakistan. In Nepal, a reproductive health sub-cluster was established under the health cluster and worked with GBV to deliver a minimum reproduction health package; except in sub-national clusters which took time to activate, this led to good access to the minimum reproduction health package [50]. In Pakistan, there was successful inter-cluster coordination, assisted by the government, between WASH, health, and nutrition clusters to focus on the rights of the mother and children to nutrition and safe water [51]. However, it was also noted in another manuscript that the adoption of the cluster approach in Pakistan had lack of clear leadership, especially in large clusters of >600 agencies, and there was a need to work closely with the National Disaster Management Agency, who adopted the cluster approach [52].

Three systematic reviews of coordination mechanisms have been completed. The first assessed health services in humanitarian crises [53], identifying 34 documents, 16 of which used the cluster mechanism. The other mechanisms used were 4W's, Sphere Standards, 5x5, and information coordination (the authors did not appear to know that 4W's is incorporated into the cluster system. Further research on humanitarian coordination mechanisms was recommended. The second assessed NGO coordination mechanisms in natural hazards [54], seven studies were eligible with 8 coordination models (Sphere project, cluster approach, code of conduct, decentralized approach, National Disaster Response Framework, conceptual integrated NGO collaboration framework for community post-disaster reconstruction, model of temporal coordination of disaster response activities, and Collabit application) extracted. It was recommended NGOs review these methods for implementation. The third systematic review was on providing or financing health services in humanitarian crises [55]; four studies (all very low quality) were identified. One study examined strengths and weaknesses of the cluster approach in relation to sexual and reproductive health in Uganda, the investigators reported improvements in coordination, particularly due to mapping and that the Gender Based Violence (GBV) cross cutting issue harmonized their strategy, reduced duplication, and encouraged more effective provision of services [56].

### Summary of Literature Review

The information found in the above literature review forms the following summary of general coordination information:

**Evolution** - The cluster approach has evolved to match the needs of humanitarian crises. There have been vast improvements over time, particularly, process-based indicators of cluster approach success. Consistently, the vast majority of respondents support the cluster approach, and feel it is a best-fit model.

**Cost-effectiveness** - The cost of the cluster approach is relatively small, and respondents consistently found it provided value for money.

**Successful Coordination** - Commonalities of successful coordination mechanisms included: people/staff who can balance the soft skills of coordination with hard technical skills; and, ease-of-working in and pre-existing coordination structures in the context.

**Trade-offs for Partners** – Participations with the cluster approach was positive, but the negative the burden of time commitments was often mentioned.



**Challenges to Coordination** - There have been intractable challenges with the cluster approach since initiation, most particularly around working with local and governmental partners, working at the national and sub-national level, and working with other clusters. Barriers were consistently identified of language, confusing cluster approach language, access, and lack of respect.

**Evaluation of Cluster** - While there has been development of multiple monitoring and evaluation protocols for the cluster approach (CCPM, data mapping, IEHE), no evaluation herein went beyond self-reported metrics of coordination, and only one evaluation included information from the beneficiaries. The Minimum Requirements and subsequent monitoring have begun to address the low beneficiary involvement; however, without a theory of change for the cluster approach, it is difficult to develop indicators to assess success, various evaluations have used OECD/DAC indicators, or attempted to develop a theory of change for humanitarian coordination within the report.

In WASH humanitarian coordination mechanisms in particular, like with the general coordination mechanisms, the initial results were promising and modifications were recommended. Over time, WASH humanitarian coordination has generally performed better than other clusters, particular with technical field support (FST) mechanisms. However, poor-quality reporting, a need for a theory of change for the GWC, and more support for monitoring and evaluation have been consistently noted as challenges and areas for next steps in WASH humanitarian coordination. From a theoretical perspective, there is a need to define where on the “autonomy to merger” spectrum (also known as the “communication, alignment, collaboration” spectrum) the WASH humanitarian coordination mechanism, and all coordination mechanisms would like to be. There is a strong need to understand what the Clusters are attempting to accomplish, in order to evaluate it.

The vast majority of the peer-reviewed literature focuses on the health cluster, with most literature critical of cluster operations. Only one peer-reviewed manuscript discussed the WASH cluster, detailing a program where WASH, health, and nutrition worked together to provide services, an example of successful inter-cluster coordination. In summary, what is of most particular note in this literature review is the lack of a theory of change to base a logical framework for the cluster approach, which could then be used to complete a rigorous evaluation.

### 3.2 Review of UNICEF Documents

UNICEF provided the Tufts team a total of 125 documents, including: 16 RAT assessments, 16 RECA assessments, 49 FST reports, 30 RRT reports, 5 JMM reports, and 9 other documents. Additionally, the Tufts team reviewed the GWC meeting meetings over the past 13 years. To organize the summary of this data set, Tufts placed “other documents” in the literature review in the first section of the discussion, and recategorized the RAT/RECA/ RRT/ FST assessments and reports into “end-of-mission” reports or not. Subsequently, it was determined to only include FST/RRT documents in “end-of-mission” reports, as they had the most comparable and valuable information. Based on the extractable evidence from this data set, we are presenting: 1) a written summary of GWC meeting minute notes; 2) a summary of all FST/RRT ‘end-of-mission’ reports; and, 3) a summary of JMM reports.

#### GWC Meeting Minutes

The GWC has held 23 meetings with stakeholders over the past 13 years. Meeting minutes documented a steady increase in participants from 20-30 over the first few meetings to 128 and 115 for annual meetings in 2016 and 2018,



respectively. This steady increase in willing participation could suggest that partners find value in the cluster and wider coordination. Evolution in GWC priorities could also be observed from the meeting minutes, from the initial rollout of the cluster approach to the creation of the RRT and large field evaluations. However, the disparate nature of meeting minutes precluded further analysis.

### RRT/FST End-of-Mission Reports

The goal of an RRT or FST mission is to provide short-term support to the NHCWP from the GWC. Typically, support missions are focused on coordination support (i.e. temporary CC) or assistance with information management. Following each mission, a report is written to detail activities and provide recommendations moving forward. A total of 74 FST/RRT end-of-mission reports with detailed feedback were coded in NVivo software, then summarized using thematic analysis.

Reports were analysed from 26 missions between 2008-2013 under RRT programs, and 48 missions from 2014-2018 under FST programs. There is a trend of increasing support over time. Both the RRT and FST framework covered similar duties and expectations of: short-term coordination support to the NHCWP through Cluster Coordinator, Information Manager, or specialized roles. The missions were based on cluster needs and availability of staff.

A total of 33 countries were supported through the FST or RRT programs, with 89% (66/74) of country-level NHCWPs visited receiving at least two missions between 2008 and 2018. Two countries with more than three support missions over this time period were Chad and Ethiopia (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Of the 12 countries with 3 or more RRT/FST missions, 11 (92%) had multiple missions in the same year. The paired missions were typically split between roles, for example a CC and IM, and could also be split between national and sub-national locations, indicating a broad need for coordination support.



**Table 1: Countries by number of RRT/FST missions**

Countries	RRT/FST Missions (#)
Chad, Ethiopia	4
CAR, Haiti, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Myanmar, Niger, South Sudan, Turkey, Yemen	3
Cameroon, DRC, Ecuador, Kenya, Lebanon, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine	2
Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Horn of Africa, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zimbabwe	1

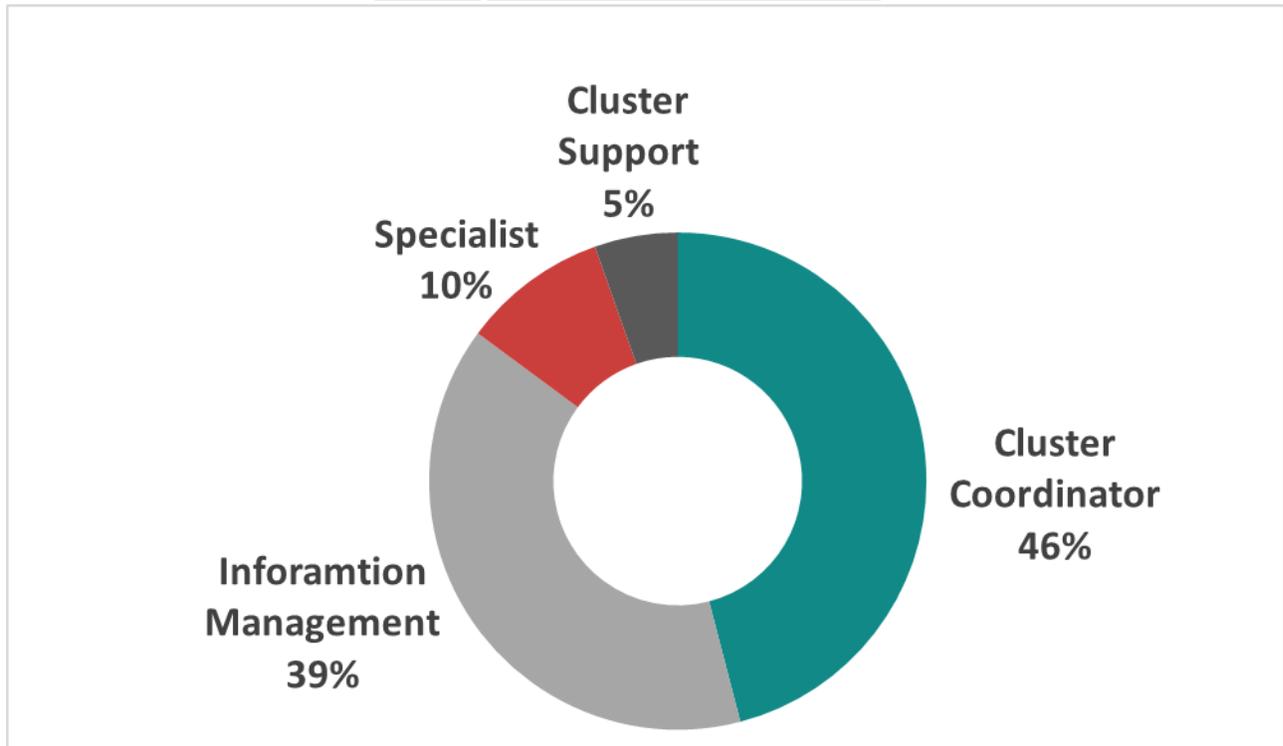
More than half of the missions (55%, 41/74) were to support conflict or complex emergencies, including conflict related displacement and overlapping emergencies (e.g. Somalia with concurrent conflict and cholera related response) (Table 2).

**Table 2: End-of-mission reports by emergency type**

Emergency Type	Frequency (%)
Conflict/Complex	41 (55%)
Drought & Food Security	9 (12%)
Typhoon/Hurricane	6 (8%)
Disease Outbreaks	6 (8%)
Flooding	6 (8%)
Population Displacement	3 (4%)
Earthquake	2 (3%)
Protracted	1 (1%)

Nearly half of the support missions were to fill CC (46%, 34/74), with IM support roles also a large portion of missions (39%, 29/74) (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Technical specialists, for example social mobilization or cholera focal point experts, accounted for 9% (7/74) of the missions. The remaining 4 missions were for general cluster support. The average duration of missions was 9 weeks (min=2; max=24; stdev=4.6).

**FIGURE 2 END OF MISSION REPORTS BY ROLE**



End-of-mission reports are generally short documents (<10 pages), with key findings and recommendations highlighted. From the 74 reports, 219 key findings were summarized into 11 primary themes (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The most prominent theme was the successful use of, or encouraging use of, existing tools and templates (mentioned 27 times). This was described as using current templates from the GWC, keeping tools simple and easy to use, and resisting the temptation of adding data requests to existing formats. The use of generic terms of reference (ToR) was repeatedly dissuaded. Defining the specific purpose and objectives of the role was highly encouraged as a lesson learned, but also missions that had clearly defined ToR, as described by the individual, also commented on the success of achieving their objectives because of having a clearly defined role (mentioned 25 times).

Thorough pre-deployment preparation was found to be an indicator for self-assessed success (**Error! Reference source not found.**). This was viewed as having a head start on understanding the context and unique demands that will be encountered. Additionally, taking the time, before deployment, to arrange in-country meeting and logistical issues like having a local SIM card avoided unnecessary delays. Previous experience in a country was also a strong finding, with basic understanding of the local culture, context, and geography being an asset. The broad demands on RRT/FST staff also materialized with an emphasis on both the people skills and technical skills. The soft (people) skills are needed to build collaboration with agencies voluntarily buying into the cluster demands. Face to face meetings and dedicated effort to meet and interact with the partners is necessary – from an CC or an IM. On the other hand, having strong technical skills needed to guide the response in a strong quality-focused manner is also

needed. Encouraging dedicated staff, instead of double-hatting with Unicef country programs, was also widely reported. This was also

emphasized with needing to ‘maintain autonomy’ and having a clear ToR so as to not be pulled away from cluster demands.

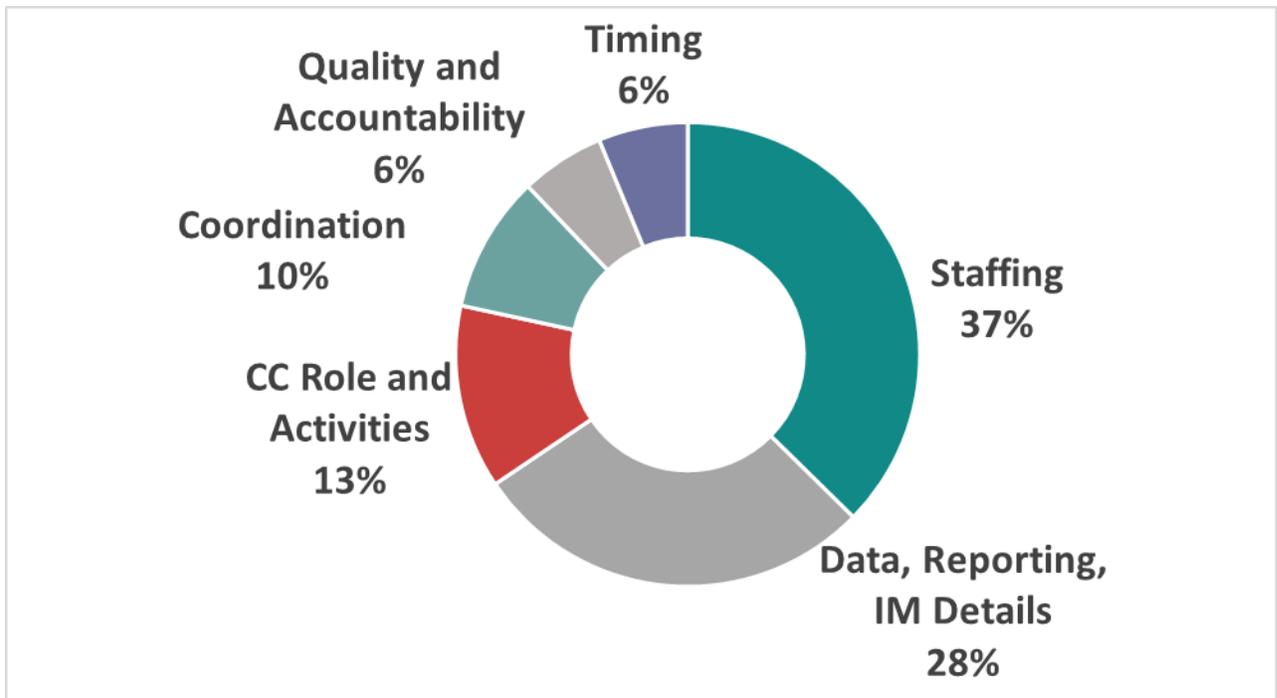
**Table 3: Key Findings from RRT/FST reports**

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count (#)*</b>
<b>RRT/FST on Mission</b>	Use Existing Tools	27
	Encourage Buy-in with Partners	11
	Encourage Inter-Cluster Coordination	6
	Address Data Available – often Poor Quality	6
<b>Recruitment and Pre-deployment for RRT/FST on GWC Level</b>	Clarify and Define Role (ToR)	25
	Dedicated Staffing (CC or IM) is Needed	14
	Personal (Soft) Skills are Important for Recruitment	14
	Pre-Deployment Preparation is Necessary	13
	Technical Skills Important	8
<b>RRT/FST on Mission and GWC</b>	Awareness of Context Challenges (HR/Logistics/Security)	17
	Support from Unicef, Government is Strong Asset	9

\*Themes identified in 5 or less reports were not listed individually

Recommendations identified by RRT/FST staff were separately analysed. Recommendations did mirror the findings, but also addressed what RRT/FST staff saw as tangible steps forward. Overall, 41 unique recommendations were identified, then grouped along the themes of: staffing, information management, CC role, coordination, quality and accountability, and timing (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3 END-OF-MISSION RECOMMENDATIONS BY GENERAL THEME**



Recommendations around staffing were 37% of recommendations, and emphasized the need for: better defined roles (ToRs); capacity building opportunities with IMOs, CCs, and responders; dedicated staff; and, long-term objectives for roles beyond a couple months (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Support for information management was mentioned in 28% of recommendations (Figure 3). This was described by: encouraging the need for common templates and indicators, maintaining a master data sheet, and, supporting knowledge sharing platforms and reducing duplication of data and reporting. Value of information management was shown through the high frequency of ‘capacity building for information managers’ and requests to increase staffing in the information management role (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Recommendations around the CC role and expectations were mentioned in 13% of recommendations (Figure 3). Improving communication, strategic focus, and advocating for funding were identified as opportunities for the CC (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Improving coordination was mentioned in 10% of recommendations, with 19 individual mentions of improving inter-cluster coordination needed (**Error! Reference source not found., Error! Reference source not found.**). Defining a quality response and service provision beyond Sphere was mentioned in 6% of recommendations. Lastly, there were opportunities identified to improve the timeliness of a response with streamlined procedures and better use of pre-positioned stock was mentioned in 6% of recommendations.

**Table 4: End-of-Mission Recommendations by Detailed Theme**

General Theme	Detailed Theme	Count (#)*
<b>Staffing</b>	Better define roles	22
	Capacity building - IM	22
	Increase dedicated staff	18
	Stronger long-term plan for CC/IM roles	12
	Capacity building - CC	10
	Capacity building - Responders (NGOs/Govt)	7
	Transition plans requires significant effort	6
	More experienced staff in key roles	3
<b>Data, Reporting, IM Details</b>	Common indicators, SOPs or Templates	23
	Support knowledge sharing	20
	Maintaining master dataset	10
	Reduce duplication of data/reporting	10
	Encourage better 4W reporting	9
	Quality of information an issue	5
<b>CC Role &amp; Activities</b>	Improve strategic focus	7
	Better communication between CC and CLA	6
	Advocacy for funding	6
	Improve cluster meetings - more discussion	5
	Better communication for sub-national CC	4
	More assessments needed	3
<b>Coordination</b>	Inter-cluster coordination needs improving	19
	Cross border coordination needed	3
<b>Quality and Accountability</b>	Quality - Support service delivery	8
	Quality - Establishment of expectations	7
<b>Timing</b>	Logistic access/delays - visa, security, other	7
	Faster deployment – streamlined, better equipped	6
	Maintain effort for prepositioned stock	4

\*Themes identified in 3 or less reports were not shown

## JMM Reports

Two emergency focused donors, the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation (ECHO) and the United States Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), funded the GWC support mechanisms, including the RRT, RAT, RECA, and FST. A total of five Joint Monitoring Missions (JMM) were conducted between 2012 and 2018 with representatives from the donors, the GWC, and NGO partners taking part in the evaluations 5 (Table 5). The aim of these missions was to monitor the impact and usefulness of the support mechanisms to the overall humanitarian response. Please note that methods were not described in the evaluations, so it is unclear how they were conducted.

**Table 5: List of JMM evaluations**

Year	Country	Response
2012	Philippines	Flood emergency
2014	Central African Republic	Complex Emergency / Insecurity
2015	Philippines	Typhoon Haiyan
2016	Ukraine	Complex Emergency / Insecurity
2018	Bangladesh	Refugee Emergency

Across the five responses, the support mechanisms were consistently described as, “necessary, appropriate and relevant.” Deployments of GWC support were positive and effective, yet the JMM highlighted several challenges and opportunities for improvements, including: challenging complex contexts, increasing technical expertise, terms of deployments, transitioning away from emergencies, and discussing quality.

**Complex Context.** Responses in CAR and Ukraine were notably more challenging from a coordination perspective than the other contexts. Both of CAR and Ukraine had difficulty in recruitment, which delayed the support and reduced impact. Both responses were also complex emergencies with insecurity, weak local capacity, and a difficult political landscape compared to the other emergencies.

**Technical Experts.** While the support mechanisms are intended to improve coordination, three of the five evaluations described opportunities to have specific technical experts as part of the teams; specific examples of opportunities included: Faecal Sludge Management (FSM) expert for the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh and water network engineer in Ukraine. Partnering with Reach, an NGO dedicated to evaluations, was positive and encouraged; responses that did not utilize Reach’s expertise viewed it as a missed opportunity. IM, experts of data management, were also described as being very positive and a great contribution to the response. Specifically, the tools and web sharing of information on WASH activities was positively described.

**Terms of Deployments.** There was clear utilization and appreciation of GWC support mechanisms to assist the response. Where deployments of coordinators, IM, and RECA were extended or longer than the typical 12 weeks, it was greatly valued. Also, comments of a 12-week mission were described as “too short to

crystallize tangible outputs” and high turnover was viewed as a challenge. Clarity of roles was also described as a challenge with additional demands being placed on staff or encouraging ‘double-hatting.’

**Transition.** The need to establish an exit strategy as emergencies transition was consistently discussed, but there was no clear description in how to achieve a transition toward development without a strong baseline capacity. In the Philippines and Bangladesh, the cluster approach utilized previously existing coordination mechanisms, with this also being an opportunity to handover. In other contexts, national capacity being weak or inconsistent was described as a major hurdle without clear path for handover or long-term planning.

**Discussion on quality.** Quality of response was consistently identified as a challenge, how to identify quality, and who is responsible to monitor. IMs described the 4Ws and partner participation as often being inconsistent or weak which undermined the confidence in reporting and accountability.

### 3.3 Key Informant Interviews

All 15 cluster-experienced personnel whose names were provided by UNICEF to Tufts researchers were contacted, and 14 interviews were conducted. Nine out of 14 informants were CCs (64%), two were IMOs (14%), two were RECAAs (14%), and one was UNICEF staff (7%). Among the 14 informants, 11 are currently serving with the WASH cluster team. Half of respondents studied engineering or technical studies; the remaining studied information management, social studies, development studies, and anthropology. Respondents reported working in humanitarian response from 10->30 years, with an average 5 years of experience with the WASH cluster team (range: 2-10 years). Respondents had experience working with UNICEF, and various agencies and NGOs, including Save the Children, ACF, IMC, MSF, WHO, and Oxfam across contexts in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South America.

Seven themes organically evolved from qualitative analysis of the interviews, including: 1) ideal WASH cluster coordination; 2) cluster activities; 3) cluster staffing; 4) relationships between stakeholders and cluster; 5) current trends in coordination; 6) perceived impact of cluster coordination; and, 7) suggestions for future coordination. Each of these themes are further described below, with concurrent analysis.

#### Ideal WASH Coordination

Ideal cluster coordination was described on a spectrum from a minimum commitment from the lead agencies or lead government to have dedicated personnel in place for coordination and information management, to a holistic approach incorporating local research to fill gaps and prioritizing resource allocation to inform strategic decision making. For example, one respondent described the ideal WASH cluster coordination as:

*“mirror something related to optimization channel, the use of resources ... communication and bringing partners to a common understanding in terms of strategy, direction, tools and approaches, monitoring resources and partners ...for gaps and needs, and using ... that to prioritize resource allocation .. [and] advocate for gaps to be filled, ... for resources and ... to inform strategic decision making at higher levels”*

Ideally the overarching goal of cluster coordination was described as “*in an ideal scenario, you’d have a quality humanitarian WASH response*” by one respondent, with another noting that “*some kind of accountability towards the community*” is needed for an ideal response.

Respondents also noted the following key characteristics needed for ideal coordination specifically for the CC role: strong understanding of the cluster strategy and the local response strategy, knowledge of local and international expertise and how to deploy both, participatory attitude, and effectively utilizing an information management system. Respondents highlighted that the effective way to implement the strategy is to ensure broad stakeholder participation, including “*effective and real government leadership,*” in strategy development and all stages of implementation.

### *Cluster Activities*

Respondents detailed a list of cluster activities that included operations at multiple levels, including:

- Developing regional strategic vision for response (including needs assessments)
- Developing of framework and strategic vision for specific response
- Managing funding and donors in the response
- Completing day-to-day activities, such as meetings and bringing partners together
- Leading technical working groups or sector partners in identifying technical issues
- Developing technical standards and guidelines for the response, ensuring quality
- Completing field visits
- Coordinating with local government and/or non-state actors
- Providing operational support to regional sub-cluster platforms
- Capacity building with government and partners
- Completing inter-sectoral coordination with other clusters
- Reporting against the HRP and core functions of the cluster
- Supporting the HC/HCP

For information management specifically, respondents stated that the role of an information manager is to: “map our stakeholders, know our people, know our context.” Information management is supported by a number of tools and systems that were put in place at the global level, originating from years of country experience that are part of the information management toolkit of the GWC (<https://washcluster.net/resources/ctk>). Additionally, IM is normally “done hand-in-hand with the coordinator” and “something we do from the very start in any kind of mission.”

Respondents highlighted that it is crucial to complete this “coordination with a purpose, coordination with clear deliverables” as “there’s no use to just collect data for the sake of collecting data” and that clusters should be operationalized, rather than simply “feeding into strategies and writing documents.”

An unsupported activity described by one respondent was a lack of access to beneficiaries. This disconnect with the beneficiaries was described as “ [beneficiary contact is] something that goes a little bit beyond what the cluster is

mandated to do, but partners are affected by it. So how do you deal with problems that your partners are facing that the cluster doesn't have the mandate to support you on?"

### Cluster Staffing

To complete the wide variety of cluster activities noted above, all respondents highlighted the crucial importance of staffing, including: 1) the need for dedicated CC and IMO staffing, and the risks of “*double hatting*”; 2) the importance of soft skills and personality; 3) the importance of appropriate training, including pre-deployment training, for cluster staff; 4) the need for additional anthropological resources and training; and, 5) the negatives of staff turnover and personal cost of cluster coordination work.

Respondents stated that “*staffing is always a limitation*” except in the largest and most well-funded responses (e.g. Cox's Bazar). Universally, respondents emphasized the need for dedicated, non-double hatted staff for cluster coordination: the word “*dedicated*” was used 68 times across the 14 interviews to describe the need for staffing, and the risks of “*double (or triple) hatting*” was noted 22 times. Alternatively, one respondent described an advantage of double-hatting which included the flexibility of additional funding through Unicef that would not normally be as accessible as a dedicated CC.

Additionally, respondents noted the need for staffing to have both technical and soft skills - moving away from the assumption that WASH people should be engineers to highlighting people who have the right attitude for leadership and have a good understanding of the sector. It was also noted that successful coordination is very dependent on the personality of the CC; one respondent described this as, “... you can get as many coordination trainings as you like, but that doesn't mean you're going to be a good coordinator.” One respondent noted the importance of experience and maturity, while another respondent noted that “because a lot of what we expect from a Coordinator is interpersonal skills, his [or her] networking skills [are important], and then at the national Cluster Coordinator, you also want a visionary and a leader.”

Respondents noted the importance of pre-deployment training, particularly the cluster coordination courses, and highlighted the need to complete research on the context before deployment. The need for anthropology background, training and skills in the response, in particular, was noted seven times by respondents, with respondents noting “*most of the contexts we don't have access to anthropologists of course.*”

Lastly, respondents noted the personal costs of the coordination work, including: career costs (e.g. concerns with ‘cluster coordinator’ as an ill-defined title on a resume that is not known or respected, the lack of career trajectory “*you'll be stuck, you'll be stuck in coordination. There's no career prospectives,*” emotional costs (“*once you take a break, you realize there were some very tough things,*” “*when you sit back and reflect ... some really tough times,*” “*there's also an emotional impact that is, is that, that is quite big*”), the difficulty of “*letting go*” of a context, the demands of the job (as coordination roles have many varied activities and it is a “*quite demanding job*” to do well), and dissatisfaction with the remote (away from beneficiaries) aspect of the job (“*I'm a bit fed up with this, a remote stuff and, I would like one day to go back to something more practical and be able to see a bit more from the project*”). These costs were noted as leading to high turnover rates, that necessitates more training and hinders response.

## Relationship between Cluster and Cluster Members/Stakeholders

Cluster activities are completed within a larger organizational framework, including: national and international organizations, national governments, UNICEF, the GWC, the larger humanitarian response structure, and beneficiaries. Respondents described the successes and challenges working within these organizational structures. Respondents described **responding organizations** having tension with participating in the cluster, in terms of benefits (e.g. information, coordination, funding, strategic framework) and drawbacks (e.g. time to engage, additional reporting outside of funding donor requirements, confusing requests for information). Respondents highlighted the need to ensure that coordination was a two-way dialogue:

*So, then it [coordination] ... produce [s] a lot of smoke but not a lot of practical, useful tools. And I think that in this we don't send enough things back to the partners." Additionally, one respondent stated that "I find it appalling that most agency sees the cluster as a drag" and another stated that "coordination has been started a couple of years ago to be too much complex. Sometime myself, I'm completely lost in who should do exactly what, where are the key documents.*

Respondents described the relationship with **national governments** as varying greatly by context, including whether or not the government was aware and familiar with coordination or not, if there were duplicative government structures on coordination that created tension with the cluster system, and if the government or a non-state actor was appropriate to work with to meet the needs of the affected population. Respondents stated the relationships with government were necessary and crucial, and that it *"takes a lot of time and engagement to make sure we keep those relationships very strong."* The need to work with the government to maintain access to the population was mentioned, but the tension between the humanitarian needs and long-term objectives were also described. *"At the end of the day, every cluster should keep in mind that they need to phase out and then hand over to the government national agencies so that cluster is merging to sector and then government are able to take the responsibility by their own."*

With few exceptions, respondents considered **UNICEF** supportive of coordination, however, uncertain reporting lines were noted as concerns by respondents. The triple hatting of UNICEF in humanitarian response – as agency/donor, as CLA for the WASH Cluster, and as responder (particularly in conflict-affected contexts such as Syria and Yemen) – was noted as having a high potential for conflict of interest: *"we have a funding role to partner, we have a coordination role, and we have a direct implementation role ... that needs to be really carefully addressed within a cluster to avoid a conflict of interest."* Additionally, as six of the 14 respondents had a double-hat role, i.e. working as the CC and for UNICEF simultaneously, it was regularly noted to complicate reporting lines: *"at times your [HCT] representative needs to be aware of the issues that are coming up ... reporting the UNICEF WASH section looks bad ... so you're between a rock and a hard place because on one hand you need to let the rep know. But, on the other hand you could be exposing your [UNICEF] manager."*

Respondents universally spoke positively of the **GWC's** support to national clusters, particularly with the field support and technical assistance available from FSTs, RRTs, and RATs, and with funding. Respondents found that these teams were able to provide rapid support and were easy to deploy capacity to support coordination: *"there was a lot of support that came from the field support team... and that helped to improve our capacity."* There one negative comment from one respondent was that the GWC operates and makes policy too far removed from the field.

With the **larger humanitarian response** structures, respondents noted there were some concerns with establishing appropriate organizational structures. In particular, in Bangladesh, a respondent noted that: *“We have somewhere in a triangle between normal OCHA-cluster, the refugee model led by UNHCR and the sector model led by the government. We are somewhere in between depending on the day.”* One respondent noted that relationships between OCHA-UNHCR-UNICEF-Cluster had an impact on technical coordinator, with some actors pushing their own technical solutions.

Universally, respondents stated that they did not directly work with **beneficiaries** as a stakeholder, stating: *“they [beneficiaries] wouldn’t know [about the cluster],” “they probably don’t know it [the cluster] exists,”* and, *“I have never seen a subnational cluster meeting or a national cluster meeting with people from the community.”* One respondent stated: *“I’m not so sure that the beneficiaries see the cluster, but they would see the potential impacts or positive impacts that might be rolled out through the cluster.”* Respondents did note the importance of feedback and complaint mechanisms, with one stating: *“I was never able to witness for example, a feedback and complaints mechanism that would be well structured enough in an emergency.”* Respondents did not feel this was a negative, stating: *“I think it’s neither good nor bad. It is what it is, and honestly it is our theme, our focus is to ensure that they get quality response. It doesn’t really matter if they [the beneficiaries] know that.”*

### Current Trends in Coordination

During the discussions, there were current trends that emerged that respondents discussed, including the role of context, including security; and the activities of capacity building, guideline/tool development, monitoring, assessing quality, and inter-cluster coordination.

One statement, *“it depends,”* was mentioned 44 times and meant to suggest the appropriate and successful way to coordinate varied by context: *“I would have to say that it depended on the, on the emergency, on the country and on the timing.”* As mentioned above, understanding the context is key to successful coordination.

The role of security was mentioned as a contextual factor multiple times, with some contexts mentioning it was not a concern (Myanmar) and others saying it severely impacted the coordination response (Yemen, Syria). Overall, respondents felt UNICEF handled security for staff quite well, stating: *“security .. pretty much very well dealt with. Whenever we are sent to the field, we have to abide to UN security, and they tend to take this very seriously.” “it’s never had a negative impact on my work. The only times where it kind of for me had, there were some constraints were the times where the UN security was a bit too harsh.”* One respondent did note circumventing UNICEF security in order to complete field visits by traveling with partners, and another mentioned inconsistent security protocols across contexts (severe restrictions in one conflict context, and much less severe in another).

In terms of activities that coordination staff is working on:

**Capacity Building** - Five responders pointed out that they made capacity building successful to support local partners including government, with technical and non-technical areas.

**Monitoring** - Monitoring was mentioned as an important activity, with successes using third-party monitoring, end-user monitoring, the organization REACH to collect data, and with collecting data over time. The next step respondents were working on is to ensure results are fed back into programming.

**Guidance Tools** - The development of guidance and tools was mentioned as a successful outcome of coordination.

**Inter-cluster Coordination** - Some successes were seen in inter-cluster coordination, particularly when regular meetings were held, although one respondent did note: “we are failing at is actually the inter-sectoral aspects of coordination ... but it's interesting to me to see that whenever we're questioning the whole cluster approach, what we're actually criticizing is the inter-sectoral aspect of that cluster approach.”

### Perceived Impact of Coordination

Respondents noted the following impacts of cluster coordination: 1) establishing of coordination as a mechanism and a sense of improvement of coordination over time; 2) capacity building; and, 3) prevention of outbreaks and disease. Lastly, respondents noted what is needed next for cluster coordination.

The first set of impacts noted by respondents were around how far the coordination system has come, with respondents stating: *“I think there is a widespread acceptance today of the importance of coordination and we've come a long way, I think since 2005 until today”* and *“I do believe in coordination.”* Respondents felt there was *“a clear pathway on how to progress on building knowledge and experience in coordination”* and coordination *“helps the NGOs actually do what they're meant to do it in a more timely and dedicated way.”* This was compared to the pre-coordination time, when *“before the cluster system, the lack of coordination obviously created a lot of issues. It was impossible to know how many organizations, how many NGOs, were in the country and what kind of programs where they were actually implementing.”*

Respondents note, consistently, that they had seen impacts with capacity building and advocacy with local organizations and governments, discussing how local structures began adopting coordination mechanisms and stating: *“One impact I've been seeing is really the, the ways that some NGOs, that some local authorities have really acknowledged with capacity building.”* and *“I remember ... was in that meeting where he said that there was cluster was doing brilliant work that our advocacy has been, really impressive.”*

Unprompted, four respondents noted that the impact of cluster coordination was evident by the lack of an outbreak: *“no recorded outbreak of acute watery diarrhoea. So basically, we prevented any outbreak of diseases, ...that's the primary function of the, WASH response”* and *“the overall goal is to contain public health risks and outbreaks. We have not had a public health outbreak so that we have ticked the box,”* *“we have not had an outbreak,”* and *“there was no outbreak of any water borne diseases.”* Additionally, a respondent noted how rapidly the humanitarian response plan was established in response to the outbreak after Cyclone Idai in Mozambique.

Another theme that threaded through the respondent's response was that of “a never-ending quest for an improvement” in coordination, raising the question of what is next for coordination? One respondent stated: *“Yes, I'm still keen on the cluster WASH. I think there is a real added value, but I think but I think the cluster WASH part is a bit tired.”* Another stated: *“We now want to take this to the next level because we've received very positive feedback. This is the way it has impacted the way the partners, do their programming. But now we want to take it to the next level.... it had an impact, over time.”*

For next steps, respondents specifically raised the need to understand impact at the community level (“*what impact does cluster have in terms of affected communities remains yet to be demonstrated*”), how to be accountable (“*the context of accountability, increased accountability and also value for money*”), and, specifically the need to investigate the quality of interventions (“*Quality of interventions is another issue and that’s also highly variable.*” “*You might find yourself in a situation where a lot of the objectives or the response lines have been achieved, but you can actually go to the field to look at the quality of interventions.*”)

### Suggestions for Future Coordination

Based on the above, respondents had a set of suggestions for the future of cluster coordination, including recommendations to:

**Background of Context** - Learn about a context before deployment, with increased anthropological resources:

- “*One of the biggest recommendations is ... enough time despite of all the requirements ... [to] know your context from different perspectives.*”
- “*Something that we need to nurture and we need to be able to have a clear understanding of who are the people, and who are the decision makers....*”
- Work within resources in a context, particularly in incorporating the private sector.

**Guidance and Standards** - Leverage the resources of global coordination, including adapting guidelines and standards from other contexts, understanding toolkits available, and reaching out to speak with other cluster staff:

- “*There’s been so many guidance and standards existing from other countries.*”
- “*The advantage of the global WASH cluster document is a bit like a toolkit. I mean, a toolkit, it’s a box and you have various tools inside. You pick and choose whatever you want.*”

**Cluster Coordinator Training** – Emphasize opportunities for CC training to ensure a cadre of cluster-trained personnel:

- “*There used to be in the past a cluster coordination training, and it was quite good actually,,, the idea was to train as many as coordination professionals as possible and they’ve trained a lot of people.*”
- “*These days I act more on the retention of people who know what they’re doing or making sure that people who are doing the job know what they’re doing or have support from people who do know what they’re doing.*”

### 3.4 Theory of Change

As described above, the need for a ToC to represent the cluster approach and/or humanitarian coordination has been previously noted. The first cluster approach logic model identified was not specific to WASH, but instead the cluster approach globally; including inputs (global cluster support, emergency preparedness), outputs (predictable leadership, partnership and cohesiveness, accountability); outcomes (gaps filled, greater coverage, ownership and connectedness); and, effects (improved overall humanitarian coordination) [19]. In the absence of a ToC, reports have turned to the OECD-DAC indicators to evaluate the cluster approach, which may not be appropriate given the development focus of the indicators.

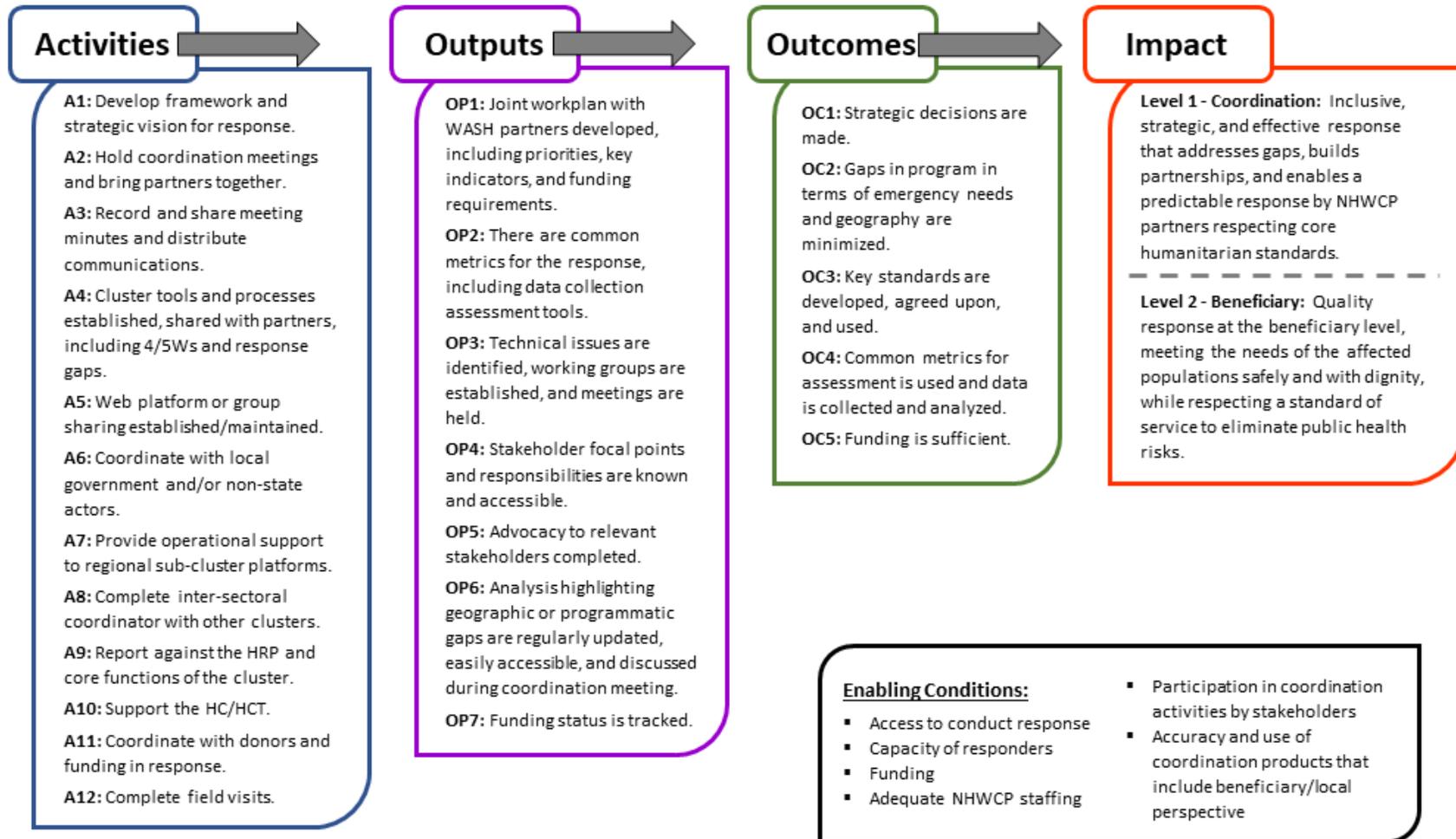


Working in collaboration, the authors iteratively developed the following ToC specifically for NHWCP. As can be seen (**Error! Reference source not found.**), it includes activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts at two levels that could be anticipated from NHWCP. It draws on the literature review described in the previous section, information from the CAST team, and the 6+1 minimum requirements document [16].

Please note that the stakeholders referred to in the ToC include all layers of response that the WASH Cluster operates within, national and international organizations, national governments, UNICEF, the GWC, the larger humanitarian response structure, and beneficiaries. Additionally, in order to progress through the ToC to reach impact, enabling conditions are needed. Enabling conditions to move between *activities to outputs* include that there is permission to access the response, capacity of responders to respond, funding for the response, and there is adequate NHWCP adequate staffing (e.g. dedicated national CC and IMO, appropriate sub-national staffing). Enabling conditions to move between *outputs to outcomes/impact* include that there is participation in coordination activities by stakeholders, use of coordination products, and that coordination activities and products are accurate and include beneficiary and local perspective.

It is important to note that coming to agreement on this ToC was a protracted process, with significant discussion around the ultimate impact of the cluster. In particular, there were concerns with the ToC from the perspective of whether the impact at a beneficiary level (Level 2 – Impact) could be attributed to NHWCP activities since response activities passed through partners.

FIGURE 4 PROPOSED NHWCP THEORY OF CHANGE





## 4 Discussions and Conclusions

Over the course of approximately one year time frame, Tufts University and GWC worked collaboratively to completed three activities (a literature review of previous information on coordination; a review of internal UNICEF documents on coordination related to its CLA mandate; and, key informant interviews with cluster experienced personnel) that culminated in the development of a theory of change specific to NHWCPs. Across this extensive and far-reaching overview, we found highly consistent themes, some challenges noted, a larger question of ‘what is next’, and a need for rigorous evaluation to document lessons learned from coordination.

As can be seen in the figure on the next page (Figure 5), there are strikingly consistent themes across the three disparate data sets, including: the underlying need for the cluster approach, as a best-fit model; the sense of evolution of the cluster approach, that it is getting better over time, particularly with process-based indicators; the sense of what the cluster approach is, as a holistic approach incorporating local research to fill gaps and prioritizing resource allocation to inform strategic decision making and have a quality response that includes government; the key importance of dedicated, consistent, staff that has both technical WASH skills and softer coordination skills; the sense that the cluster approach is cost-effective; the fact there is a trade-off to cluster participation that needs to be considered and balanced by NHWCP staff and partners; the importance of context and pre-existing coordination mechanisms to coordination; the difficulties in operating with disparate partners and complex structures; the challenges of sub-national coordination, inter-cluster coordination, and working with national governments; the lack of non-subjective monitoring of cluster impact; the sense that guidance documents, tools, capacity building, and reductions in outbreaks are impacts of the cluster; and, a sense of ‘what is next’ for the cluster approach, with questions on quality of response and accountability to beneficiaries needing to be addressed.



**FIGURE 5 KEY RESULTS FROM 3 INVESTIGATIONS (LITERATURE REVIEW, UNICEF DOCUMENTS, KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS)**

Literature Review (LR)	UNICEF Documents (UD)	Key Informant Interviews (KII)
<p><b>LR1</b> - The cluster approach has evolved over time, and currently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Has good process-based indicators</li> <li>▪ Is a best-fit model</li> <li>▪ Is relatively low cost</li> </ul>	<p><b>UD1</b> - Meeting minutes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interest in coordination has grown over time</li> <li>▪ Evolution of priorities noted               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Process-based to more holistic</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>KII1</b> - Staff knows ‘ideal coordination:’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Holistic approach incorporating local research to fill gaps and prioritizing resource allocation to inform strategic decision making and have a quality response that includes government.</li> </ul>
<p><b>LR2</b> - There are trade-offs of cluster participation to members</p>	<p><b>UD2</b> - RRT/FST end-of-mission report:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Staffing               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Need defined roles</li> <li>○ Dedicated staff</li> <li>○ IM capacity building</li> <li>○ Mix of personal and technical skills</li> <li>○ Pre-deployment preparation</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Data               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Need common indicators</li> <li>○ Knowledge sharing</li> <li>○ Use of existing tools, no scope creep</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Recommendations               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ CC should lead strategic focus</li> <li>○ Inter-cluster coordination needs improvement</li> <li>○ Strong support from UNICEF, government, partners needed</li> <li>○ Need to understand quality, service delivery</li> <li>○ Timing/logistical aspects important</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>KII2</b> - Staffing is key:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dedicated CC and IMO role</li> <li>▪ With appropriate technical and soft skills</li> <li>▪ Anthropological information</li> <li>▪ Support to address personal cost of work</li> </ul>
<p><b>LR3</b> - Successful coordination depends on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Staff having a balance of soft and technical skills</li> <li>▪ Understanding the context</li> <li>▪ Existence of pre-existing coordination mechanisms</li> </ul>	<p><b>UD3</b> - JMM evaluations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No methods detailed - subjective</li> <li>▪ Challenging contexts are harder</li> <li>▪ Specific technical expertise is needed</li> <li>▪ Dedicated, longer-term staff is helpful</li> <li>▪ A transition plan is needed</li> <li>▪ Quality of response is an emergent topic</li> </ul>	<p><b>KII3</b> - Operating in complex structures leads to overlapping demands, conflicts-of-interest, and need to define value of participation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ National and international organizations</li> <li>▪ National governments</li> <li>▪ UNICEF, the GWC</li> <li>▪ Larger humanitarian response structure</li> <li>▪ Beneficiaries</li> </ul>
<p><b>LR4</b> - After a decade, challenges remain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Working with government</li> <li>▪ Inter-cluster coordination</li> <li>▪ Managing sub-national clusters</li> </ul>		<p><b>KII4</b> - Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Coordination is working, and is needed, and is improving over time</li> <li>▪ Impact of coordination is prevention of outbreaks and capacity building</li> </ul>
<p><b>LR5</b> - Currently multiple monitoring mechanisms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ All are subjective</li> <li>▪ None approach outcomes or impacts</li> <li>▪ None are beneficiary focused</li> </ul>		<p><b>KII5</b> - Wanting to improve, what is next?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Capacity building, monitoring, guidance tool development, and inter-cluster coordination</li> <li>▪ Accountability to beneficiaries, understanding context, more training</li> </ul>
<p><b>LR6</b> - Without a theory of change coordination is difficult to monitor</p>		



The consistent challenges noted across the data sets analyzed were: questions on how to incorporate beneficiaries, and how to do inter-cluster coordination, work with national governments, manage sub-national clusters, and transition out of the emergency. There is an active and vibrant debate ongoing within the GWC, and within the authors, of whether the scope of NHWCPs impact should focus on information flow and organizing partners with an aligned strategy or assessing the indirect impact of a quality response at the beneficiary or household level ultimately provided by a partner organization (i.e. Impact at Level 1 or Level 2 of the ToC). While this report cannot answer this debate, it is worth noting that, at this point, there is little evidence to support the first, let alone the second, level of impact. A current project (2019) through the GWC is aimed to help address questions of quality and beneficiary accountability at the national and sub-national level or response. The Quality Assurance and Accountability Project (QAAP) will attempt to identify and address challenges at the beneficiary level through partners and NHWCP - ideally improving accountability and improving the overall WASH response. Additionally, there is ongoing work at the GWC/CAST level to provide information and guidance on inter-cluster coordination (particularly with the health cluster) [57], additional guidance on sub-national cluster management and transitioning out of the emergency is needed.

One theme throughout the data sets was a tone of ‘what is next for the cluster approach?’ One respondent said the cluster approach is “tired.” There is a sense across that data that the cluster approach and the NHWCPs in specific, needs to break into understanding what is a quality response, and how the cluster approach should interact with other coordination mechanisms.

Of particular note in this review is the pre-dominance, after over a decade and tens of evaluation, of the use of subject-to-bias, qualitative methods of evaluation (e.g. key informant interviews, desk reviews). The overwhelming majority of data on evaluating coordination presented herein is subjective, and thus subject-to-bias. Additionally, only one evaluation document reached out to include beneficiaries and there were no cost-effectiveness evaluations. There is a critical need to develop monitoring and evaluation tools that dig deeper – to reach responders and beneficiaries – that answer questions about outcomes and impacts. To do this type of evaluation, a theory of change is needed, which was developed herein.

This review has limitations, including that the search was not a formal systematic review, there is a reliance on grey literature reports and documents that have not been peer-reviewed, the interview selection was not randomized which could lead to selection bias, and some interviews were conducted on weak internet connections with intermittent audio cuts that led to difficulties in exact transcriptions. We do not feel these limitations impact the results of the review.

Another limitation is that this research was internal research looking backward. What is not included herein is current international discussions on the future of the cluster approach. While the WASH sector assesses the cluster approach as a ‘best-fit’ model for humanitarian response, at the international level there is active debate whether the cluster approach should be modified/replaced. In particular, there are questions whether a command-and-control emergency operations structure is more appropriate in outbreaks [58]) and non-evidence-based policy statements broadly stating: “The world’s humanitarian aid architecture is growing outdated. Relief programs are most effective when they are integrated, locally owned, and demand driven,” suggesting an “area-based approach,” and noting discussion “participants cautioned that the existing coordination clusters should continue to play a prominent role.”[59] In the continuing demand for humanitarian reform, there are ongoing questions on how to incorporate/reform the cluster approach.

Overall, we recommend to “not throw the baby out with the bathwater” and to continue humanitarian reform understanding the benefits and the drawbacks of the cluster approach as described herein. Additionally, we recommend future research on NHWCPs, including research that: engages all relevant stakeholders, including responders and beneficiaries; includes contextual factors to understand the underlying context; completes measurement over time that are not an undue burden for



partners; and, limits evaluation subjectivity by emphasizing measurable outcomes or impacts with a transparent methodology.

It is anticipated that nothing in this report will be 'surprising' for those familiar with the cluster approach; the value of this report is the succinct summary and analysis of information and development of the ToC for subsequent cluster evaluation. Moving into the future, monitoring and evaluation is needed to help determine the most effective ways to implement the cluster approach within the humanitarian response system.

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