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Review on IFRC-convened shelter cluster, Typhoon Ketsana, Philippines, 2009.

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Background

At the end of September, 2009, The Philippines was hit by typhoon Ketsana resulting in considerable damage and displacement of many people. Metro Manila was hardest hit, due to the large numbers of informal settlers living in highly vulnerable areas.

The city of Manila received over 17 inches of rain in just 12 hours, widespread flooding occurred – the worst in 42 years. A state of emergency was declared by the Government of the Philippines on 26 September and the cluster system activation process occurred immediately after the declaration culminating in a letter being sent to Sir John Holmes on 3 October 2009 outlining the proposed cluster set up for the typhoon Ketsana response. The Operations Manager from International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) participated in the first two days of heads of cluster meetings that discussed the flash appeal and Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF). Four days after the typhoon struck, the first coordinator arrived in the Philippines and the information manager arrived 36 hours after the coordinator.

While this was the second time the shelter cluster had been activated in the Philippines, it was the first time that it operated in parallel to a national cluster system managed by the government. The IFRC-led the shelter cluster for a period of three months, with initial contact with UN-Habitat regarding handover, occurring during the 14 days the first coordinator was in the field. After a series of unsuccessful bids to take over the shelter cluster by both UN-Habitat early on and International Organization for Migration in the latter stages, UN- Habitat finally, following negotiations in Geneva, took over the shelter cluster.

This review seeks to appraise the service provided by the IFRC as shelter cluster lead as well as provide recommendations to the IFRC on shelter cluster coordination.

There are some limitations to this review firstly, the timeframe during which this review was conducted meant that not all possible informants were available for comment. Interviewing stakeholders one year after the shelter cluster was active meant that recall of events in detail by informants was not always easy. Therefore, based on this, the review seeks to correlate experiences of informants with previous evaluation recommendations while identifying any specific issues related to shelter coordination for typhoon Ketsana.

Findings

Overall, the coordination offered by the shelter cluster team was appreciated by those interviewed. It was felt that two major outputs of the cluster, assigning of operational areas and standardization of shelter repair kits made a significant contribution to the members work. The strongest criticism was the lack of continuity of human resources, with the shelter cluster coordinator being replaced four times in just over one month.

In examining the findings, the objectives outlined in the terms of reference have been deconstructed into the following statements:

1. **Shelter cluster was appropriately equipped, funded and supported.**

   The requirement for the shelter coordination team to set up an operational centre immediately upon deployment places considerable burden on the coordination team and the often unprepared, but not unwilling IFRC delegation to provide support.

   In the Philippines, considerable frustration was felt by both the coordination team and the delegation around accessing resources to enable the cluster to become functional. One of the major concerns highlighted in this review was that the coordination team - employed as consultants, are not according to IFRC financial policies and procedures, able to receive working advances. This requires the coordination team to fund the set up of an operational centre from their own pockets which may be possible for some members, eg , those supported by wealthy national societies, but for other members this is not possible. The lack of accessible funds/ resources, standardized equipment, procurement processes and disposal of assets (and standard operating procedures, in general) were an added stress for the coordination team while attempting to deliver the services of the cluster. It also drew considerable time and resources from the delegation in trying to resolve these administrative issues while complying with IFRC policies and procedures and assist the national society to deliver a response to the typhoon. There is inconsistency in applying IFRC policies and procedures by IFRC for shelter coordination team such that they are followed for finances but not for procurement or disposal of assets.

   In the context of the above statement, it is reasonable to conclude that the shelter cluster was not appropriately equipped and funded at the time of deployment, instead relied on the personal means of members of the shelter cluster coordination team and the delegation to 'rally' resources.

   In 2009, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), following a request by donors, indicated that funds for country level cluster coordination should be requested at the country level, not through global level appeals. Consequently, negotiations with the IFRC zone office regarding inclusion of cluster coordination in the emergency appeal were held with an agreement reached that only funds earmarked for cluster coordination would be used for that purpose. However, in the emergency appeal cluster coordination was not clearly mentioned and no budget line appeared in the final document. This led to an alternative arrangement with the country IFRC office that availability of funds for cluster coordination would be contingent on 100 percent funding of the appeal. As the appeal was significantly under-funded, zero funds were received at country level for coordination.

   This highlights the need for country offices to be fully aware of the role of the IFRC in the cluster system in order to secure the necessary support through emergency appeals.

   Despite this, the coordination team, with its members' funds and within existing limitations, did establish operations that allowed service provision to occur in a timely manner to cluster members.

   Support from the secretariat to the coordination team was highly praised, although communication between the delegation and secretariat in Geneva on resolving practical issues in the operation set up was often protracted and time-consuming. Press releases from the media department that may have assisted in fundraising were slow to materialize.

2. **Shelter Coordination role is understood and supported by IFRC and the national society.**

    In general terms the shelter coordination role is understood by the IFRC delegation and the national society. What remains unclear is the relationship of this IFRC-convened cluster to the delegation and the national society, especially in regard to the flow of information around activation, identity of the cluster coordination team as an IFRC entity (or not), management of or support to shelter coordination personnel and accountability of the coordination team in country.

    In the Philippines the national government has established its own cluster system that, in the case of Typhoon Ketsana, operated in parallel to the 'international' cluster system. This duality creates confusion for the national society which already participates actively in the government clusters, leading it to question the need for an 'additional' shelter cluster. This national cluster system is attended by many local and international organizations that have a permanent presence in the Philippines. The national cluster system operates during non-emergency times and is conducted in the local language, but it should be noted that the structure of the national cluster system differs to that of the IASC structure.

3. **Structure and composition of the cluster was appropriate to the context.**

    The structure of the cluster appeared to be appropriate - the coordinator and information manager had clearly defined roles. However, the biggest area of dissatisfaction was the turn over of coordinators in a short space of time and the leading of the cluster by an inexperienced coordinator during one period. Of those interviewed, this high turnover of the coordinators coupled with inexperience led to a sense of lack of progress or lack of leadership and of being in a constant state of repetition. It was also suggested by those interviewed that the high turnover was an obstacle in building relationships with cluster members which may have prevented the free exchange of information.

    Although the high turnover of coordinators was the most common complaint of the cluster, there was consensus that the cluster was effective in delivering its services and this may reflect the quality of the information management and the fact that the information manager who became the final coordinator was there for the whole period the cluster was operational.

    While each coordinator brought strengths to the role, the reference to inexperience was directly linked to the coordinator who had no previous experience in a coordination role. Disharmony in the coordination team at this time may have inhibited the exchange of skills within the team. But equally important, those coordinators with previous cluster experience may not have appeared experienced but this was most likely due to the fact they were not deployed for long enough periods in the coordination role for their experience to resonate. It should also be noted that at the time of typhoon Ketsana there were three other clusters led by IFRC significantly limiting available human resources.

    In discussions on staffing, it was also consistently raised that permanent shelter personnel is required in the Philippines. It was suggested that this maybe a person within the IFRC country delegation that would be able to provide contextual support when the cluster is activated as well as establish relationships with government during the non-emergency periods to facilitate cluster service delivery at times of emergency, as both these assets were felt to be missing from the shelter cluster.

4. The neutrality and independence (of RCRC) was not affected by the cluster leadership.

During this deployment of the shelter coordination team there was no reports of the neutrality or independence of the Red Cross being compromised or hindering the delivery of service of the cluster coordination team. While many interviewees commented on the professionalism and reliability of the IFRC, no direct correlation was made to the principles of neutrality and independence.

5. Shelter cluster had a positive impact on the work of the cluster members.

Overall, cluster members interviewed were satisfied with the service provided by the coordination team, in particular two outputs of the cluster were mentioned by almost all interviewed, namely, assigning of areas to cluster members and standardization of the shelter repair kits.

The engagement of local NGOs in the cluster was low with only three attending the cluster meetings, this may be attributed to the existence of the national clusters (in their national language) and the established relationships with those clusters and local NGOs. There may have been opportunities to identify local responses by using the information from the national government, but this appears not to have been undertaken.

Two of the perceived weaknesses of the shelter cluster was firstly, its inadequate role in advocacy in fundraising for shelter response through the flash appeal. Many organizations attending the cluster meetings had not yet received funds and were using the information from the cluster to help formulate funding strategies. Secondly, the cluster was criticized for not working closely with the government to evaluate options on evacuating vulnerable people (namely, informal settlers who live in high risk areas, such as canals and railway tracks).

Many government assessments did not include these informal settlers therefore the number of people requiring assistance were underestimated and alternative solutions were unable to be discussed and organizations were unable to use potentially conflicting data to fund raise.

Most informants attributed those weaknesses to the inexperience of one of the coordinators who had a good understanding of donor requirements but was unable to use that experience to raise funds as well as the high turnover of coordinators.

6. Cluster had effective and professional links to government, other clusters and UN.

Coordination team was active in trying to engage with government, however, this was often unsuccessful as the government was running its own clusters and tended to see the 'international' clusters as separate and therefore were perhaps unable to allocate resources to coordinate. However, clusters that have a permanent presence in the Philippines were able to access their relationships with government use them in the 'international' cluster coordination.

The Philippines Red Cross (PRC) is an active member of the national clusters and was under-utilized by the shelter cluster coordination team in connecting with government counterparts. However, it may be argued that during an emergency time the access to key PRC staff that participated in this national cluster system and other governmental response mechanisms may not be available.

Communication with other clusters by the coordinator appears to have occurred with sharing of relevant information to shelter cluster members during meetings.

Relations with IOM were strained a little at the beginning of the deployment from what appears to be a miscommunication. From discussions with informants it is suggested that IOM was arguing that it should be shelter cluster lead because of its structure and presence in country, however, IOM says that this is a misunderstanding and were only seeking to be active in the shelter cluster due to their role in the national cluster which has camp coordination, protection and shelter combined. IOM then took over the coordination of non-food items (NFI) and shelter materials as part of their fundraising strategy.

Despite the misunderstanding, particularly at the time of the cluster activation, the relationship between the shelter coordination team and IOM in country were cordial and professional, with the first two shelter cluster coordination meetings being joint meetings with IOM on camp management.

7. **Clear exit handover strategy.**

Although a clear exit plan had been initiated in the early days of the shelter coordination team in its contact with UN Habitat, as the time to exit came closer, it became clear that UN Habitat were not in a position to assume responsibility for the cluster.

Negotiations with IOM were then undertaken with all systems apparently in place, the coordinator left the Philippines, only to find out that the funding the IOM thought they had obtained to support coordination activities was not able to be used in such a manner. Therefore, the secretariat in Geneva took over negotiating the exit with colleagues in UN Habitat. As a result, the UN-Habitat office in Manila took over the cluster management and continues to coordinate the shelter cluster in the Philippines, today.

8. **IFRC actively participated in the cluster activation process.**

The delegation (specifically the head of delegation) was not significantly involved in the activation of the cluster however the operations coordinator from the IFRC zone office played a part in the initial days of meetings while on a field visit to the Philippines to assist in the typhoon response. Two days later the cluster coordinator arrived and completed the activation process that largely involved clarification of roles between IFRC and IOM on coordination of NFIs, although the coordinator was deployed on the understanding that activation of the cluster was already completed.

The need for the coordinator to be involved in activating the cluster and the negotiations with IOM meant that coordination was likely to have suffered although information management had begun meeting and sharing information. Such a scenario may suggest that delegation (head of delegation) involvement in activating the cluster would assist early operations of the cluster and would not have occupied the time of the operations manager who was trying to assist the PRC in delivery of a response.

Colleagues from the shelter department, IFRC, in Geneva, also participated in developing the flash appeal and attending meetings, in order to relieve the IFRC country office of the burden.

Recommendations

Below is an amalgamation of recommendations from previous evaluations and comments based on findings outlined earlier in this review. Recommendations have been solicited from informants and this has been used to prioritize the top five recommendations. Additional recommendations or comments specifically based on the Philippines experience have been given in the table below, as required, however, there are recommendations from previous evaluations that are applicable to this review.

Recommendation from previous reviews/evaluations	Relevance to current review	Additional recommendations/ Comments	Priority
Co-location with/ use of IFRC resources, e.g. FACT, delegations, PNS, security as well as consider integration hierarchically (Philippines 2006, Bangladesh 2007, Mozambique 2007, Myanmar 2008, Nepal 2008, Tajikistan 2008)	The delegation supported the set-up of a separate operations centre, this was time-consuming and increased costs of deployment of the shelter coordination team. Located away from the delegation meant that contextual information and government relationships held by the Philippines Red Cross were underutilized. Unfamiliarity with IFRC policies and procedures also hindered rapid set-up.	The concept that the cluster coordination is 'separate' to the delegation needs to be explored in terms of defining what actually needs to be separated from the delegation and national society. By identifying this, it may become feasible that cluster coordination teams are located with delegations (or national societies). Alternatively, if co-location with the delegation is not possible, equip the coordination team with the delegate's handbook specifically for office set up processes as well as policy and procedures on finance and asset disposal specifically.	1
First deployment of coordinator should be with requisite experience (P5/10 years) and for period of months not weeks and with shelter deployment kit. (Philippines 2006, Bangladesh 2007, Mozambique 2007, Tajikistan 2008)	In general the coordination team was effective, however, the high turnover and inexperience led to a sense of lack of progress. The team was expected to set up using their own means that is not always possible for some.	Development of shelter cluster deployment kit along the lines of an ERU. This may allow some national societies to access 'pre-positioned funds' to assist deployment.	3

Recommendation from previous reviews/evaluations	Relevance to current review	Additional recommendations/ Comments	Priority
Permanent cluster presence established in countries with high vulnerability; preparedness activities, capacity building of local resources & government (Philippines 2006, Bangladesh 2007, Myanmar 2008, Nepal 2008, Pakistan 2009, Bangladesh 2009)	The existence of national clusters and the confusion regarding which cluster should lead (national v 'international'), suggests that if there was some regular representation at the national cluster, relationships with government may have been stronger and cooperation between national and 'international' clusters may have been better.	Prioritize the Philippines (and two other high risk countries) and discuss with delegations about opening a shelter position (possibly locally recruited). These positions could then work with other shelter lead agencies to form a permanent shelter cluster and begin contingency planning. This staff member could then be used to support cluster coordination activities in the early days of operation.	2
Continue dissemination of information on role, mandate and capacities of shelter department and cluster. Distinct in-country identity of cluster required. (Philippines 2006, Bangladesh 2007, Nepal 2008, Pakistan 2009, Bangladesh 2009)	During the activation of the cluster confusion or misunderstanding on cluster lead led to delays in setting up the cluster. Lack of understanding by government about role of 'international' clusters meant that interactions with coordination team and government were not as frequent as required. IFRC as cluster lead for emergency shelter was thought to be a good fit by informants, however, some said the link between the cluster and the IFRC was not strongly branded enough.	In three priority countries, develop a communications plan that includes briefing of delegation and national society personnel. Link to contingency planning and locally recruited shelter position within delegations. Agree on the identity of cluster and ensure that all members of the cluster coordination team are briefed and equipped appropriately.	4
Flexible handover strategies (Philippines 2006, Nepal 2008)	Despite early preparations, UN Habitat were not in a position to take over the cluster, alternative arrangements were made with IOM although this did not materialize in the end.	In the context of global agreements, develop country or regional level exit plans with partners as part of contingency planning, including budgets.	5

Recommendation from previous reviews/evaluations	Relevance to current review	Additional recommendations/ Comments	Priority
Cluster leadership should draw from non-lead agencies (Myanmar 2008, Pakistan 2009)	Technical advisor was brought in from CARE and made significant contributions to the work of the cluster members. Issues of identity were raised in this review, as technical advisor continued to use his CARE business card while working with the cluster, for some interviewees this was confusing. Other cluster members had cards with the IASC logo.		
Hire local counterparts and include translation services. (Yogyakarta 2006, Myanmar 2008)	Staff and consultants were hired, but concerns were raised that recruitment did not follow IFRC procedures although requiring HoD sign off on employment contracts. There was good communication between the delegation and the coordination team on this matter. However, there was little attendance by local NGOs in the cluster meetings this may have been due to the lack of translation services.		
Forms for data collection could be prepared in advance (Yogyakarta 2006)	Some respondents suggested that the forms were too complicated, that the information required by the forms would be good if cluster members were doing research, however, information needed to be more in the style of a rapid assessment.		

Recommendation from previous reviews/evaluations	Relevance to current review	Additional recommendations/ Comments	Priority
Clear guidelines required for fundraising; involvement of IFRC in writing of Humanitarian Action Plan and coordination of CERF. (Pakistan 2008)	Criticisms of the cluster were its lack of advocacy for informal settlers and missing fundraising opportunities for the cluster. This seems to have been attributed to the inexperience of the coordinator. In addition, funding for the operational expenses of the cluster coordination team currently only come from fully funded emergency appeals where a budget line has been included. In the early stages of the shelter cluster, many agencies did not have funding and were actively seeking funds using information provided by the cluster.	Following briefings with delegations on the role of the cluster, seek agreement for funding in country emergency appeals for operational costs. Clarify the role of the strategic advisory group in fundraising as opposed to the IFRC, ensure that all parties to the cluster understand this demarcation.	
Clarification of NFIs with in shelter cluster (Tajikistan 2008)	The NFIs were coordinated by IOM as this was linked to IOM's ability to access funding. However, this coordination by IOM appears to be a concern for some.	Maintain a flexible, context specific approach to managing NFIs, but ensure the primary concepts as per MoU are understood by all IASC members. In the Philippines, the national cluster design affects the perceived lead roles for coordination of certain activities.	

Conclusion

This review finds that the overall coordination services provided by the IFRC-convened shelter cluster were effective in supporting cluster member activities. The recent deployment to the Philippines indicates the application of recommendations and experience of previous cluster deployments, however, the major areas that require urgent attention include:

1. Define cluster relationship to IFRC delegation and national society as well as continue communication activities with key stakeholders on the role of the shelter cluster (and shelter department in Geneva).
2. Improve access to experienced human resources and ensure longer deployment periods of experienced individuals. (It is noted that there were several disasters occurring at the same time drawing heavily on available experienced human resources).
3. Deployment of shelter coordination teams with a shelter cluster kit and clarification of application of IFRC policies and procedures to cluster coordination teams.
4. Establishing a permanent presence in shelter activities in the Philippines (and perhaps two other highly risk countries) to facilitate coordination with the government and provide immediate on the ground support during emergencies.
5. In the context of global agreements, develop exit plans with appropriate agencies at a regional or country level as part of contingency plans.

Documents reviewed

1. ToRs of the IFRC Shelter Coordination Team members

2. IFRC emergency appeal and operations updates.

3. Case study, Philippines Typhoon, Cluster Coordinator training, September 2009

4. Letter to Sir John Holmes on activation of cluster.

5. Email to Global Emergency Cluster informing on the deployment of the SCG

6. Emergency Shelter Cluster Handover document IFRC-UNHabitat December 2009

7. All documents (meeting minutes, strategy documents etc.) available from the Philippines Shelter Cluster website http://groups.google.com/group/sheltercluster-ph

8. Reviews of IFRC-led shelter cluster coordination in Nepal (Floods 2008), Myanmar (Cyclone 2008), Bangladesh (Cyclone 2007-2008), Tajikistan (Cold weather 2007), Pakistan (Floods 2007), the Philippines (Typhoon 2006), Bangladesh (Cyclone Aila 2009) and Pakistan (Baluchistan earthquake 2008).
   These reviews can be found at: http://www.humanitarianreform.org/Default.aspx?tabid=688

Interviews

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