

Smarter coordination meetings

Why do you need to be concerned with “smarter cluster meetings”?

Actors in a humanitarian operation probably meet most often face-to-face in the venue of the coordination meeting. The degree to which the meeting is organised to produce results and the quality of the participation affects the way actors perceive both the cluster/sector lead performance and the entire coordination process itself. A common problem in coordination is the failure of actors to feel ownership of the process. One danger is that actors who feel left out or marginalised will seek their own parallel meeting forums. It is therefore crucial that the meetings represent a process that includes key actors, respects what each has to say and the resources they have to offer, and promotes consensus building to achieve the best outcome for the affected people.

What is expected of you in your role as Cluster/Sector lead in the field?¹

Rationalize meetings: Sector leads are responsible for determining, together with those participating in the relevant sectoral groups, the frequency and types of meetings needed. Sector leads should ensure that they do not make excessive demands for meetings, particularly where this concerns small organizations which have limited capacities to attend large numbers of individual sectoral meetings. Sector leads are responsible for ensuring that sectoral meetings are well managed and productive. In some cases, different sectoral groups may decide to meet collectively. Sectoral meetings should supplement rather than replace or undermine the Humanitarian Country Team meeting (at the country level) and to its equivalent at the district or provincial level. Establishing individual sectoral meetings at the district level should be determined by need rather than by a concern for creating a uniform structure.

What challenges will you face?

Many have criticised cluster/sector meetings for:

- failing to engage local NGOs due to language issues, poor announcements, too many meetings, inability to attend meetings because they are out in the field doing the work
- failing to involve NGOs in meetings of a conceptual or strategic nature, not just operational
- being conducted as UN internal meetings or as “Talk Shops”
- their poor preparation, poor facilitation and poor management
- unwieldy agendas derailed due to emerging issues or by “urgent” personal agendas
- lacking cluster/sector leads and meeting facilitators who are “neutral” and objective facilitators
- overloaded agendas, long meetings, too many meetings, too many participants, the wrong participants
- being unruly, unproductive, and dominated by most vocal participants

Tips and practices for smarter cluster meetings

Broaden ownership of the meetings

- Co-chair meeting with government counterpart.
- Ask NGO to co-chair the cluster meeting.
- Arrange for translation. Send the minutes to international and local NGOs.
- Pro-actively communicate with key international and local NGOs. Meet one-on-one with key stakeholders to identify common issues, areas of agreement and dispute, personal agendas. Find out how best to engage them.
- Ask three key participants for feedback on the coordination meeting and how to improve it.
- Resolve meeting overlap by setting up a central coordination system at each cluster and hub.

Practice good facilitation skills

- Use active listening, probing and re-directing.
- Use flip-charts, maps, visible displays of information. Post agenda on flip-chart visible to all.

- Separate idea generation from debate or evaluation.
- Break into sub-groups, form advisory group, technical groups, etc.
- Share responsibility for success, managing the group, enforcing groundrules, time-keeping, etc.
- No matter what happens – maintain your calm. Relate calmly to irate or difficult meeting participants.

Practice good meeting management

- See meetings as part of a broader communication and coordination process, which include things you can do **before** to prepare for the meeting (e.g. circulate agenda, bilateral discussions) things you can do **during** the meeting (use facilitation skills) and follow-up you can do **after** the meeting (e.g. ask for feedback on the meeting, disseminate notes). Good coordination comes as much, if not more, from the work that is done between meetings as is done in meetings themselves.
- Delegate: use small groups to analyse problems, generate options, propose solutions, and take decisions.
- Do not try to agree on strategic priorities or reach a significant decision with a large group (10+). For these matters, delegate them to a manageable advisory group (6-10) comprised of key stakeholders, including a representative from government, 2-3 reps from international and local NGOs selected by their peers, donors, UN, and others as appropriate to cluster (e.g. IFRC, IOM).
- Jointly establish (and ask help in enforcing) minimum meeting groundrules (e.g. one speaker at a time, time limits for agenda items and for interventions, etc). Display groundrules prominently and translate.
- In meetings attended by a large group of people, arrange for “support facilitators” (from a non-UN agency) to help manage groundrules and interventions from groups of people or from dedicated areas in the meeting room. In plenary clarify the role of these “support facilitators”.
- Arrange for translators to facilitate communication with local NGOs.

Manage disruptions, derailments and "monopolisers"

- Note the issue, remind all of the meeting objective & redirect with a question.
- Call on your allies– deputize key stakeholders in the room to help manage disruptions.
- Show of hands to agree to revise agenda—if they consider the emergent issue to be immediate relevance or importance, then it is not a “disruption” but rather a “valued contribution” .
- Create a structure for interventions: e.g. one idea per table, time limits, succinct interventions.
- Get to know individual before or during a break – make “human” connection so that he/she is easier to manage during the meeting.
- Use the Parking Lot – help arrange for an alternate forum after the official meeting.
- Anticipate issues which may disrupt the planned agenda and hold one-on-one pre-meeting consultation to resolve issue outside of the coordination meeting.

Key reference material

“Better Coordination Meetings” in UNHCR eCentre and ESS self-study module “EP 07 Coordination”, June 2003. <http://www.the-ecentre.net/resources/2-7-0.cfm>