

**EXAMINING NGO PERFORMANCE: A CASE OF THE CLUSTER APPROACH**

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Title

Examining NGO Performance: A Case of the Cluster Approach

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## **ABSTRACT**

The need for coordinated efforts to respond to emerging crises, disasters, and conflicts has become ever-more apparent in the past decade. As events occur more frequently, at a larger scale, and the 24 hour news cycle associated with cable networks and the web-based media enhanced the public's exposure to disasters, the need for coordination has become more apparent. To that end the United Nations implemented the Cluster Approach. In the decade since its deployment, starting with the Pakistan Earthquake of 2006, little independent academic research has been conducted to assess the approach. Instead, the literature tends to be confined to two camps: internal after action reports from the United Nations and editorials in respected, though non-academic journals, such as Slate Magazine. The following paper suggests exploratory research be done to assess whether the coordination approaches utilized by the Cluster Approach are proving to be beneficial, efficient, and functional.

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## **LIST OF DEFINITIONS**

- Cluster..... A UN designated formal grouping of non-governmental organizations with a similar mission
- Gatekeeper..... A key stakeholder in research that provides access to possible interviewees
- Intergovernmental Organizations... A formalized, often regional, cooperative grouping of national entities developed for a specific goal
- Intimacy..... The degree to which an organization has specific knowledge of local governmental, cultural, and other structures in a given region
- NGO..... Non-governmental organization
- UN..... United Nations
- Utility..... The degree to which an organization or type of organization is better suited to conduct specific tasks than others

## **SECTION 1. INTEGRATION, STANDARDS, AND VANTAGE POINTS**

Today's international, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seem to be suffering from a split personality. A quick search of the internet can find volumes of praise for the heroic deeds of NGOs around the world. The same search, however, is likely to find significant criticism of NGOs including very serious charges about the ethical soundness of their behavior. Such criticism comes from politicians, professionals, and academics, and its volume has arguably increased over the last two decades as one major, international disaster after another seemingly raises new questions about how NGOs are doing their job (Hilhorst, 2002).

Critics have raised questions about accountability, reputation, cultural sensitivity, and utility. Each of these issues has its own dynamics, and each of the issues has triggered an array of specific solutions. However, one particular, recent, international disaster played a special role in highlighting several of these issues—the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. The effort to coordinate the international NGO response to the tsunami clearly left much to be desired and highlighted some of the general issues noted above. Soon after this disaster, enthusiasm began to build around a new organizational concept for coordinating NGO activities.

In an attempt to standardize humanitarian work in the NGO sector the UN commissioned the development of the so-called Cluster Approach to Humanitarian work. This approach sought to address the commonly perceived weaknesses within the NGO sector. Developed as an integration model, the Cluster Approach seeks to provide oversight and accountability to the sector, validating NGOs in the eyes of the world. With appropriate integration and management, it was argued that waste in the non-governmental sector as well as outright corruption could be minimized.

Events quickly overtook general discussions of the Cluster Approach as another major, international disaster, the Pakistan earthquake, led to the approach's implementation on the fly. The approach seemed to offer some promise, so it has now been adopted by the United Nations as the way to coordinate international NGO response to major disasters (IASC Operational Guidance, 2007) and has been used in several subsequent events (e.g., in 2008 and 2009 for conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan, respectfully, and in 2010 for the Haitian earthquake, see *NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project*, 2010).

With the approach's increasing use, it is now time to raise several questions: a) to what extent, if any, do members of NGOs view the Cluster Approach as an improvement over pre-Cluster Approaches to disaster response; b) do NGO members believe that the Cluster Approach has and/or can address one or more of the more general, significant criticisms that have been aimed at past NGO behavior; and c) if the Cluster Approach is perceived as a potential problem-solver for one or more such issues, how do NGO members perceive that the Cluster Approach has and/or can do this? These are the questions that should be explored in future studies through interviews of a diverse, purposive sample of NGOs and selected NGO members who have participated in the Cluster Approach during one or more international disaster response efforts.

The research heretofore performed on the Cluster Approach falls into one of two categories. First, the UN has done its own assessments of its own program (e.g., *OCHA Evaluation and Studies Section*, 2007), and these assessments are generally positive while noting a few areas for improvement. The assessment formats follow that of corporate public relations reports. Second, there have been a number of anecdotal and editorial critiques by single individuals participating within the Cluster Approach. These critiques are primarily opinion pieces, even political attack pieces, and not based on empirical assessments (McCabe, 2002;

O'Connor, 2011). Thus, little or no systematic, empirical research from outside UN auspices exists on the Cluster Approach. This gap is understandable given the recent emergence of this approach to NGO disaster work, but it is also a serious gap in light of the commitment that has been made to the continued use of the approach. Future projects should seek to highlight this gap and to begin to address it with an exploratory study involving in-depth interviews of selected participants from various NGOs who participated in the UN's use of the Cluster Approach. The following paper concludes by offering a model of how such a study could be done.

## **SECTION 2. APPROACHING THE PROBLEM: MODELS IN LITERATURE**

The literature regarding international humanitarian response is focused largely on key aspects that are modeled, often by weaknesses, in the body of work. Accountability, Reputation, Cultural Insensitivity, and Utility are all focal points in literature that guide literature to discuss the degree to which these touchstones play a role in humanitarian work. For 13 years, at the time of this paper, research has focused on the need to address these key models, while largely ignoring the paradigm developed to oversee how they fit within humanitarian work. Instead of assessing the structure responsible for holding these aspects in focus, overwhelmingly the body of research has instead focused on hashing out, and rehashing previous non-conforming paradigms, such as the Red Cross Code of Conduct, and Sphere Standards. It seems peculiar that in the more than ten years since the development and implementation of the Cluster Approach, there has been such a minimal attempt to explore how the paradigm addresses the ongoing struggles in the field, to what degree the paradigm has mitigated those struggles, and how the paradigm can continue to build.

### **Current Concerns About NGOs**

**Accountability.** The broad mission of NGOs is to serve those in need. Thus, NGOs are first and foremost morally accountable to this audience as part of their mission. Meanwhile, NGOs are also held accountable by those that provide funding and resources, and to their own employees and volunteers for completing their work. These diverse audiences can create cross-pressures that can set the stage for mismanagement and even corruption. A variety of NGO scandals have shown accountability, or the lack thereof, to be a significant NGO problem (Moore et al, 2003).

Accountability issues differ by the size and power of the NGO. Some NGOs operate strictly at a national level. Eriksson and Sadiwa (2001) recognize that these organizations often seek to create social change or alter local domestic policies to be more fair in regard to international law or the humanitarian imperative. In addition, there are regional, and international NGOs with much greater scale and level of resources that are often dedicated to a particular cause throughout the world, rather than several social issues in a target location (Eriksson and Sadiwa, 2001). Locally based NGOs generally are more understanding of recipient needs, but lack the power to make broad changes for the betterment of their clients. In contrast, larger NGOs and multilateral organizations generally hold the power to make a broad impact, but may lack the on-the-ground sensitivity to recipient needs. In what Suparamamian and Dekkar call a “paradox of power” (2003, p. 312), very rarely do groups or NGO workers have both on-the-ground knowledge and power. Those groups or workers who feel most accountable may have little power to be accountable, while those who have the power to be accountable, may not feel the pressure or have the knowledge to do so. One result of this “paradox of power” is that accountability is not uniform throughout the NGO sector. Authority in humanitarian work is generally concentrated among the more powerful groups (Rubenstein, 2007). If authority, whether legitimate or not, is compounded in the hands of groups without the knowledge of how to appropriately act, a disconnect between what is expected of NGOs and what they actually deliver is likely to only accelerate over time.

To address this, various systems of standards have been offered aimed at putting NGO groups on a relatively level playing field (Rubenstein, 2007). Observers note that it is as essential for large and powerful groups holding physical capital (e.g. funds and staffing) to adopt these standards as it is for smaller weaker groups that have a local hold on social and cultural

capital (local knowledge of populations and adaptation mechanisms). Some of these guidelines benefit from being absolute, that is, “perfect obligations that are consistent across contexts and do not admit of degrees” (Rubenstein, 2007, p. 622). For example, “perfect obligations” or standards would include prohibitions against NGOs being involved in murder, theft, graft, or lying to benefit themselves. However, the appropriate use of other rules is less obvious. Less absolute or “imperfect standards” are far more complicated. These arise when considering things such as effectiveness and efficiency (Rubenstein, 2007, p.622). In short, room for relative interpretation mitigates the unanimous adoption of these standards across NGOs.

Alternatively, NGOs can adopt their own standards for their work, but when groups do this, the sector suffers from inconsistent rules. Several sets of NGO specific standards and codes of conduct have been developed by NGOs in the humanitarian field. For example, the *Red Cross Code of Conduct* guides the Red Cross, and any other group that chooses to adopt it (Hilhorst, 2005; 354). Such a self-imposed standard can be useful to enhance accountability, but it leaves the individual NGOs the flexibility to interpret what the standard means. As an example the *Red Cross Code of Conduct, Article One* states, “the humanitarian imperative comes first.” At first glance this appears to be a reasonable guideline for behavior, even noble. Though self-imposed, how could there be an accountability issue here? Nevertheless, without a clear definition for the phrase, “humanitarian imperative,” this Article becomes difficult to implement, and the judge of the implementation’s success is the NGO doing the implementation. Moreover, the Article has no gauge by which to measure whether the “humanitarian imperative,” whatever it may be, did in fact come first, or whether that imperative was appropriate for the given context (Hilhorst, 2005). In sum, this ethical code lacks clarity and teeth.

To combat the problems associated with ethical and moral codes that are simply self-imposed and/or lack clarity and practicality, the Sphere Standards were established in 1997 (Gostelow, 1999). The Sphere Standards' goals are two-fold. First, the standards address conduct from practical and assessable vantage points, and second, the standards seek to unify humanitarian work by incorporating NGOs into one overarching body to promote consistency across NGOs. In effect the Sphere Standards seek to provide a governing body of and for NGOs. Sphere Standards measure effectiveness and efficiency of tasks completed. To do this, the Sphere Standards approach offers "an operational framework for accountability in humanitarian response" (Gostelow, 1999; 318).

Sphere Standards potentially create a context within which a much clearer and unified approach to accountability for NGOs exists (Gostelow, 1999). This approach codifies a single language for NGOs to use to streamline communication and the overall process of humanitarian work. The standards provide an assessment baseline and develop a backdrop to assess and evaluate projects. Sphere Standards can aid in the coordination of projects and the work of NGOs. Finally, the projects can be vetted to help guide, clarify, and specify goals.

While the above benefits are recognized, the consortium approach, at least as demonstrated by the Sphere Standards, is confronted with several obstacles (Griekspoor and Collins, 2001). Primarily this approach has the opposite problem faced by the *Red Cross Code of Conduct*. If the former had no teeth to hold groups accountable, the latter is stricken with lockjaw. The Sphere Standards are too specific, and even the minimum standards take too much for granted about an NGO's resources. Resources of NGOs are often not substantial enough to meet these minimum standards, or even when resources are available, logistical concerns, often beyond the control of the NGOs themselves, obscure the appropriate utilization of their resources

(Griekspoor and Collins, 2001). Because of these limitations, small NGOs often become scapegoats for the inadequacies of host countries and donor nations.

Thus, this consortium-based approach to standards is not without its critics. The Sphere Standards face the problem of limiting the creativity and ingenuity requisite for effective work in the humanitarian field (Gostelow, 1999). Further, blame becomes the focal point when circumstances go awry, rather than a focus on problem-solving. Additionally, the consortium approach limits the autonomy of member groups, and limits the diversity of groups, practices, and approaches. New groups could lose funding as they fail to immediately meet minimum standards. Political will could color humanitarian work making the Sphere Project no more neutral than NGOs acting under the strict direction of their home governments. Smaller groups could be seen as inferior to international and global NGOs. Finally, the consortium approach clearly displays its origins in the developed world.

Other approaches have been suggested to address specific accountability concerns. For instance, to address assessment, focused audits of NGOs, both internal and external, can be and have been done (Hilhorst, 2002). Specifically, humanitarian groups often employ social and performance audits to assess the quality and effectiveness of their work. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are utilized in these assessments to gauge success. External groups especially can provide fresh eyes to assess an NGO's outcomes. This approach to accountability faces the question of who has the respect and authority to do the audit. And, again, the audit approach challenges the autonomy of NGOs making them answerable to outside, auditing organizations and to possible sanctions.

These issues could be mitigated by relaxing the audit approach to one more similar to a peer review process (Hilhorst, 2002). The peer review process takes the sanctions emphasis

away from the auditing approach while still examining quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of the NGO's work. The peer review process benefits both the reviewer and the reviewed. The reviewer gains insight into approaches not necessarily seen before in their own work, and the reviewed organization gains an outside assessment of its work. If either group perceives a weakness, it can draw from information derived through the partnership to try to strengthen it. Similar reviews could be utilized to address the financial success or failure of organizations.

While steps have been taken to address accountability issues throughout the NGO sector the concern with accountability remains. Codes of conduct, standards, audits, and peer reviews are steps toward a more accountable sector, but they have yet to be fully accepted. Further steps need to be taken to provide organizations throughout the sector equal footing and still ensure accountability of all NGOs to their mission. The suggested study will guide consideration of the extent to which participants in the Cluster Approach after a given emergency perceive the integration of NGOs into functionally based clusters encourages or hampers problems with accountability.

**Reputation.** Related to concerns of accountability, the reputation of non-governmental organizations has fallen under increasing scrutiny in the last two decades. Beginning with the media's real-time exposure of events in Rwanda in 1994, the number of organizations in the non-profit sector has been exploding. The increasing severity and cost of natural disasters, along with expanding 24/7 media coverage world-wide, also has triggered the emergence of more NGOs. Even if the percentage of all NGOs involved in ineffective or even inappropriate activities remains the same, the explosion of NGOs sets the stage for more NGOs, numerically, that can harm the reputation of the sector as a whole. Furthermore, the overlap of natural disasters with local and regional conflicts has meant that the definition of what "humanitarian"

work is has become more and more diffuse. It is less clear whether NGOs are indeed doing or not doing what they claim to be doing in their humanitarian mission statements (Hillhorst, 2002). Some question if the expansion of NGOs is little more than a fad to be exploited for publicity, and additional funding in what appears to be a growth industry. Hillhorst (2002) notes that with the growth of the sector comes increased competition for resources, diffuse or missing coordination, and scattered cases of unprofessionalism, graft, political preference, and conflict mongering.

In fact, these colors of corruption do exist to some degree (Smith, 2010). At its worst, some members of the NGO sector are exploitative profiteers of instability. Smith offers Nigeria as an example of an economy where corruption has become commonplace throughout the country's economic system and where this corruption creates an environment for the creation of NGOs solely to exploit the availability of donor dollars to help the poor. In turn, with governmental corruption in unstable countries a frequent problem throughout the continent, legitimate NGOs often seek to avoid involvement in the state and become quasi-governmental agencies in their own right.

In addition, the reputation of NGOs has been harmed by other stake-holders (Pitner, 2000). Often repressive governments develop organizations labeled as "humanitarian organizations" to stifle NGOs seeking to provide a voice for previously quieted populations. Pitner (2000) points to Tunisia, where the government created its own "NGO organizations" under the leadership of the Tunisian intelligence service. Similar organizations have been developed as champions of foreign governments' interests. Ironically, these "humanitarian" organizations are on the rise while more genuine foreign funding sources such as United States

Agency for International Development and the European Commission are forced to tighten purse strings.

These blatant attempts at subterfuge however are not the only instances of NGOs being seen as just another arm of a foreign power. According to Frangonikolopoulos (2005), when NGOs aid militaries with humanitarian actions, the NGOs actually aid in advancing the political agenda of that military's home-state. This is often combined with a dichotomy of mission. While NGOs are generally focused on long-term agendas, the tasks of militaries generally support short-term goals. Regardless of this inconsistency, Paul (2003) notes that military groups are usually seen as groups with the infrastructure and ability to distribute aid, assist in redevelopment, et cetera. Nevertheless, the cooperation of military organizations and NGOs creates a slippery slope. The autonomy of NGOs comes into question, risking the reputation of the NGO sector (Frangonikolopoulos, 2005).

Alternatively, Harsh (2010) notes that the reputation of NGOs as a sector is threatened not so much from underhandedness, subterfuge, or blatant corruption, but rather from technological lag. Technology and business practices in the private sector dominate the expectations of organizational culture as a whole. Advances in record keeping technology, telecommunications, medical technology, infrastructural technology, et cetera throughout the business sector raise standards throughout all sectors. Meanwhile the tight budgets of NGOs are sluggish or altogether incapable of keeping in step with their for-profit counterparts. How can NGOs do good if they are not good at what they do?

While the reputation of NGOs is often outside the control of individual organizations, the sector as a whole has taken substantial blows. Often the weaknesses discussed regarding NGOs are due to a poor understanding of the challenges they face rather than actual failures. Funding

and access can be challenging, and NGOs may find partnerships with organizations across sectors (e.g. military organizations) to be unavoidable. Future studies should seek NGO participants' perspectives on the extent to which clustering the activities together of NGOs enhances their effectiveness and reputation by reducing some of the complications of working on their own.

**Cultural Insensitivity.** Yet another accusation facing today's NGOs is that there is a certain level of cultural insensitivity in how NGOs sometimes respond to the needs and beliefs of help recipients (Breslau, 2000). This lack of intimacy with diverse cultures is evident when there is a cultural mismatch between what is needed and what NGOs supply. The accusation has been focused on Western NGOs. When Western culture is forced to fit over non-Western cultures, both potential needs and potential points of resiliency can be overlooked.

To illustrate this, McCabe (2002) points to aid policies that impose regulations on recipients, while failing to incorporate local practices related to economic coping. This practice can force recipients into a state of dependency. When assistance is concentrated in a single location, local populations consolidate on the aid centers and traditional reciprocal aid networks are eliminated. He points to Turkana pastoralists to demonstrate this. "One of the main reasons why recovery was so difficult was that those families that had migrated into the famine camps found their pastoral friends and neighbors were less willing to give them live-stock to recover from drought. Many successful Turkana felt that residents of the famine camps had spurned the traditional system and would not make good exchange partners (McCabe, 2002; 227)." To compound this issue, development strategies employed by NGOs and multilateral organizations that were more in line with Western development abandoned low yield drought resistant live-stock on communal land for higher yield, more vulnerable live-stock. While higher yield

animals may have a moderate positive impact on national resources, the local populations did not see these same benefits, and the practices actually increased their vulnerability (McCabe, 2002).

The benefits of utilizing local cultural and social capital go beyond mere familiarity of local populations and a passive notion that needs are being overlooked. There are benefits of engaging local culture as well. Garcia-Acosta (2001) recognizes that intimacy with local cultures allows for groups to have a better understanding of adaptation strategies specifically catered to local geographic, economic, and political practices. When these practices are ignored, or worse, actively opposed, vulnerability increases (Oliver-Smith, 2002). Examples of this date back as far as Spanish colonization of Peru. Utilizing traditionally Spanish practices, or those of the developed world forces the local population in to new and maladaptive settlement patterns. The disadvantages of cultural insensitivity were also evident during the 1986 Ugandan relief where, “local skill sets of the Ugandan refugees, potentially lucrative or valuable for livelihood schemes, were disregarded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and outside programmes were foisted upon Ugandans as though they were homogenous, unskilled peasants (2006, 1144).”

Today, NGOs are generally aware of these issues even if the issues remain. A focus on local, social and cultural capital is growing exponentially. Dijkzeul (2006) recognizes a growth in the role of local culture reflected in the literature. However, while it is recognized that local culture should be incorporated in response planning, there is little suggestion as to how this may be done. Perhaps, the Cluster Approach is one answer. Those developing this approach have expressed the hope that clusters will provide some vertical integration around a given functional need, such as health, such that smaller NGOs on the ground can communicate more directly the cultural needs and beliefs of help recipients to larger NGOs high up the cluster hierarchy.

**Utility.** Despite concerns about accountability, reputation, and cultural insensitivity, NGOs have existed for many decades and are expanding in number today because they do fill major needs in response to and recovery from major disasters. There is certainly much that can still be done to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of NGOs, but much has already been done, and the inherent character of NGOs as a unique organizational form demands that any changes in the coordination of NGOs in the field, that is, a change such as the development of the Cluster Approach, must maintain NGO's current utility to those in need.

By their nature, NGOs have specific advantages relative to other types of organizations (e.g., government agencies, businesses) in providing help, especially to those on the margins of society with few resources to exchange for help. These advantages can play out in two dynamic ways. First, the mission of NGOs typically focuses on services, rather than profits. This is a significant organizational advantage. NGOs can focus their energy on service utility, that is, on doing all that can be done for those in need without concern about the extent to which the service being provided is profitable. This freedom from concern with profit allows NGOs to play a variety of key roles. Aldaba (2002) notes that NGOs can play the following five roles in disasters and conflict settings: intermediary, capacity builder, conflict manager, resource mobilizer, and networker/coordinator. As intermediaries, NGOs can offer neutral locations for stakeholders to assemble. In neutral locations, partnerships and programs can be developed and implemented. As capacity builders, NGOs can offer training (e.g., how to build safer structures) and promote vulnerability reducing awareness (e.g., providing HIV reduction education). As conflict managers, NGOs can mediate between or among contentious groups (e.g., unifying survivors of a particular event and their government). As resource mobilizers, NGOs often have access to diffuse resources and can mobilize these resources when typical donors cannot come

through as expected. Lastly, as networkers/coordinators, the small size of many NGOs relative to multilateral organizations and governmental agencies, allows NGOs to navigate on-the-ground needs and concerns. Thus, free of concern with profit, NGOs have the organizational flexibility to enter the fray of a disaster or conflict and serve in a variety of demanding roles.

Second, the utility of NGOs is enhanced by their semi-autonomous existence with respect to their homeland and their recipient nations. NGOs benefit from being “sovereignty free actors (Thakur, 1994; 147)” and are not driven by the interests of their homelands. This allows NGOs to be more responsive to vulnerable populations than nation-states, and multilateral organizations. This autonomy can involve actually circumventing the recipient nation’s government when that government is unstable and/or corrupt (Paul, 2003). Paul (2003) notes that funds in highly politicized disasters often get tied-up at the state level and never trickle down to their intended target populations. However, in less politicized events, foreign NGOs are better able to engage in direct relief and are encouraged to do so because multilateral organizations and larger foreign governmental organizations often prefer to fund development indirectly through NGOs as a means to bypass potentially unstable or corrupt governments. Thus, autonomy within recipient nations means that NGOs are often able to go where other organizations dare not to go due to local political or social barriers. In addition, NGO autonomy provides flexibility to play a number of key roles internationally. According to Thakur (1994; 152), NGOs can “play five distinct roles in international relations: conscience raising or value promotion; agenda setting; lobbying to shape the terms of the instructions given to delegates at multilateral and IGO [multilateral] forums, and implement international commitments; monitoring; and direct action.” Thus, regardless of accountability and reputation issues, the perceived utility of NGOs has increased as the severity of disasters has increased (Moore et al, 2003).

Clearly, the advantage of operating without concern for profit and in a semi-autonomous manner are unique advantages for NGOs relative to other organizations in disasters, especially international disasters, and the implementation of the Cluster Approach should not hamper such advantages. Thus, a future study should examine the extent to which selected NGO participants in the Cluster Approach perceive that the advantages of NGOs have been maintained and the concerns about accountability, reputation, and cultural sensitivity have been addressed.

### **The Cluster Approach: Its Origins and Early History**

The UN's Cluster Approach was developed as a way to coordinate NGOs and to integrate their efforts with local, regional, state, and national governments, the private sector, and multi-lateral organizations (e.g., the UN, European Union, and African Union (IASC Operational Guidance, 2007)). The approach is intended for use where a major emergency requires a multi-sectoral response with participation of a wide range of international humanitarian actors (IASC Operational Guidance, 2007). Clusters are organized at the global scale, and by nation-states (Street, and Parihar, 2007). The goal of this dual organization paradigm is to bolster general humanitarian systems overall, while addressing recognized local needs.

The Cluster Approach organizes NGOs by their basic function. For example, health, sheltering or security. However an inconsistency between global and state cluster labels exists. While the global divisions may incorporate food and sanitation into one cluster, and healthcare in another, specific state clusters may incorporate sanitation into the healthcare cluster and leave food out as separate. In turn, clusters are spearheaded by "cluster lead organizations." These organizations provide overall leadership for each cluster. This structure then becomes the means by which NGOs are coordinated in their response to international disasters.

A weak response during the 2003 Darfur crisis highlighted the humanitarian arm of the UN. Particularly, it brought about criticisms that this arm, OCHA, was too integrated into the military and political facets of the UN to adequately serve as a non-biased contributor of humanitarian aid (Streets et al, 2012). With the weaknesses during the Darfur response as well as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition and the Humanitarian Response Review, recognized key points that needed to be addressed. Two of these key points were standby arrangements and coordination (United Nations, 2012). The Cluster Approach was presented as a way to address these two fundamental, as well as several other secondary, weaknesses (United Nations, 2012).

The test case for the Cluster Approach was conducted in response to the 2006 Pakistan Earthquake (Street, and Parihar, 2007). The results were mixed. Problems with the approach came early in its initial implementation. Cluster meetings were held in English limiting the involvement of some local NGOs. Meetings failed to recognize the issues brought up by groups with more intimate knowledge of local needs. The failures of clusters to integrate with local NGOs decreased the buy-in of those NGOs who saw meetings as a distraction from actually doing work in line with their missions. Further, cluster meetings were held too frequently and focused too narrowly. This strict direction of groups ignored the capacity of NGOs engaged in several activities. Clusters failed to incorporate local civic, cultural, and governmental organizations. Groups not recognized by the UN charter were not sought out to engage within the Clusters, limiting the number of stakeholders and potential resources involved. Finally, leadership tasks were not clearly defined or delegated causing confusion about the implementation of the paradigm. These outcomes were in part due to a lack of buy-in from organizations on the ground, as well as a lack of enthusiasm by groups that did participate.

Nevertheless, the UN has continued the development and implementation of the Cluster Approach.

### **The Cluster Approach: Addressing Current Concerns**

Given the obstacles NGOs face in the current international climate, the Cluster Approach could be a solution for many concerns. Such an integration mechanism could provide a unified starting point to oversee, prioritize, expand the success of, and hold accountable organizations participating in the model. Presumably, the concerns associated with accountability, reputation, cultural sensitivity, and utility can be addressed by integrating organizations.

**Accountability.** Despite repeated weaknesses, the Cluster Approach aims at solving real issues. Most importantly, accountability has been a major concern throughout the NGO sector. NGOs can judge their success or failure against their own overall goals, but critics of the sector recognize a lack of unifying principles across NGOs as a whole. The NGO sector looks disjointed and chaotic. NGOs remain susceptible to accountability concerns. Systems of standards have yet to fully address this situation. In contrast, the UN designed Cluster Approach ideally enhances cooperation and consistency throughout the sector, and such coordinated activity could be a route to greater, sector-wide accountability as NGOs compare and contrast their efforts. Future studies should explore perceptions of cooperation, coordination, and accountability in disasters employing the Cluster Approach. The present paper will present a model for such a study (see chapter 3).

**Reputation.** The reputation of NGOs has fallen under increasing scrutiny in the last two decades (Hillhorst, 2002). The utilization of clusters could serve to provide oversight and a degree of consensus on what is considered humanitarian work. Further, clusters could serve as a type of clearinghouse aligning reputable organizations with similar missions. Finally, the pooled

resources envisioned by the Cluster Approach could provide an alternative funding source to foreign governments providing a clear distinction between the interests of foreign governments and the interests of non-governmental organizations based in foreign states. If the Cluster Approach were to accomplish all of these ideal outcomes, the reputation of the NGO sector would most likely improve.

**Cultural Sensitivity.** The integration sought by clusters could serve to minimize one of the greatest weaknesses inherent in the effort by external NGOs to be of help in cultures that are quite distinct from the homeland cultures, that is, the problem of cultural insensitivity. Thakur (1994) recognizes the essential role NGOs play in international humanitarian affairs. Through cluster-based integration, the intimate relationship that smaller NGOs share with local populations and cultural structures are not wasted due to lack of resources. Their on-the-ground knowledge can be spread among other NGOs, including much larger ones, that all are addressing the same functional needs. Working with local structures could redirect policies toward being more in-line with the practices and needs of the populations to be served.

**Utility.** Regardless of the seemingly faltering reputation of the NGOs, their perceived utility or potential utility increases (Moore et al, 2003). The structures created by the Cluster Approach do not appear to undermine either the focus of NGOs on service rather than profit or the ability of NGOs to operate semi-autonomously in foreign lands—both key utilities for NGOs. Still, the increasing use of the Cluster Approach demands attention be given to any latent developments associated with the approach that might either harm or enhance these utilities.

**Need for exploratory research.** It is time for an exploratory study to begin the examination of the extent to which the Cluster Approach is addressing or exacerbating some of the fundamental concerns existent in the general literature on NGOs. The concerns have been

frequently expressed about the NGO sector as a whole, but little or no effort has been made to address the extent to which these concerns are addressed by the most widespread restructuring of international NGO efforts in recent history. In fact, there is very little empirical research, at least research by non-UN researchers, to study any aspect of the Cluster Approach. Research should be conducted directing attention to this surprising absence of research on the Cluster Approach and specifically addressing perceptions of the extent to which the Cluster Approach is impacting sector-wide concerns.

Since 2006 the Cluster Approach has been deployed in over 40 countries for events ranging between civil conflicts, to famine, to natural disasters. Notably the model was deployed in response to the 2010 Haitian earthquake (O'Connor, 2011). During the earthquake response several of the above noted issues arose yet again along with new dilemmas. Power and authority remained concentrated in the traditional cadre of organizations including the UN and those organizations with the longest lasting ties to it. Once again, local NGOs and local populations were left out of the conversation. Further, the decision making process remained undefined and chaotic allowing for no clear regulation within each cluster (O'Connor, 2011). The Cluster Approach faced some of the issues in Haiti that the general NGO sector has faced. The Haiti disaster involved major distribution in an underdeveloped country requiring the involvement of numerous NGOs at all levels from around the world. Such a disaster requires the coordination promised by the Cluster Approach and represents the type of disaster where the Cluster Approach is truly tested. Thus the present paper uses the Haiti Earthquake as a sample disaster to illustrate how a study of the Cluster Approach could proceed.

As will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, a proposed exploratory study could begin research on the Cluster Approach and general, sector-wide concerns about international

NGOs with an exploratory research effort. The proposed effort would involve in-depth interviews of selected participations with open-ended questions and associated more focused probes to allow participants both to freely provide their perceptions of the approach and to respond specifically to the issues such as accountability that have been covered above.

## **SECTION 2. CREATING NEW KNOWLEDGE: HOW TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP**

### **Overview**

In order to properly assess how successful the Cluster Approach has been in focusing the humanitarian sector with regard to humanitarian crisis, research must delve into the actual workings of the Cluster Approach. To date, the majority of research on the topic has largely been comprised of anecdotal criticisms and technical reports that arguably offer extreme views in both directions of the paradigm. While anecdotal reports are largely critical of the work conducted under the purview of Clusters throughout the world, technical reports seemingly hand-wave away legitimate concerns as simply minor complexities that should be explored to maximize success of what is presented as an already successful endeavor. To address these gaps in research, the voices of the subjects that the Cluster Approach seeks to unify should be consulted. To that end research should be conducted to gain insight into the perspective of the NGO members.

### **Choice of Site**

The present paper suggests a research project that would begin to document and analyze the voices of NGO members involved in the Cluster Approach. A future study should look at strengths and opportunities in the existing literature for implementation of the Cluster Approach. Such a study would look at qualitative methodologies, specifically in depth interviews to implement exploratory research to sow seeds of further research. These interviews would give voice to representatives of member NGOs, that the organizational structures seek to aid.

An ideal study would seek to conduct semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of non-profit organizations engaged in a national Health Cluster in response to a particular event, such as Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Focusing on one cluster function (e.g.,

health), one location (e.g., Haiti), and one disaster (e.g., the 2010 earthquake) should help to hold constant a number of major contextual factors that could otherwise complicate perceptions of the approach's operation. This allows interviewees to address a common pool of experiences and needs. At the same time, holding these factors constant significantly limits any generalizability the findings might have, but such a limitation seems preferable in an initial exploratory study. The hope is to gain in-depth knowledge about one, specific location and event within the evolution of the Cluster Approach before seeking an understanding of how significant contextual variables might alter the cluster's operation.

### **Sample**

The selection of a sample presents several challenges both administrative, and logistical. One solution would be to interview participants in the meetings of NGO representatives within the Health Cluster both during and following the disaster. Such NGO representatives should be uniquely able to observe the interaction of NGO members working within the cluster framework. Thus, study participants would be sought from among these NGO representatives who are involved in Health Cluster meetings following a disaster (Warren, 2001). In addition, these meetings might provide documentary evidence that participants in the cluster actually met and coordinated these activities. The hope would be to interview meeting participants representing several different NGOs in a cluster such as the Health Cluster. Efforts will be made to purposively include both local, and international NGOs, in hopes of gaining the richest data possible.

It should be noted that the staffing in these meetings can often be somewhat ephemeral. Turnover in NGO staffing can be swift, and assignments in large organizations can be temporary. This provides both opportunities, and challenges. While the turnover provides a greater pool of

individuals to interview, the brief tenure in these positions could limit the potential for snowball sampling necessary to effectively expand the pool of interviewees.

The biggest challenge anticipated in this sampling effort is gaining access to the initial interviewee—someone who has participated in these meetings as an NGO representative. Perhaps the most effective route would be to use a prominent participant in the overall response to a disaster as a gatekeeper (Taylor and Bogdon, 1998a). Once such a name is provided, then future participants hopefully would be identified via snowball sampling. Regardless of the gatekeeper, a copy of the minutes from any such cluster meeting could prove instrumental if it had a list of participants, and such a list should be sought.

## **Procedures**

Should the interviewees prefer a degree of confidentiality measures should be taken to provide it, however some, particularly those involved in smaller NGOs may prefer to be identified as this may be the first opportunity for their voices to be heard in an academic setting. First and foremost, at the behest of interviewees, the names of interviewees and the names of their organizations should not be mentioned (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998a). Further, all documents, recordings, and transcripts of or related to interviews should be kept on the researcher's personal, password protected computer. All data should be kept only until research related to the data is complete exceeding no more than four years and then destroyed. The information regarding each interview should be given a generated numeric identifier rather than being saved with interviewee's names or organizational names. At the onset of each interview a drafted privacy statement regarding the recording of the interview as well as the steps taken to ensure privacy should be read aloud to the respondent, and they should be given the opportunity to end, or continue with the interview (Warren, 2001). Physical, legal, or emotional harm

associated with this research (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998a) as well as any professional risks of harm should be mitigated by the previous attention given to privacy.

Initial contact with selected participants should most likely be via email. The preferred technology for the interview is phone. However, it may prove impossible to contact some interviewees by phone in which case questions could be provided via email.

### **Interview Guide**

An interview guide should guide the semi-structured interviews (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998a). Questions ought to be broad and oriented toward the organizations that work in the humanitarian field, as well as their engagement in the Cluster Approach, and related to organizational needs and how they are fulfilled, such as resources, staffing, et cetera. Additionally respondents should be probed to create even richer data. Interviews should range from 30 to 90 minutes.

The goal of the open-ended questions is to determine to what degree the criticism of the NGO sector is recognized by NGO participants themselves as well as how the Cluster Approach has been implemented to ameliorate these obstacles. Further, questions should be designed to specifically explore the perceptions of the Cluster Approach's impact on accountability, reputation, intimacy and utility. Thus, if these issues are not covered during responses to the open-ended questions, probes should focus on the issues of accountability, reputation, cultural sensitivity, and utility. Suggested question are provided below. The questions proceed from a broad focus on the NGO sector, to the respondent's NGO, to the Cluster Approach, and finally to interactions within the Cluster.

- 1) Can you describe the general state of the international NGO sector?
  - Function of NGOs in general? (Utility)

- Perceptions vs reality?
- Relative to other sectors? (Utility)
- Reputation?
  - Corruption?
- Military partnerships? (Corruption)
- Are expectations reasonable?
  - Benefits of direct vs. indirect aid

2) Describe your organization and its function.

- Role
- Scale
- Challenges faced specific to your organization
- Funding through donations or grants?
- Measures of Strengths and Weaknesses? (Accountability)
- Growth and Improvement? (Accountability/Audits)
- Integration with other organizations prior to cluster involvement?
- Integration after cluster involvement?
  - NGOs of different scale (Paradoxes of power?)
  - Uneven resources (intimacy)
  - Codes of Standards (standards)

3) Can you describe the successes and failures of the Cluster Approach?

- Successful integration?
- Benefits of integration?
- Clear leadership?

- Partnerships with other sectors?
  - Integration with local authorities?
  - Increased accountability/response capacity?
- 4) To what extent do you perceive NGOs buying into the Cluster Approach?
- Language barriers?
  - Overly bureaucratic?
  - Limits on focus of NGO?
  - Picking favorites?

### **Data Analysis**

Recorded telephone interviews should be transcribed immediately following each interview. Each interview should be treated independently for sake of transcription, receiving individual document files with a randomly assigned number label to ensure confidentiality (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998b). Preferably, transcription should be completed by the primary researcher to monitor confidentiality and learn the data.

Emerging themes should be drawn from the data throughout interviews (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998b). Themes could be anything from common vocabulary, topics, or repeated concerns. All themes should be laid out and attention most closely paid to those themes most prevalent throughout the data. Attention should also be paid to drastically opposing perceptions, and potential causes for the different perceptions (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998b). From there, narrative can be developed exploring the voices of those interviewed.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this research. First and foremost this project should not, nor would it be intended to be generalizable. Instead, it should simply be an exploratory study.

Second, participation may be limited based on potential participants' limited time to participate. Third, the nature of this study would face some of the same limitations common among the humanitarian field, and outlined in critiques of the Cluster Approach itself. Primarily, linguistic barriers hinder inclusion of organizations without English speaking representatives. Further, the technological dependence on telephone interviews could serve to hinder the inclusion of small organizations with single remote offices where telecommunications are sporadic or limited. Finally, this study would begin by focusing only on organizations that are currently, or have previously been engaged within the Cluster Approach, but future research is needed on the perceptions of the Cluster Approach by those NGO members that have not been integrated. Hopefully, the proposed, exploratory study will trigger research efforts that will begin to address these initial limitations.

## **Conclusions**

While several obstacles exist in conducting this study in regard to access, technology, and logistics, it is important to recognize the substantial potential of the outlined research. As the world grows ever more toward a global community, increasingly, global approaches such as the United Nations and other integration mechanisms are going to be the chief way to solve critical emerging problems.

With luck the bureaucratic obstacles that seem to cast negative light on these processes can make way for a systematic focus aimed at solutions before blame. Research could seek to determine if concepts like accountability, reputation, cultural sensitivity and utility can be served through these top-down approaches, or if they remain stubborn buzz words in the professional vernacular.

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