

Research Report: Coordinating Education in Emergencies through the Education Cluster – illustrated by the cases of Mali and Nigeria

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This study, informed by various sociological neo-institutional approaches, investigates whether a global mechanism such as the cluster approach represents an adequate framework to structuring humanitarian response. It sheds light on the coordination of education in emergencies (EiE) through the Education Cluster in the contexts of Mali and Nigeria and identifies internal and external influential factors that need to be addressed in order to improve the quality of response.

Introduction

The focus here is on the Education Cluster, a coordination mechanism established in 2007 as part of the cluster approach to structuring the provision of education activities in emergency situations. The question of efficiency in coordination of emergency response activities as such is an important one; especially in view of the various humanitarian situations in past years characterized by a lack of coordination resulting in the need to create different mechanisms (e.g. the Sphere Project or the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP)) to counter inefficient collaboration within the humanitarian system.

Despite tireless advocacy efforts, EiE continues to be chronically underprioritized within the humanitarian system, to the extent that current reports, such as the World Development Report 2018, warn of a ‘learning crises’. One of the main reasons for this is that EiE’s being both an essential part of immediate humanitarian assistance as well as a development measure is often neglected.

Nevertheless, EiE has recently been given a funding platform, the ‘Education Cannot Wait Fund’: while the launching of this platform, given that one of EiE’s main problems has been its chronic lack of funding, may be considered a success, pressure for the Education Cluster to be more accountable and capable of justifying its working methods to different stakeholders (i.e.

donors) will naturally increase owing to that very success.

This study investigates the implementation of the cluster approach as a global coordination framework by Education Clusters at the national and local levels in the contexts of Mali and Nigeria. Furthermore, it attempts to determine whether deviations in the practical implementation of coordination activities are inherent in the coordination mechanism itself (internal) or dependent on the context within which clusters operate (external).

Methodology

The investigation of factors that might influence the implementation of practical activities of the Education Clusters in Mali and Nigeria was conducted in two phases: 1) through an analysis of documents focusing on cluster performance (e.g. strategy documents, performance reviews, project proposals, evaluations) and 2) via semi-structured interviews with experts having served, or still serving, as Education Cluster Coordinators, Co-cluster Coordinators and Information Managers (IM) in the contexts of Mali and Nigeria.

During the review of documents, special attention was paid to text passages indicating an unexpected turn of events or failure in the implementation of coordination activities. These text passages were integrated into a category system that was developed in parallel with the document review.

Following a personal interpretation, the essence of these text passages was deductively condensed into a single umbrella term (factor). The range of factors identified and categorized as internal or external were expected to have an influence on coordination efforts by Education Clusters in Mali and Nigeria. These were classified in five broad categories: **context** (factors related to the political, economic or in-country situation), **advocacy** (activities aimed at fostering understanding of the importance of EiE), **management** (e.g. internal HR capacity for coordination of the cluster), **implementation** (of cluster work activities) and **working environment** (entities involved in the cluster's activities from education partner to community-based organizations (CBOs)). These categories were used to design the structure of expert interviews conducted in order to verify the prevalence of these factors in the cases of Mali and Nigeria.

Results

Main findings suggest that:

1) both analysis of the literature and expert interviews reveal precisely the same factors as having had the most influence on the work of Education Clusters in Mali and Nigeria in the past few years. These were the following: **in-country situation, HR capacity, prioritization of EiE, advocacy for EiE, funding for EiE and collaboration across levels**. The question arises as to what degree organizational learning within the humanitarian system in general, and within the cluster approach in particular, has been researched

2) determining whether the roots of potential influential factors are internal or external remains a challenge because of their strong inter-relatedness. What can be said with certainty, however, is that the latter plays a much more important role in

trying to make an assumption on the adequateness of a coordination mechanism such as the cluster approach

3) decoupling in the practical implementation of EiE activities from the formal structure of the cluster approach is inevitable due to the complex and fragmented interplay of local, national and international actors operating at the different intervention levels not only within, but also beyond the field of humanitarian action.

Conclusion and recommendations

The complex interplay of influential factors at various levels has a significant impact on the actual performance of Education Clusters, making decoupling of practical activities from their formal structure inevitable.

This study suggests that the Global Education Cluster, as a central entity representing the education sector in the global humanitarian arena, analyses which expectations imposed by the global cluster approach it can or cannot fulfill. Accordingly, the Global Education Cluster should adapt its action framework according to the real capabilities of Education Clusters in order to increase deliverables in the coordination of EiE.

Furthermore, the study also suggests the possible usefulness of extending this research to other thematic clusters within the humanitarian system in order to evaluate whether the cluster approach today is the adequate mechanism for the coordination of humanitarian response within the ever-changing complex humanitarian system.

This research was conducted in the framework of Gabriela Müller's Master thesis for the acquisition of the academic degree 'Master of Arts in World Society and Global Governance' (University of Lucerne, Switzerland). For more information please contact Gabriela at gjosefamueller@gmail.com.