

Cluster activation and deactivation: Checklist

1. Purpose

This document outlines the steps for cluster activation and deactivation and serves as an internal tip sheet for OCHA staff in the field and at HQ involved in cluster activation or deactivation processes. This document comprises a quick checklist as well as “Important Considerations” in the pages that follow. The checklist should be read in conjunction with the *IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level 2015* which is the definitive guidance on the issue: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-transformative-agenda/iasc-reference-module-cluster-coordination-country-level-revised-2015>.

2. Overall guidance and support:

Please contact the System-Wide Approaches and Practices Section for support: Marina Skuric Prodanovic skuric@un.org, Randa Hassan Hassan50@un.org and Janet Puhalic puhalovic@un.org

3. Focal points at HQ and Mailing List

The following HQ contacts are the key focal points involved in processing the activation/deactivation of clusters:

SWAPS: Marina Skuric Prodanovic skuric@un.org, Randa Hassan Hassan50@un.org, Janet Puhalic puhalovic@un.org

OAD: Relevant Desk Officer and Section Chief and Alexandra Bonvolat: bonvalot@un.org, Snezana Visnjic (visnjic@un.org), Melissa Fernandez (fernandez15@un.org)

OUSG: Natasha Geber geber@un.org, Sofie Karlsson karlsson2@un.org, ousgocha@un.org

IASC Secretariat: Farhad Movahed movahed@un.org

“*OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation*” is a mailing list composed of the above key individuals at HQ responsible for overseeing the activation/deactivation process and has been set up to facilitate communication.

1. Cluster activation¹

Important considerations

IASC criteria for activation

The criteria for cluster activation are met when:

1. Response and coordination gaps exist due to a sharp deterioration or significant change in the humanitarian situation.
 2. Existing national response or coordination capacity is unable to meet needs in a manner that respects humanitarian principles, due to the scale of need, the number of actors involved, the need for a more complex multi-sectoral approach, or other constraints on the ability to respond or apply humanitarian principles.
- RC/HCs (in consultation with the HCT/UNCT) should only recommend the activation of clusters when there is an identified gap warranting their activation.
 - OCHA should advise the RC/HC and the Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs) that the activation of clusters must be **strategic, specific to the context, and intended to be for as short a duration as possible.**
 - To ensure that clusters continue to operate only while they are strictly needed, plans to deactivate and transition clusters should be prepared as soon as possible after activation. Building the capacity of national and local actors should be an objective from the outset. Annual Cluster Coordination Architecture Reviews assist the HC/HCT to determine the necessity for the continuation of clusters.
 - The formal activation of clusters may be difficult in circumstances where national authority capacity is constrained (e.g. limited capacity, lack of willingness or where duty bearers are party to the conflict). In such contexts, different ways of augmenting coordination and response capacity may need to be identified, underpinned by the principles of the cluster approach.
 - Prior to activation it is important for the RC/HC and Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs) supported by the OCHA HoO to dialogue with national authorities and establish the level of capacities of national humanitarian coordination and response mechanisms and discuss international support in terms of operational response and humanitarian coordination (e.g. application of cluster approach).
 - ***Note:** The CLA is selected by RC/HC, in consultation with the HCT (or UNCT if no HCT is in place). The criteria for determining the CLA is based on an operational actor's coordination and response capacity, operational presence, and ability to scale up. Ideally, this mirrors global arrangements but is not always possible and sometimes other organizations are in a better position to lead. It is important that the CLA is able to put in place the required resources to effectively support and staff the cluster (dedicated Cluster Coordinator and IM capacity).*
 - CLAs are encouraged to share cluster leadership with NGOs wherever feasible. OCHA plays a role in encouraging co-leadership.

¹ Please consult the *IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level 2015* "Cluster Activation" p. 9-11

Cluster activation checklist

Issue	Field	HQ
<p>Primary Contacts</p>	<p>RC/HC, HoO</p>	<p>SWAPS: Marina Skuric Prodanovic skuric@un.org, Randa Hassan Hassan50@un.org, Janet Puhalic puhalovic@un.org</p> <p>OAD: Relevant Desk Officer and Section Chief and Alexandra Bonvolat: bonvalot@un.org, Snezana Visnjic (visnjic@un.org), Melissa Fernandez (fernandez15@un.org)</p> <p>OUSG: Natasha Geber geber@un.org, Sofie Karlsson karlsson2@un.org</p> <p>IASC Secretariat: Farhad Movahed movahed@un.org</p>
<p>Step1</p> <p>Criteria</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have IASC criteria for cluster activation been met? ▪ Has the RC/HC/HCT analyzed and discussed the gaps and needs for (sectoral) coordination based on the context? ▪ Is the identified CLA the best positioned actor based on IASC criteria? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has SWAPS provided guidance to the HoO on cluster activation or on the coordination set-up in country?
<p>Step 2</p> <p>Consultations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the CLA been in discussions with its national sectoral counterpart at senior level? ▪ Does the government understand the coordination arrangements being put in place? ▪ Has the RC/HC/OCHA discussed possible activation with the government? ▪ Is it clear how the proposed cluster will connect with/support national coordination structures? ▪ Will the CLA make available the requisite resources for the cluster to perform its functions? ▪ Has the RC/HC/HCT discussed and agreed to the cluster activation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has SWAPS convened the Global Cluster Coordinators to discuss cluster activation and coordination architecture set-up [for new emergencies] or had a dialogue with specific Global Cluster Coordinators on individual activations?
<p>Step 3</p> <p>Request letter from RC/HC to ERC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has HoO drafted a letter* from the RC/HC to ERC outlining the reasons for the activation and detailing the clusters to be activated and the lead or co-lead agencies responsible for each and shared letter with OAD? <p><i>*This may be in a form of a letter or e-mail.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has OAD or OUSG/ERC received a letter from the RC/HC requesting cluster activation? ▪ Has the letter been shared with “OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation” mailing list? ▪ Has SWAPS provided comments? ▪ Does the letter conform to guidance and effectively indicate why cluster activation is requested? ▪ Are there any concerns known from an HQ perspective on why cluster activation may be problematic or if alternative arrangements should be considered?

Step 4
IASC
consultation:
ERC note to
IASC Principals

- Has OAD:
 - Drafted a note* from the ERC to IASC Principals with ERC’s recommendation on activation?
 - Transmitted the ERC’s note to OUSG copying **“OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation”** mailing list within three working days².
- Has OUSG:
 - Cleared the draft note from OAD ?
 - Transmitted the email together with the RC/HC’s request to the IASC Principals with a 24-hour objection deadline³ copying the EDG, and **“OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation”** mailing list [within the same three working days].
- Has SWAPS shared the RC/HC letter and ERC note to the IASC Principals with the Global Cluster Coordinators?
- Have OUSG and the IASC secretariat confirmed that no objections were received from Principals within the deadline?

If there are concerns:

- These are addressed in the usual manner in order to arrive at a satisfactory outcome. The Principals may ask the EDG to discuss in more detail, if necessary.

Note: The ERC must convey any objections in the letter to the RC/HC (see below).

**This may be in the form of a letter or e-mail.*

² The three working days is an indicative timeline. Additional time may be necessary where guidance or other considerations are necessary.

³ The 24h deadline for approval by IASC Principals is the deadline expressed in the IASC guidance (Cluster Coordination Reference Module).

<p>Step 5 Endorsement: ERC note to RC/HC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the RC/HC received confirmation from the ERC that the clusters are endorsed by the IASC? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has OAD: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prepared a note from the ERC to the RC/HC confirming cluster activation and sent it to OUSG, copying "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list? ▪ Forwarded to the HoO the endorsement note sent from OUSG to the RC/HC (see below)? ▪ Has OUSG : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sent the note from the ERC to the IASC Principals confirming no objections and the cluster is activated as per RC/HC request, copying the EDG and "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list? ▪ Sent the note from ERC to the RC/HC confirming cluster activation copying "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list. ▪ Has SWAPS shared the ERC's endorsement note to the RC/HC with the Global Cluster Coordinators?
<p>Step 6 Communication and confirmation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the RC/HC shared the ERC's endorsement note with the HCT? ▪ Has the RC/HC /OCHA officially communicated the cluster activation to the national counterpart? ▪ Has the CLA confirmed cluster activation to the national sectoral counterpart at senior level? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has SWAPS updated its activation/deactivation files?

Cluster activation: The letter from the RC/HC to the ERC

The request from the RC/HC to the ERC is an important record of the initiation of international humanitarian coordination in a given crisis. The letter serves as an official request from the RC/HC having consulted with the HCT on the arrangements that have been agreed at country level and the commitments that the Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs) have made.

With increased emphasis on reinforcing and not replacing national capacity, it is essential that the letter from the RC/HC to the ERC demonstrates that the RC/HC and the HCT have given sufficient consideration for the reasons and modalities for introducing international coordination of sectoral response in the country.

It is essential that these letters are clearly written and outline the following:

Essential components of the letter:

- ✓ Clear reasons for cluster activation (e.g. why there is a need for international coordination of sectoral response in reference to the cluster activation criteria).
- ✓ Indication that there has been an endorsement of the decision by the HCT.
- ✓ Which clusters are recommended for activation.
- ✓ Which organizations are proposed as the lead, co-lead, or co-chair.
- ✓ How proposed coordination will support national capacity.

Other suggested elements in the letter:

- When the coordination architecture that is being put in place will be reviewed.
- Providing a table that outlines the proposed clusters and specifying the organizations that will lead, co-lead or co-chair each cluster.
- The letter may be an opportunity for the RC/HC to update the ERC and IASC on other coordination-related issues impacted by the change in the context.

Cluster activation: The letter from the ERC to the RC/HC

- ➔ Where no objections are received from IASC Principals to the proposal for cluster activation, the note from the ERC to the RC/HC should simply confirm the activation as per activation request letter.

Note: The ERC may wish to add additional information or requests depending on the context, e.g. to be kept regularly abreast of the situation, to express support for the RC/HC's efforts in addressing the humanitarian situation, or a reminder of the need to carry out a Cluster Coordination Architecture Review in line with IASC policy.

Where objections are received from a CLA, they are addressed through the normal channels. Also, the Principals may ask the IASC Emergency Directors Group (EDG) to discuss in more detail, if necessary.

- ➔ Objections could be received on the proposed lead, co-lead or co-chairing arrangements, the name of a cluster being used at country level, or on the need for the cluster to be activated.

The ERC must convey these objections in the letter to the RC/HC, preferably with suggestions on alternative arrangements that have been proposed in negotiations with the CLA. The ERC's letter will require a response from the RC/HC including any new proposals.

Please contact SWAPS for support or guidance on the above, including sample letters.

Important considerations

Cluster deactivation means the closure of a formally activated cluster and the transfer of its functions from an entity with international leadership and accountability to other structures, including those that are led nationally, or are focused on development. Cluster deactivation may take place for a single cluster or several clusters. It may take place after a coordination architecture review or after other events in the country impacting the need for humanitarian response.

Cluster deactivation must always be based on an assessment of national capacity and consideration of the context.

The criteria for deactivation must be met, i.e.:

(i) The humanitarian situation improves, significantly reducing humanitarian needs and associated response and coordination gaps

and/or

(ii) National structures acquire sufficient capacity to coordinate and meet residual humanitarian needs in line with humanitarian principles.

Cluster deactivation: The letter from the RC/HC to the ERC

The RC/HC's deactivation letter is an important record outlining a significant change in humanitarian coordination arrangements and accountabilities. The letter must convey that the above-mentioned criteria for deactivation are met, outlining the reasons, and noting that an assessment of national capacity and the evolution of the operational context were considered.

The letter serves as an official request to stand down cluster lead agency accountabilities and responsibilities as assigned by IASC policy. The letter clearly indicates what the future arrangements will be, including role of national authorities and that of development actors, and how any residual humanitarian needs will be covered for particular sectors.

Essential components of the letter:

- ✓ Clear reasons for cluster deactivation and the transitional coordination arrangements that will be put in place, including consultations with national authorities and their role as well as with development actors.
- ✓ How residual humanitarian needs will be addressed and the accountable entity.
- ✓ The date that deactivation will take place based on consultation with the HCT and national authorities.
- ✓ A table outlining the remaining cluster/sectors (if relevant) that will continue, including the cluster lead agency and co-lead (if any).

Cluster deactivation checklist

Issue	Field	HQ
Primary contacts	RC/HC, HoO	<p>SWAPS: Marina Skuric Prodanovic skuric@un.org, Randa Hassan Hassan50@un.org, Janet Puhalic puhalovic@un.org</p> <p>OAD: Relevant Desk Officer and Section Chief and Alexandra Bonvolat: bonvalot@un.org, Snezana Visnjic (visnjic@un.org), Melissa Fernandez (fernandez15@un.org)</p> <p>OUSG: Natasha Geber geber@un.org, Sofie Karlsson karlsson2@un.org</p> <p>IASC Secretariat: Farhad Movahed movahed@un.org</p>
Step1 Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are the IASC criteria met for cluster deactivation? ▪ Has there been an assessment of national capacity and of the context? ▪ Has the RC/HC/HCT analyzed and discussed the context and the gaps and the continued need for (sectoral) coordination? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has SWAPS provided guidance to the HoO on cluster deactivation or transition coordination procedures? ▪ Has APMB (Humanitarian-Development Collaboration Section) been consulted?
Step 2 Consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the CLA been in discussions with its national sectoral counterpart at senior level regarding handing over coordination responsibilities? ▪ Has the RC/HC/OCHA discussed possible deactivation and transition planning with national authorities and related implications? ▪ Is it clear what the alternative coordination arrangements will be and how residual humanitarian needs will be addressed? ▪ Have consultations with development actors taken place? ▪ Has the RC/HC/HCT discussed and agreed to the cluster deactivation and timeline? ▪ Has a transition plan been developed and approved by the HCT? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has SWAPS liaised with the relevant Global Cluster(s) or convened the Global Clusters to discuss cluster deactivation and transition planning?

Issue	Field	HQ
<p>Step 3 Request letter from RC/HC to ERC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the HoO drafted a letter from the RC/HC to ERC outlining the reasons for the deactivation and shared it with OAD? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has OAD or the ERC received a letter from the RC/HC requesting cluster deactivation? ▪ Has OAD shared the letter with SWAPS for comments? ▪ Does the letter conform to requirements and effectively indicate why cluster deactivation is requested as per guidance? ▪ Are there any concerns known from the HQ perspective on why cluster deactivation may be problematic or if alternative arrangements should be considered?
<p>Step 4 IASC consultation: ERC note to IASC Principals</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has OAD: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Drafted the note from the ERC to the IASC Principals with the ERC's recommendation on deactivation? ▪ Transmitted the ERC's note to OUSG copying "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list <i>within three working days</i>⁵? ▪ Has OUSG: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cleared the note from OAD? ▪ Transmitted the note together with the RC/HCs request to the IASC Principals copying EDG, and "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list [within the same three working days]? ▪ Has SWAPS shared the RC/HC letter and ERC note to IASC with the Global Cluster Coordinators?
<p>Step 5 Endorsement: ERC Note to RC/HC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the RC/HC received confirmation from the ERC that the cluster deactivation is endorsed by the IASC? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Were any objections received within deadline? ▪ Has OAD: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prepared a note from the ERC to the RC/HC confirming cluster deactivation and sent to OUSG, copying "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list? ▪ Forwarded to the HoO the deactivation endorsement note sent from OUSG to the RC/HC (see below)? ▪ Has OUSG: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sent the note to the IASC Principals confirming there are no objections and the cluster is deactivated as per the RC/HC request, copying the EDG and "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list? ▪ Sent note from ERC to RC/HC confirming cluster deactivation copying "OCHA-Cluster Activation-Deactivation" mailing list? ▪ Has SWAPS shared the ERC's deactivation endorsement note to the RC/HC with the Global Cluster Coordinators?

⁵ This is an indicative timeline. Additional time may be required where guidance or other considerations are necessary.

Issue	Field	HQ
<p>Step 6 Communication and confirmation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the RC/HC shared the endorsement of deactivation letter with the HCT? ▪ Has the RC/HC /OCHA officially communicated the cluster deactivation to national counterpart? ▪ Has the CLA confirmed cluster deactivation to its national sectoral counterpart at senior level? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has SWAPS updated its activation/deactivation files?