

WASH Cluster Response to the Humanitarian Emergency in Yemen

Langley Topper

Objective

Understand how Yemen WASH Cluster activities, tools, and products lead to (or not) response outcomes in humanitarian contexts.

Background on Yemen

Yemen has been labeled by the United Nations as the “world’s worst humanitarian crisis.” Since 2015, there has been active conflict in Yemen between the north and south with significant external influence from Iran and a Saudi-led coalition. Conflict has caused the economy to plummet and high rates of inflation of 20-30% annually. There has also been massive displacement as the population has fled frontline conflict zones. Yemen also faces several health issues including widespread malnutrition, endemic cholera, and now COVID-19. The ongoing conflict has crippled the Yemeni health system. Approximately 50% of health facilities have been destroyed, many in targeted drone attacks, and there are limited healthcare personnel. This multitude of factors has created a complicated operating environment for humanitarian actors. Presently 77% of the population of Yemen needs some humanitarian assistance and 55% of the population lacks access to drinking water and sanitation.

Background on Cluster System

The Cluster system was established by the United Nations in 2005 as a mechanism to coordinate the work of the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) responding to complex emergencies. The Cluster’s mandate is to support service delivery, inform strategic decision making, monitor and evaluate performance, and promote the capacity building of affected populations. The Global Clusters are headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and National Clusters presently active in thirty countries.

Who’s in the WASH Cluster?

- Cluster Staff (UNICEF)
 - Cluster Coordinator
 - Information Managers
- National and International NGOs (79)
- UN Agencies
- Local Government
- International donors

Methods

1. **Key informant interviews (KII)** with Yemen WASH Cluster staff, national and international NGOs, local government, and donors. We did three rounds of interviews, the first round in February, the second in May, and the third September. Key informants were randomly selected from the WASH Cluster database of staff working in Yemen.
2. An **online survey** with six open-ended questions that was distributed to the entire Yemen WASH Cluster mailing list. This survey was also distributed simultaneous to each round of key informant interviews.
3. Monthly **context monitoring report** of Cluster activities. This information was gathered both from the Yemen WASH Cluster website and from the Yemen WASH Cluster Information Manager.

The audio recordings of the key informant interviews were transcribed using Temi. The transcripts and survey results were coded and analyzed for themes using NVivo 12 Plus.

| | Key Informant Interviews | Web-surveys |
|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Round 1 (Feb-March) | 8 | 18 |
| Round 2 (May-June) | 14 | 23 |
| Round 3 (Sept-Oct) | 12 | 23 |

Thanks to Dr. Daniele Lantagne, Dr. Travis Yates, Camille Heylen, and to Cluster staff, partners & donors who interviewed and completed the web-survey

Results: Effective Tools, Products & Activities



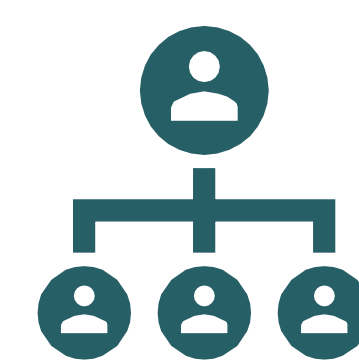
Gap analysis: NGOs rely on the WASH Cluster to identify and prioritize needs and select partners for projects. There are limited financial and material resources, so it is important to prevent duplication and overlap. Each month the WASH Cluster updates live and static dashboards of priority areas in each thematic activity. Before an NGO can receive funding through the Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF), the Cluster must confirm there are no partners doing similar interventions that area.

“You can just log in, see who’s intervening, where and what are they doing and what does this area lack”

Information sharing: The WASH Cluster distributes information through large group coordination meetings, small group technical exchange meetings, technical guidelines and SOPs posted to the website, and emails blasts alerting NGOs to new outbreaks of cholera or flooding.

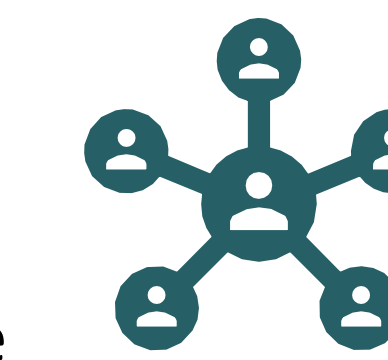


Strong Cluster Leadership: NGO staff feels supported and knows they can reach out to ask questions and guidance. The current Cluster Coordinator and Information Manager have introduced new tools and products that partners find useful.



“If you try to contact them at any time, they would respond to you, they would give you information, they would answer your question, they will provide you with whatever material you need.”

Sub-Cluster Coordination: The National WASH Cluster headquarters are in Sana’a, but in 2018 five sub-clusters were established across the country. This has allowed national NGOs who may not have offices in Sana’a to participate in the WASH Cluster. The sub-clusters have also facilitated better relations with local authorities. Some sub-hubs have specifically designated focal points, Yemeni nationals whose role is to facilitate general coordination and sub-agreement approval between the WASH Cluster, responding NGOs, and the local government agencies.



“Critical and essential.”

“It means that discussions...are not really happening at national level only, but they are trickling down, cascading down, to the last institutional level of the governorates authority.”

Results: Barriers to Coordination



Government: The WASH Cluster needs to coordinate with two governments, one in the north and one in the south. This also complicates operations for NGOs operating in multiple governorates of Yemen. The government in the north highly restricts activities that NGOs can implement. Projects are often delayed due to the extensive bureaucratic process of sub-agreements approval. However, the WASH Cluster has established a strong relationship with the Ministries of Water and the Environment.

“For the same grants we can have months and months of delay...because we need [sic] the sub agreements for it. And then again, even when you have the sub agreement, which is your official authorization from the central government to do your projects, you need to have some more local authorization and again, once you have this local authorization, you can still be prevented to implement if you don’t get your travel permits on a daily or weekly basis.”

Travel: NGOs must apply for travel permits to visit project sites. International staff are sometimes unable to get visas and must work remotely from Amman, Jordan. It is challenging to understand the Yemeni context while



Staff: Cluster staff turnover due to short temporary contracts. National staff are unprepared to work within the humanitarian field.



“Coordination sometimes tends to be weak because new people are coming in, others are leaving, so the handovers are not very clear”

“You have very good engineers. The Yemeni skillset, it is amazing. But if you haven’t worked in a humanitarian emergency before, it’s not natural.”

Lack of funding: Many U.S. donors have suspended funding to northern Yemen in order to pressure local authorities to stop aid diversion in Houthi controlled territory. In 2020, only 54% of needed funding was met. With the onset of COVID-19, need has increased. Without sufficient funding, affected populations are left without critical services. This is critical given that 75% of the Yemeni population dependent on some form of humanitarian aid.



“We’re at the stage now of a complete stalemate where programs are just stopping, and donors are also now threatening to pull out funding completely because they can’t work in this with that type of authority anymore.”

Recommendations

Increase trainings: Continue to build the technical skills of partners through frequent trainings and technical exchange meetings. Capacity building is an investment to improve the quality of future projects.

Strengthen Sub-Clusters: Investments in the capacity of the sub-clusters facilitates better relationships with local authorities which in turn improves the operating environment for partners. The sub-clusters also allow smaller, national NGOs to participate in the Cluster, contribute to the national strategy, and access technical documents and project support.

Improve website: The Yemen WASH Cluster website has many useful guidelines and documents, but it is challenging for partners to find the materials they are searching for.

Tool Adjustments: Based on key informant interviews, there are changes that can be made to existing tools to make them more accessible, detailed, and useful to partners.

Cluster Staff: Maintain Cluster leadership and ensure Cluster staff are sufficiently supported so that they have the capacity to continue their good work.

Zoom Opportunities: The transition to remote work with COVID-19 has opened new possibilities for Cluster meetings to be held on Zoom which allows people not located in Sana’a to join, including national NGO staff and international donors.

Lead Country Coordination: We heard from people who work with multiple Clusters that the WASH Cluster has a good reputation and has been successful. This is an opportunity for the WASH Cluster to be forward leaning and take a leading role in country level coordination and planning.

Long-Term Development: The WASH Cluster needs to plan for sustainability and begin to transition away from emergency activities. Additionally, the WASH Cluster should support national NGOs in obtain funding and work in partnership with Yemeni university engineering departments to add technical WASH to the curriculum. Ultimately, it is nationals who will stay in Yemen and implement WASH activities in the long-term.