

THE CLUSTER APPROACH REVISITED

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Abstract

The UN Cluster approach came from the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) commissioned by the UN in 2005. The intention of that review was to address apparent failures in the speed, quality and effectiveness of humanitarian responses and in addition the lack of any common basis for assessing and comparing levels of need. Levels and techniques of funding were also found to be inadequate. The Cluster Approach would identified lead organizations for typically 10 key areas or clusters such as Food and Nutrition, Water and Sanitation, Health, Emergency Shelter, Early Recovery and Reconstruction, IT Telecommunications, Logistics, Camp Management and Protection and Education (as happened in Pakistan after the 2005 Kashmir Earthquake).

One of the case study areas used for the HRR was the West Darfur situation. And this paper re-visits that situation based on data collected there in June 2004 as part of testing of the Kestle Framework. The paper revisits the development and validation of that framework and then compares it to the Cluster Approach and suggests a way to move ahead by merging the framework into the Cluster Approach to produce an enhanced more robust approach.

Key words: Cluster Approach, Management Framework, Humanitarian Aid.

1. The cluster approach

The cluster approach operates at both a global level (before an emergency), by building up international capacities of human resources and assistance materials, and at a field level (during the emergency) by coordinating humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations, The Red Cross-Red Crescent, International Non Government Organisations and National Non Government Organisations (IASC, 2005). Thus a cluster is “a group comprising organizations and other stakeholders. Each cluster has a designated lead, working in an area of humanitarian response in which gaps in response have been identified.” (OCHA, 2006).

Cluster leads have been assigned the responsibility of ensuring that the specific cluster needs both before and during an emergency are firstly identified and subsequently met. In cluster terminology lead “will act as the provider of last resort.” In addition, the cluster approach sets out the lines of reporting, the development of technical capacity with the ultimate aim of partnerships. However, it does not give any assistance in exactly how this is to be achieved or even attempted but instead appears to rely on it’s organisational changes achieving these aims.

2. The Kestle Framework

The Kestle Framework (refer to figure 1 below) was developed from a grounded theoretical approach and has been tested in a range of remote commercial and humanitarian situations (Kestle, 2009). It has proven so far to be a robust and resilient tool that captures the added value of design management for such situations. The framework has 4 components that are as follows:

Value Generation/Integration, Knowledge Integration, Process Integration, Timely Decision Making.

The definition of these terms is discussed later.

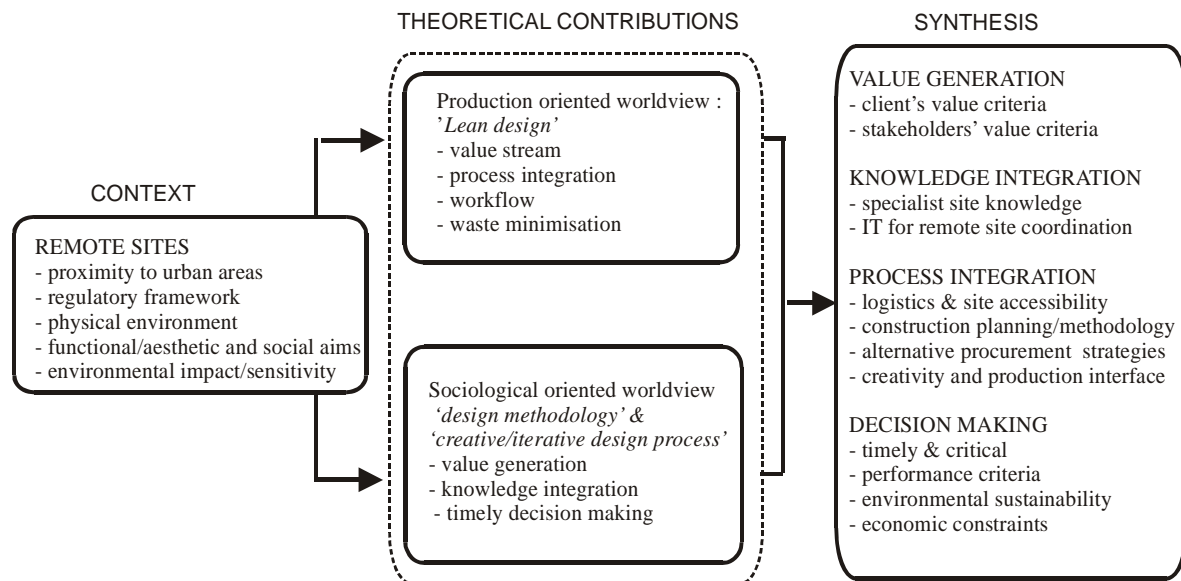


Figure 1: Outline of the Kestle Framework

But what is interesting is that part of the impetus for the cluster approach was the crisis in Western Darfur in and around 2004 which was also one of the key test situations for the Kestle Framework. Initially, the authors were intrigued that two quite different models could come from the same context but on further reflection it would appear that the Kestle Framework could be merged into the Cluster Approach to enhance and better achieve it's humanitarian goals.

3. The situation in West Darfur circa 2004

Darfur is a large area of approximately 256,000 square kilometres, consisting of 3 states with an estimated population of 5 million people made up from a complex tribal mix. Large parts of Darfur are prone to drought, and desertification that intensifies demands on its more fertile lands, and water supplies. In recent decades, areas of Darfur have been subject to sporadic inter-tribal clashes over the use of such resources

From early 2003, fighting intensified in the region following the emergence of two armed groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and later the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), and the

commencement by them of hostilities against the Government. Following a string of SLA victories in the first months of 2003, the Government sponsored a militia composed of a loose collection of fighters, apparently of Arab background, from the Darfur region (Commission on Human Rights, 2004). This militia became known as the 'Janjaweed' or 'men on horse back'. The humanitarian fallout of this situation in Darfur (and the border regions of Chad) was an estimated one million Internally Displaced Persons/People (IDPs) by May 2004 (compared with 250,000 in September 2003) with 570,000 of the IDP's being in West Darfur. By July 2004, this had increased to 601,096 based on camp population estimates from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Such a large displacement of people impacts on the 'host' community. Scarcity of water, firewood and animal feed before the crisis inflamed tensions and fighting. Against such a back drop, UN Agencies and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), worked to get aid into Darfur.

4. Methodology

The opportunity was taken to test the Kestle Framework in this extreme situation and the sense of the authors was that the framework may not work. Nonetheless, 17 middle/senior management and operational staff from UN Agencies and INGO's based and working in El Geneina the provincial capital of West Darfur were interviewed over the two months of June and July 2004. The interviews were held in El Geneina during the evenings and curfew period that existed at the time. Hence, the comments and views of those interviewed were current. No special selection criteria was applied for the interviewees, other than that they were representative of active humanitarian aid agencies in the area. They were recognized as middle/senior management people within the aid community at that time and were available and willing to be interviewed.

There were two parts to the interview. Part A comprised a three part question that related to the interviewees' official responsibilities. The question sought to establish the main issues that arose during the project, from the interviewees' perspective and the impacts that these issues may have had on the project and their individual roles.

Part B of the interview focused on the four key factors of the Kestle Framework with questions aimed at establishing fit (or mis-fit) between the framework and the reality experienced by those interviewed. Subsequently, 8 of the 17 interviewees' transcripts were used for part B. These 8 were the managers of the agencies, and as such knew the big picture objectives, the strategies being applied, and the desired outcomes.

The interviews were taped recorded and transcripts taken from them for the following analysis. The semi structured interview questions used are included in Appendix A.

5. Analysis of the key findings for part A

The findings were reviewed and analysed under the following headings which were taken from a compiled review of the response in West Darfur completed by Minear that identified the following issues (Minear, 2004):

The Management Framework and Approaches, Funding / Budgets, The Pre-planning Stage(s), The Operations Stage, Communications, Human Resources

5.1 The Management Framework and Approaches

There appear to be significant gaps in the understanding of disaster management within the humanitarian aid community which is not unusual (Fitz-Gerald et al, 2002). Moreover, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) guide lines contained within their handbook are

circumspect and state that “There is no single blueprint for refugee emergency management; each refugee emergency is unique. However, experience shows that emergencies tend to evolve according to certain recognizable and documented patterns.” (UNHCR, 1999). The Handbook works by setting up desired outcomes and then leaves it for the practitioner in the field to select the management processes required to achieve those outcomes.

Thus, the present literature tends to be strong on objectives but weak on process. Moreover, it suggests that each disaster is different and that there perhaps is no single answer, or process. Hence the initial thinking that there would be no fit (or even a minimal fit) between the ‘experiences in the field’ and the Kestle Framework.

The management approaches according to those interviewed depended on the particular agency. Their unanimous view was that the management approaches were modified to fit with the particular disaster. Fitz-Gerald et al comment that “*The humanitarian aid community is a ‘slow follower’ in the adoption of management tools and techniques. In some ways this can be explained or defended on the basis that humanitarian aid is delivered in an environment where no two situations are the same. Consequently there is no single model that can be applied and the absence of effective lessons-learned mechanisms that ensure positive and negative experiences are addressed throughout all levels of the organisation encourages reinvention with each deployment.*”

The lack of one particular coordinating agency dedicated to the needs of the IDPs, and a lack of delegated authority (by the agencies in Khartoum) to make decisions ‘in the field’ was also identified by several as a significant barrier.

5.2 Funding / Budgets

Eight of the seventeen interviewees were actively associated with budgeting and were responsible for reporting and monitoring their activities relative to their budgets. This ranged from having an ‘annual budget’ from their agency, or requesting funds on an ongoing basis, to forecasting a year in advance. In almost all cases, funding was not available at the start of the emergency. The interviewees also referred to the fact that for some of the agencies, Khartoum budgeted for all of the Darfur states’ needs. In a few cases, the interviewees were required to be a part of a reporting and monitoring system that was linked directly to a monthly Action Plan.

5.3 The Pre-planning Stages

The unanimous view of the interviewees was that whilst they knew of the emergency situation in West Darfur in a general sense. They neither knew the specifics nor the scope or magnitude of the emergency before going there. They were basically advised to “assess and fix it”. The interviewees all noted that there was no real expectation of being briefed but that the briefings they did receive were of little relevance to the actual situation. Statistical information on IDP numbers, available resources and amenities varied and were therefore unreliable. “*There was a complete lack of transportation, telecommunications, office equipment (phones, fax machines, email systems, photocopiers, paper et al) Medivac plan, technicians and laboratories when we arrived into Darfur*” (interviewees 10,15,16).

The situation in Darfur basically evolved and personnel were in catch-up mode rather than being able to pre-plan months in advance. Curiously, the interviewees noted that the most useful information was gained from watching the news on television and from reading media articles, before going to Darfur, rather than from the agencies. The logistical pre-planning was almost impossible to organise given the lack of existing systems. In addition, there was the issue of the inaccessibility of the site from political and geographical perspectives with air transport being the only feasible mode of transportation.

5.4 The Operations Stage

There was unanimous agreement amongst the interviewees that the remoteness of the site seriously impacted on the project and their roles. There was a view that “remoteness was the enemy of the programme”. The distance between Khartoum and Darfur added to the problems in terms of getting supplies through intact, if at all. The only realistic and relatively reliable form of transportation involved relatively light planes, given there were no properly formed roads, only marginally formed airstrips and no formal airport facilities. However, according to the interviewees there was never any real certainty as to when the planes may arrive or leave, nor what resources would be on board. Materials not locally available would take 5 weeks from by road from Khartoum, were frequently looted, or were held up by floods that would wash out the roads/tracks.

5.5 Communications

There was consensus amongst the interviewees that the management of communications’ systems and processes were either non-existent initially, or were unreliable at best. As already noted air transport was the only feasible means of providing resources to the West Darfur site. The camps were inaccessible by vehicles. Darfur was not serviced by fibre optic cable nor satellite technology, so phones were the only form of telecommunication, in association with a Pulse mailing system.

Reporting systems to HQ in Khartoum relied on a mailing system, and given the ever-changing nature of the emergency, reported information was quickly outdated, “*20,000 IDPs could leave or arrive in any one week, so you try to systemise the information received from people in the field using simple report sheets that can be quickly upgraded so that you can monitor the changes in order to respond*” (8)

5.6 Human Resources

The UN generally has a different management style compared to the INGOs. UN staff are usually professional career people following a particular career path and basically have to ‘play it safe’ to be promoted. This risk aversion was perceived in different ways by the interviewees.

All of the Emergency Phase ‘needs analysis’ people were highly trained specialists in their field generally from around the world and usually with high levels of previous humanitarian emergency experience. There was consensus amongst the interviewees that there was a lack of trained and experienced people resources with institutional knowledge and an ability to draft up monitoring reports. On-the-job training was regarded by a few of the interviewees, as appropriate, important and unavoidable. The appointment of compatible work personnel was considered more important than pre-training.

Thus, from a management perspective the findings so far suggest a fragmented and highly uncertain set of overall outcomes, for the stakeholders and the clients (IDPs). All the interviewees, whilst being given some basic terms of reference, on appointment, from their particular agency appeared to be working in parallel rather than in an integrated manner. All seek to comply with agreed standards such as SPHERE but at the same time each agency has it’s own mandate. But there appeared to be agreement as expressed by interviewee 12 that “*the whole thing is based on sustainability and durability. Have to ensure the protection of the IDPs and that their return (to their township and land) is sustainable and not just a survival package. Have to give them the means to be self-sustaining*”.

6. Analysis of the key findings for Part B

Part B of the interview studied the presence (or otherwise) of the four key factors of the Kestle Framework with the aim of establishing fit (or mis-fit) between the framework and the reality experienced by those interviewed.

The results were generally consistent and supported the suggested framework across all of the 17 interviewees. Differences appeared to be due to varying levels of autonomy in the decision-making processes. The following key points were drawn from the interviews:

Value Generation was singularly concerned with making a difference to the lives of the IDP's which was evident in comments made in the interviews. The effectiveness, and therefore the value was measured by what was achieved, how many IDP's were assisted and mortality and morbidity rates. It was also measured in terms of keeping a reliable, continuous supply line of food to the displaced people, making a difference to the living conditions, access to water and sanitation and being able to respond in a timely manner to recommendations and changes in the field. It was a key factor.

Knowledge Integration was concerned with the gaps in the knowledge integration process. No-one wanted to "trespass" on others' areas and there were issues where the planning did not align with the reality in the field. The impact of experts was mitigated by the rigidity of the systems involved and some consultants being unfamiliar with the UN systems in particular and the existence of both formal and informal systems of knowledge integration. In addition, the gaps in specialist knowledge, in terms of the experiences of the people in the field, versus those in the office - they were not always aligned and a more holistic approach was required. Finally, a working knowledge of the IDP's cultural and value systems were needed which was not helped by the high turnover of staff and the lack of recorded knowledge. Hence, it was another key factor.

Process Integration was concerned with understanding how the IDP's perceive the assistance being provided and designing processes and systems accordingly. The need for accurate assessments as the basis for setting up these processes (such as the logistical pipeline and camp distributions) was seen as the key. The need for co-ordination at the camp level and relationship-building with the International, and IDP communities and knowing the other agencies' plans all meant better facilitation. Moreover, more could be achieved by using the Sudanese people and their expertise. They had valuable connections and networks within the community.

Timely Decision- Making was concerned with the centralization of decision making in Khartoum. Hence, decision making in the field was slow and prescriptive. There appeared to be a tiered system of decision-making. Consultative decisions were made between those on the ground from different organizations as part of the value generation mentioned earlier but the degree of that decision making was proportional to the degree of autonomy of the staff member. Some were given almost total autonomy in the 'field', and dedicated organisational finance personnel to work with. Others appeared to work with minimal autonomy and resources.

This lack of consistency of decision – making and delegated authority, across the range of agencies, and the ever-changing personnel in the Field and offices, was challenging, frustrating and disorientating for a number of the respondents.

The level of fit between the 4 factors that make up the Kestle Framework and the responses from those in the field was encouraging given the extreme circumstances faced in West Darfur. The authors have gone on and successfully used this framework in other humanitarian situations (Potangaroa et al, 2008). But by chance, West Darfur was also the context for the development of the Cluster Approach

and hence the intriguing situation of two quite separate management frameworks emerging from essentially the same context.

7. Comparison of the cluster approach and the Kestle Framework

It is interesting to compare the two approaches which shows the organizational bias of the Cluster Approach and its lack of direction compared to the Kestle Framework (refer to table 1 below). Moreover, the Kestle Frame appears to offer a more sophisticated response than what is capable under a Cluster but the cluster is possibly more robust in larger organizational settings.

Table 1: Comparison of the Cluster Approach and the Kestle Framework

Cluster Approach	Kestle Framework
Organisational perspective	Manager perspective
Comparatively minimal direction	4 suggested areas for managers to review and monitor
Funding made more accessible	Funding linked to “value generation” but connected to the other 3 framework areas
Responsive through removal of organizational blocks	Responsive through all 4 framework areas
Quality through reduction of duplication and closing of gaps	Quality through focus on 4 key areas
Accountability through “provider of last resort”.	Accountable through metrics associated with the 4 framework areas

8. The way forward?

So what can be concluded and how could the effectiveness of humanitarian response be best served from these approaches? It seems that both approaches have advantages and that perhaps a way forward is to merge the Kestle Framework into the 10 or so clusters. And for example the emergency shelter cluster would as shown in table 2 below and over time would grow and mature as the informal lessons in the field filter into the strategic planning away in the office.

Table 2: The Merged Cluster and Framework.

Kestle Framework	Merged Emergency Shelter Cluster/Framework.
Value Generation/ Integration	How do you know or measure the effectiveness of shelter? What are the rules of thumb that can be applied? What and how do you get feed back from “clients”?

	In what ways are you are accountable?
Knowledge Integration	How is learning recorded and passed on to others? How can you improve this situation? How would such changes be implemented? Are their gaps in the specialist knowledge in shelter?
Process Integration	What methods or approaches do you employ to achieve your goals and fulfil your role? How have you tried to improve on this or the system? What role does HR play or could play (for example in staff training, skills and experience)?
Timely Decision Making	How are your decisions made? Is this decision making centralised or de-centralised? How are budgets maintained? How significant are sustainability issues in your role?

9. Conclusion

The suggestion to merge these two approaches has significant advantages at minimal to zero cost to those agencies leading each cluster. Over time and with successive applications will emerge a structured array of experiences and tools that will better equip future generations of humanitarian aid staff. But more importantly, will result in better outcomes for those receiving emergency assistance.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTION SHEET

The objective of this research is to ascertain how projects operate in remote areas and how issues of “remoteness” are addressed and the recommendations that you would make particularly from a management perspective. These recommendations could be for the decision making both before and as work proceeds, the management framework, decision making, communications, HR or funding. This is achieved through the structured question set below.

In your role and official capacity as what is your involvement with the West Darfur situation and what is its relationship to your job description or TOR? Have your TOR relating to West Darfur changed in your time on the job?

How much do you know or have been told of the West Darfur area and the situation there? How often have you been or get to West Darfur?

What advice would you give to anyone about to be stationed in West Darfur?

What in your view are the main issues for those stationed in West Darfur and what part (if any) do you believe they are the result of its remoteness?

What conclusions and recommendations would you have for future projects?

In terms of your involvement and understanding of the West Darfur project could you please comment on the following areas:

Value Generation:

How do you know or measure the effectiveness of your role as it relates to West Darfur? Are there any rules of thumb that you intuitively apply?

What and how do you get feed back from “clients”?

In what ways do you feel that you are accountable?

Knowledge Integration:

How is what you have learnt on West Darfur recorded and passed on to others?

How are you or would you like to improve this situation?

Would such changes or are changes related to your involvement in West Darfur easy to implement?

Are their gaps in the specialist knowledge in the area in which you are involved for West Darfur?

Process Integration:

What methods or approaches do you employ to achieve your goals and fulfil your role?

How have you tried to improve on this or the system?

What role does HR play or could play (for example in staff training, skills and experience)?

Decision Making:

How are your decisions made? Is this decision making centralised or de-centralised?

How are budgets maintained?

How significant are sustainability issues in your role?