Coordination in Transition: How NGOs are Navigating and Adapting beyond the IASC

Case Study #4: Sectoral coordination evolution – Iraq

Two and a half years after the clusters deactivated in Iraq, coordination has fragmented from the inter-linked structure of the IASC cluster system to individual groups working with little or no connection to each other.

Several sectoral coordination groups created during cluster transition have continued – although not necessarily in their originally intended form.[1] Two are explored here, looking at changes to leadership, membership, and remit. Changing NGO roles are highlighted: diminished for WASH and increased for cash.

For both WASH and cash, NGO humanitarian implementation has substantially reduced since transition. Some NGOs have shifted to longer-term recovery or development-oriented programming.

Key learnings

- ☐ The shape of coordination may continue to change based on the operational need for coordination. Sustaining it requires commitment to leadership, and intentional inclusion of local/national actors.
- ☐ Sustaining NGO inclusion in, or connection to, government-led forums may require effort, and facilitation by actors (such as UN agencies) with greater access to government-led groups.
- ☐ NGOs may continue to add value through technical contributions, even if operational roles shrink.
- ☐ External networks can add resilience. CALP's support for cash coordination demonstrates the value of regional/global connections post-cluster.

WASH

The WASH Cluster transition was one of two where humanitarian and development coordination were merged.[2] The former Cluster Lead Agency (CLA), UNICEF, set up government coordination groups to bring together different ministries to strategize jointly on WASH issues. Ensuring their continuation has required ongoing effort from UNICEF programme staff, tasked to support coordination as a small part of their ToRs.[3]

Two and a half years after transition, little humanitarian WASH response remains in Iraq. Focus of all actors has shifted toward a development approach, centred on water security and climate-related drought. The evolution of coordination reflects this change of priorities.

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[1] These include, non-exhaustively: WASH, cash, education in emergencies, GBV, and child protection in 2025 although in changed structures. Protection and mine action continued until at least 2024.
[2] The other was the Child Protection Area of Responsibility, also led by UNICEF.
[3] Unlike some other UN CLAs, UNICEF has internal commitments to support coordination in its sectors of response even when clusters are not active. See: UNICEF, *Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action*, 2020

Post-cluster structures

WASH coordination is now government-focused as well as government-led. Two structures were established: one for the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region (KRI) with its ministries, and one for central and southern Iraq with federal Iraq authorities. Members are government ministries/institutions, with UNICEF co-chairing until the lead ministries are fully able to take on all coordination functions. Both groups excluded NGOs in the main coordination body; in KRI, UNICEF initially had to advocate for its own inclusion.

In KRI, UNICEF and the former Cluster Co-coordinating Partner, Mercy Corps, collaborated on influencing the design of the new structure. Mercy Corps' donor USAID-BHA provided funding for the Cluster Co-Coordinator to continue in a (double-hatted) role to support the establishment of coordination – initially for a year, then extended for two years after the cluster deactivated. The KRI WASH Working Group was tasked with "service coordination and strategic WASH planning between government bodies for IDP and refugee camps, facilitating coordination with remaining humanitarian WASH actors, and contingency planning for future emergencies, including water scarcity and climate emergencies".[4]

While NGOs were excluded from the main coordination group, Mercy Corps and UNICEF successfully advocated for at least one of its quarterly meetings to be a forum with NGOs.

Changes since cluster transition

NGOs' WASH implementation has significantly reduced, two and a half years after transition. Humanitarian activities have either been handed over to local authorities (in camps, after several years of advocacy) or phased out as funding declined. The impact of the climate crisis is being increasingly felt in Iraq. Donor funding for climate-related WASH issues has so far focused on central and southern Iraq – meaning that NGOs who have pivoted to engage in this implement there. The focus of both WASH coordination groups has also shifted to reflect government priorities: WASH infrastructure and climate-related WASH issues.

By 2024, NGO WASH activities in KRI were minimal. The connection with the government KRI WASH Working Group had also therefore reduced. By 2025, UNICEF was facilitating meetings between government and NGOs around twice a year to discuss mobilisation and prioritisation of resources on climate and development issues.

The federal Iraq WASH Sector Coordination Group now has a focus on climate and water scarcity. Its structure has changed since it was set up, adding six taskforces for technical issues. This structure has created the opportunity for technical engagement of NGOs with WASH funding. Two INGOs have roles in the taskforce for Disaster Risk Reduction – one working on early warning systems, and the other on water scarcity. In turn, this INGO supports a Water Scarcity Community of Practice, which engages other NGOs and CSOs.

Cash

Transition

During transition planning, the Cash Working Group – which had active UN, INGO, NNGO, and donor members – proposed to its members to adapt and continue cash coordination. 75 actors signed up as

[4] IASC, *Guidance for Cluster Transition and Deactivation: Annex E – Examples*, 2025

being interested. It was agreed that an Iraq Cash Forum (ICF) would be established, under the HCT.[5] The two lead agencies, WFP and INGO People in Need, committed to continue leadership.

The Iraq Cash Forum had an expanded remit, taking forward longer-term topics that the Cash Working Group had explored: cash and voucher assistance for durable solutions as well as remaining humanitarian response, strategies for climate change adaptation, and work on social protection. It continued to issue technical guidance, coordinate activities, and facilitate technical discussions among members.[6]

The number of NGO members reduced as funding declined, but around 20-30 organisations remain active: NGOs plus UN agencies working with government on longer-term issues including social protection.

The Iraq Cash Forum was unique among the sector coordination groups that emerged after cluster transition in having a full-time coordinator continue. The Cash Working Group Coordinator from WFP was a CashCap, seconded by NORCAP. NORCAP continued this support for the ICF: the Coordinator continued for 6 months after transition for continuity, followed by another CashCap until January 2025. This person had experience in development – described as a strength as the ICF's focus shifted and its government engagement increased.

Evolution to NNGO leadership

In mid-2023, one and a half years after transition, an NNGO co-chair was added, creating UN-INGO-NNGO co-leadership. The position was not funded: a barrier for some to apply. Rwanga Foundation took on the role, committing a percentage of an existing staff member's time. The INGO co-chair changed to World Vision International.

The coordinators also made efforts to increase L/NNGO membership and to coordinate with government directorates. Respondents noted hoping that engaging an NNGO in coordination leadership would help strengthen government engagement, and described some success in this in KRI.

In mid-2024, two and a half years after cluster deactivation, another transition was planned. It was agreed that the international CashCap chair would continue until the end of the year, and that NNGO Rwanga would take on the main leadership role alongside the INGO co-chair. The UN (WFP) co-chair continues in a reduced role.

The transition was designed around the capacities of Rwanga and World Vision, with gradual handover of responsibilities to the part-time coordinators. Recognising that Rwanga had good coordination capacity, but less technical capacity for all issues, a 'technical coordination advisory group' was set up. This was a small group of ICF members with strong technical expertise, who could advise other members on technical issues.

Rwanga Foundation took the main leadership role from early 2025. As of mid-2025, the Forum meets every two months, and its chairs meet every two weeks. Chairing is now voluntary, not funded, for all three chairs.

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[5] Termes, Mireia, *Cash Working Group deactivation in Iraq*, Cashcap/NORCAP, 2023, p.10
[6] See, for example, Iraq Cash Forum, 'Minutes of the meeting', 06 June 2023

Regional support from CALP

Uniquely, the Iraq Cash Forum continues to receive external technical support – unlike the other Iraq sector coordination groups whose technical global connections (with the Global Clusters) stopped either at, or soon after, cluster phase-out. ICF coordinators and members are connected to the CALP Network's regional team.

The ICF's members can access CALP resources and trainings, and can become members of CALP's regional Communities of Practice which meet in a mixture of Arabic and English. The ICF's coordinators receive direct support from CALP's team through twice-yearly discussions and on an as-needed basis, and are connected with other cash coordinators in the region through quarterly meetings.

More on cash coordination transition can be found in:

Termes, Mireia, *Cash Working Group Deactivation in Iraq – Case Study*, CashCap/NORCAP, May 2023 https://www.calpnetwork.org/publication/cash-working-group-de-activation-in-iraq/

CALP, *Iraq Cash Forum: From Humanitarian Response to Sustainable Solutions*, 2025