

Key Messages: The IASC Transformative Agenda

What is it?

1. The IASC¹ Transformative Agenda is a set of concrete actions aimed at transforming the way in which the humanitarian community responds to emergencies. It focuses on improving the timeliness and effectiveness of the collective response through stronger leadership, more effective coordination structures, and improved accountability for performance and to affected people.

Why do we need it?

2. The response to the Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods in 2010 exposed a number of weaknesses and inefficiencies in the international humanitarian response. The Transformative Agenda aims to ensure that these shortcomings are addressed.
3. The risk of future large-scale emergencies remains high due to the increasing frequency and scale of climate-related disasters; violent conflicts; HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases and pandemics; rapid population growth and urbanization in some areas; and increased vulnerability due to poverty, hunger, unemployment, displacement and migration.
4. Governments, affected communities, humanitarian organisations, donors and the UN General Assembly itself have stressed the need for a more efficient and well-coordinated international response to major disasters.
5. The actions we are now taking as part of the Transformative Agenda build on the 2005 Humanitarian Reform. We recognize that we need to focus not on the process of implementing change, but on the impact of change. Through these changes more lives will be saved, and we will be more accountable to all our stakeholders.

What does it do?

6. The Transformative Agenda focuses on three key areas: **leadership, coordination and accountability**. The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), country clusters and cluster lead agencies remain the prime actors supporting national response efforts, and the Transformative Agenda seeks to further strengthen these actors. Concrete priority actions to strengthen all humanitarian operations include:
 - Strengthened leadership capacities at all levels of the response.
 - Improved strategic planning that clarifies the collective results that the humanitarian community aims to achieve.
 - Strengthened needs assessments, information management, planning, monitoring and evaluation for a more effective and strategic response.
 - Improved cluster coordination, performance and participation, as well as a more clearly defined cluster-activation procedure.
 - Enhanced accountability for the achievement of collective results, based on an agreed performance and monitoring framework linked to the strategic plan.

¹ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is a global humanitarian forum established in 1991 by a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly to bring together the main operational relief agencies from the United Nations, international components of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, the International Organization for Migration and international non-governmental organizations.

- Strengthened accountability to affected communities, to be implemented at field level through a defined inter-agency operational framework.

What makes this different?

7. For the first time, the IASC has agreed on how to respond collectively to a major, sudden-onset Level 3 emergency that requires the activation of a system-wide response with agreed mechanisms, tools and procedures. Level 3 emergencies are judged by their scale, complexity, urgency, the capacity required to respond and the reputational risk to humanitarian organisations and responders if we don't get them right. Many elements of the Transformative Agenda will also be applied as appropriate to non-Level 3 contexts (including protracted crises, slow-onset, and smaller-scale disasters), to strengthen existing response operations.
8. A key element of the Transformative Agenda is the Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation. This will occur in Level 3 emergencies, for an initial period of three months, when the gravity of the crisis requires a rapid mobilization of the entire humanitarian system. During this time, humanitarian leadership will be strengthened, for instance with the deployment of a senior emergency coordinator, if required. He or she will have "Empowered Leadership" to direct the overall response, with more authority over the planning, priority setting, resource allocation, cluster activation and advocacy.
9. To ensure the coordination mechanisms function well and improve delivery to affected people, pre-identified humanitarian leaders at various levels will be deployed through the newly established Inter-Agency Rapid Response Mechanism (IARRM).
10. An initial strategic statement—to be developed within the first five days of a Level 3 emergency—will be informed by a commonly defined scenario and initial rapid multi-cluster needs assessments. This strategic statement will establish the response priorities, identify "who does what," and form the basis of the Flash Appeal and any subsequent Consolidated Appeal.
11. The Transformative Agenda will ensure the best results for people in need and provide full transparency and accountability to all stakeholders, including host governments. It will also give value for money for taxpayer's investment in the humanitarian response.
12. The Transformative Agenda emphasizes the importance of mobilizing national and local capacities, and close engagement with governments, the private sector and other partners for a more effective emergency response.

Frequently Asked Questions

- Q. Why do we need the Transformative Agenda when we already went through a reform in 2005?*
- A. The reform of 2005 was key to strengthening the effectiveness of our humanitarian system. It resulted in significant improvements, such as the establishment of the improved Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the cluster system and the establishment of the Humanitarian Coordinators' pool. The Transformative Agenda builds on the Humanitarian Reform process and on the recognition of the need to tackle persistent weaknesses in our collective response capacity. It aims to further strengthen leadership, coordination and accountability.*

- Q. How will a Level 3 humanitarian system-wide emergency be determined?*
- A. The ERC and the IASC Principals will meet within 48 hours of a sudden-onset emergency to assess the situation. The decision to activate system-wide emergency measures will be made on the basis of five criteria: scale, urgency, complexity, capacity and reputational risk of the crisis, and will be informed by a meeting of the Emergency Directors prior to the Principals meeting. The declaration of a Level 3 emergency triggers the deployment (by Global Cluster leads and OCHA) of a senior inter-agency team to fulfill core coordination functions including cluster and inter-cluster coordination, and specialized functions in information management and need assessments. They will be deployed on a “no regrets” basis, thus ensuring speedy deployments right from the onset of an emergency.*
- Q. Won't sending in such a team on top of existing in-country partners result in duplication?*
- A. No. The procedures specify that any such deployments must take into account existing capacity at field level, and aim to augment and support—rather than replace—this. In any case, in any major emergency, additional capacity from HQ is required in the early stages of the response. The Transformative Agenda makes this deployment more predictable by pre-identifying senior and experienced staff who are on standby through the Inter Agency Rapid Response Mechanism.*
- Q. If the system deploys a senior and experienced HC, will this not supplant/render unnecessary the existing in-country leadership, including the RC/HC?*
- A. Not at all. The decision to deploy additional senior leadership capacity— taken by the ERC and IASC Principals— will be based on a review of existing capacity at field level. In many cases, the existing RC/HC will be given the additional Empowered Leadership role. An additional, more senior, HC will only be deployed in cases where the necessary leadership capacity is not in place and the magnitude of the disaster requires it. The senior emergency coordinator will be someone with experience in Level 3 emergencies. We currently have 18 persons on the L3 roster. These are senior coordinators who have the full confidence of the IASC to lead the response to future Level 3 emergencies.*
- Q. Will we only focus on Level 3 emergencies? How will the Transformative Agenda affect other contexts?*
- A. No. Many elements of the Transformative Agenda will also be applied as appropriate to non-Level 3 contexts (including protracted crises, slow-onset, and smaller- scale disasters), where it is clear that relevant TA tools, guidance, and procedures will add value in strengthening existing response operations, including based on lessons learned through field-testing.*

Q. What will IASC partners actually have to do?

A. All parts of the IASC have committed to putting in place the right systems and resources to improve the collective impact of our emergency response operations, and to fulfill their obligations both as members of an agreed system at HQ and field level, and as global cluster lead agencies. They have also committed to following the agreed procedures for Level 3 response operations. This is in addition to decisions on activating their respective internal processes. IASC organizations are committing to working as a team, with crisis meetings of heads of agencies (Principals) chaired by the ERC, and with empowered IASC leaders in the field leading and coordinating humanitarian response teams.

Q. What does the Transformative Agenda mean for the clusters?

A. It means that clusters will be activated only as and when required. Their activation will be more strategic, less automatic and time limited, and will strengthen existing national-led coordination mechanisms to the extent possible. The Transformative Agenda also recognizes that there is no “one size fits all” approach to cluster management, and it provides various models that can be adapted for use in different contexts. Cluster leads must provide effective coordination, and cluster partners must share responsibility for effective and timely humanitarian response.

Q. What does the Transformative Agenda mean for our engagement with national authorities and their response efforts?

A. The humanitarian community will continue to work with governments to enhance disaster preparedness and to complement their response when national capacity is not sufficient to address the needs. By improving the timeliness and effectiveness of our collective response through better leadership and coordination structures, more lives will be saved, and we will be more accountable to all of our stakeholders.

Q. What is expected from NGOs, especially those that are cluster co-leads?

A. The 2009 cluster evaluation recommended that the efficacy of clusters would be enhanced by sharing leadership responsibilities with NGOs, particularly at sub-national level. Guidance is being developed to provide greater clarity on cluster co-leadership arrangements and will be completed by June 2012. Meanwhile, the Minimum Commitments for Cluster Participation give clear details on the expectations of all cluster partners in terms of committing to cluster functioning and outputs. The Transformative Agenda has also produced guidance on strengthening NGO representation in HCTs.

- Q. How will we know if the Transformative Agenda works? How will the results, impact and outcomes be measured, and what will be the time frame for demonstrating real change?*
- A. Ultimately, the success of the Transformative Agenda will be measured in improved and more efficient collective response capacity at field level, strengthened and empowered leadership to achieve tangible results, and greater accountability throughout the system. The Transformative Agenda commits us to develop a commonly agreed monitoring-and-reporting framework in all response operations, with performance indicators against which individual and collective outputs will be measured (clusters, HCT). It also envisages annual reviews of all country operations by senior HQ emergency directors, as well as annual performance reviews of all HCs. These are significant improvements and recognize the need to measure results more systematically, deal with under-performance, and respond to challenges and weaknesses identified in the system.*