NGOs as field protection cluster co-coordinators – inside the collaboration black box

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Acronyms

AoR – Area of Responsibility

CBPF – Country-Based Pooled Funds

CD – Country Director

CLA – Cluster Lead Agency

DRC - Danish Refugee Council

DRC - Democratic Republic of the Congo

ERC - Emergency Relief Coordinator

GPC – Global Protection Cluster

HC – Humanitarian Coordinator

HCT – Humanitarian Country Team

HNO – Humanitarian Needs Overview

HoP – Head of Programmes

HRP – Humanitarian Response Plan

IASC - Inter-Agency Standing Committee

ICCG - Inter-Cluster Coordination Group

INGO - international non-governmental organisation

IOR - Inter-Organisational Relations

IRC - International Rescue Committee

L/Nas - local/national non-governmental actors

MoU – Memorandum of Understanding

NGO – non-governmental organisation

NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council

OCHA - Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)

PAU – Protection Analysis Update

PC – Protection Cluster

RC – Resident Coordinator

SAG – Strategic Advisory Group

ToR – Terms of Reference

UN – United Nations

UNHCR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

1. Abstract

The humanitarian coordination architecture has been based on a United Nations-led cluster approach since 2005. To make cluster coordination more equal and inclusive towards its membership, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been cluster co-coordinators in many cases. Although recognised as a good practice, the co-coordination of field protection clusters by NGOs remains a difficult undertaking whose results have been seldomly evaluated. Using a collaboration theory as a lens and drawing on interviews with protection cluster co-coordinators, this research paper assesses the impact of cluster co-coordination and examines the necessary conditions for more successful collaboration. The study demonstrates that cluster co-coordination does achieve positive outcomes: it strengthens the cluster, enhances NGO participation and has positive spillovers for co-coordinating NGOs. However, a lack of transparency and accountability from the cluster lead agency's side, as well as bad faith behaviours and power abuses, are identified as major obstacles to the achievement of strategic outcomes. In addition, high turnover rates of co-coordinators lead to limited learning from experience and prevent progress in better leveraging co-coordination positions. The research shows that it is of utmost importance that the co-coordinators are positioned as useful, credible and powerful counterparts to foster an enabling collaborative environment where better outcomes can be achieved.

2. Introduction

As Thomson and Perry rightly observed, “before we can manage [a] collaboration, we need to know what it is” (2006, p. 21). The co-coordination of protection clusters is a form of collaboration between a non-governmental organisation (NGO), as cluster co-coordinator, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as the cluster lead. This shared leadership of field protection clusters has been praised over the past decade for its positive impact on the coordination of the protection response. At the 2022 Global Protection Cluster Meeting on Co-Coordination, Gillian Triggs, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, articulated UNHCR’s appreciation of cluster co-coordination: “At UNHCR we recognise that creating an inclusive, participatory and efficient cluster is facilitated by co-coordination [...]. We therefore strongly recommend that co-coordination takes place in all operations.”

Humanitarian operations involve many actors providing similar services to the same population in unpredictable circumstances, making coordination essential to ensure their success. In 2005, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) adopted the cluster system as a key strategy to address both delivery gaps and coordination problems throughout a humanitarian response. The leadership of the clusters was originally conceived as a prerogative of the United Nations (UN). However, the effectiveness of the clusters is heavily contingent on the active involvement of a broad range of NGOs operating on the ground. This reality naturally gave rise to the development of a system of shared leadership. In 2012, under the IASC Transformative Agenda, Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs) were formally “encouraged to consider developing a clearly defined, agreed and supported sharing of cluster leadership by NGOs wherever feasible” (IASC, 2015a, p. 21).

In the literature, the shared leadership of clusters between a UN agency and an NGO is frequently acknowledged as having a positive impact on the functioning of the cluster. Cluster co-coordination supports protection clusters to deliver on their core functions: supporting service delivery, informing strategic decision-making of the Humanitarian Country Team, planning and cluster strategy development, advocacy, monitoring and reporting, as well as improving preparedness. In addition, it is seen as enhancing inclusiveness, accountability and transparency in cluster governance.

Despite the apparent consensus that co-coordination is beneficial, research on cluster co-coordination remains scarce. The added value of cluster co-coordination, which is frequently highlighted by both the UN and NGOs, was identified over a decade ago. In the meantime, cluster co-coordination has evolved and has become more structured. It is no longer an ad hoc response to the general perception that the coordination system was not representative of the perspective of the NGO community. The investment of NGOs in cluster co-coordination has become highly professionalised – nearly all protection cluster co-coordinators are now fully dedicated to this role. In 2022, the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) released a template Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for co-coordination. This document "sets out minimum expectations for the effective design of a co-coordination arrangement" (GPC, 2022, p. 1), thereby formally clarifying the way in which cluster co-leadership should be structured.

From the perspective of NGOs, successful cluster co-coordination enhances the effectiveness of the cluster, while benefiting both the co-coordinating NGO and the wider NGO community. However, these positive outcomes which are often put forward to justify NGOs' engagement in co-coordination were seldom evaluated. In practice, it appears that field cluster co-coordination remains a challenging endeavour. NGOs acknowledge that the principle of equal partnership on which this collaboration is based is often misunderstood, that they have repeatedly found themselves deprived of any strategic leadership role and are confined to a mere secretarial position. Hence, it seems that NGOs are attempting to leverage a collaboration that they assume to be very promising, without fully understanding how this collaboration with a powerful UN counterpart unfolds in practice.

Collaboration theories have demonstrated that inter-agency collaborations present both significant potential and significant challenges. On the one hand, they have the potential to achieve outcomes that could not be achieved by a single organisation. On the other hand, collaboration is a complex and evolving process which requires careful attention to ensure it does not result in a standstill. In that sense, collaboration theories are a warning: simply delegating a co-coordinator to a protection cluster will not automatically produce the desired results. Thomson and Perry (2006) have indeed demonstrated that effective collaboration requires the intentional management of

several key aspects of the collaboration process. Therefore, if NGOs are to optimise their investment in cluster coordination and enhance its effectiveness, it is essential to examine the collaboration process to identify the barriers and enablers at play.

Through the lens of Thomson and Perry's collaboration theory, in order to improve the effectiveness of cluster co-coordination, this research paper investigates the following questions: what are the necessary conditions to allow for the successful co-coordination of the protection clusters by NGOs? Is protection cluster co-coordination delivering on its expected outcomes? The study seeks to identify the obstacles and enablers to protection cluster co-coordination in order to understand how NGOs could better leverage these positions to make co-coordination more successful.

In order to answer these questions, the paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review provides an overview of research on cluster coordination (section 3). Section 4 describes the disciplinary focus, examining collaboration theories and their relationship with cluster co-coordination. Particular attention is given to Thomson and Perry's theory, 'Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box' (2006), which is used as a theoretical framework. The methodology employed in the research and data collection is presented in section 5. The research, developed throughout sections 6 to 8, initially examines the reasons motivating NGOs to invest in cluster co-leadership (section 6). It then explores the key dimensions of the collaboration process (section 7), and finally, it seeks to determine whether cluster co-coordination delivers on its perceived potential (section 8).

The objective of this research is to examine the process of collaboration between NGO co-coordinators and UN coordinators in field protection clusters. By gaining a deeper understanding of the expectations placed upon these collaborations, how they function in practice, and what they achieve, NGOs will be better positioned to manage them and possibly capitalise on their potential.

3. Literature Review - Overview of coordination and co-coordination in the humanitarian sector and related literature

The cluster system is by nature a collaborative approach. It seeks to bring together, in sectoral groups called “clusters”, a wide variety of humanitarian actors to coordinate and ensure the appropriateness, efficiency and timeliness of the response in emergency situations. The co-leadership of clusters by NGOs is at the heart of this collaborative approach and has been acknowledged as a strength for the clusters (IASC, 2015a, p. 46). However, little research has been conducted on the functioning of cluster co-leadership and NGOs face recurrent challenges in fulfilling these roles.

3.1 Coordination: a challenge and a necessity

Coordination is crucial to the success of a response in a humanitarian emergency. The United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has consistently hammered this message: coordination saves efforts, resources, time and ultimately lives (OCHA, 2012a). But coordination is also “a persistent historical problem of humanitarianism” (Heath, 2014, p. 244).

Coordination can be best described as a challenging necessity. It is a necessity in a complex environment where numerous organisations work under time and resource pressure, to minimise - at the minimum - gaps and duplications. But actors operating in humanitarian crises are numerous, ranging from donor governments, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, to peacekeeping missions and non-traditional actors. They have various mandates, priorities and ethical motivations (Knox-Clarke and Saavedra, 2015). They operate in environments which are highly political, and where they compete for attention and resources (Boin and ’T Hart, 2010; Knox-Clarke, 2013). In the last decades, both the number of actors, and the size and complexity of responses have increased (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, 2016). Under these circumstances, the leadership of the UN to steer the overall humanitarian response and coordinate organisations which ultimately remain autonomous entities, is a real challenge.

3.2 The humanitarian coordination architecture and the cluster approach

Since the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/46/182 (1991; OCHA, 2012b), and the establishment of the current humanitarian coordination structure and its hierarchical system (IASC, 2021; ICVA, 2021), significant efforts have been made to improve humanitarian coordination.

In 2005, the failures in the humanitarian responses following the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami and the crises in Darfur compelled Jan Egeland, then United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), to commission an independent review of the humanitarian response system. Building on the UN Secretary General Report "In Larger Freedom" (2005), the Humanitarian Response Review (Adinolfi *et al.*, 2005) identified critical gaps in terms of speed and quality of the humanitarian response, due in particular to the "absence of clear operational accountability and leadership in key sectors" (Egeland, 2005). As part of a wider system reform, the review led to the launch of the cluster approach: a major reform of humanitarian coordination initiated through the IASC, with the view to improve the timeliness, effectiveness and predictability of humanitarian responses through enhanced accountability and partnership (IASC, 2006). Until today, the cluster system remains the main coordination mechanism activated by the ERC in humanitarian crises where the needs exceed the government's capacity and a multi-sectoral response is required.

With the cluster system, eleven clusters were defined covering the main sectors of humanitarian response: Health, Logistics, Protection, etc. (see fig. 1). These sectoral groups gather humanitarian actors, both UN and non-UN actors, who intervene in a specific area (OCHA, 2012b). At the global level, the clusters are responsible for standards and policy setting, building response capacity and to provide operational support (IASC, 2006, p. 4). At the country level, they aim at enhancing the prioritisation of resources, avoiding duplication by clarifying the division of labour between humanitarian actors and ensuring needs of affected populations are met both in a timely and appropriate manner (IASC, 2006). While sectoral groups already existed at country level, the novelty of the cluster approach was to clearly designate a UN agency as cluster

lead. UNHCR, for instance, was designated to lead the Protection Cluster (PC) as well as the Shelter Cluster, and Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster.

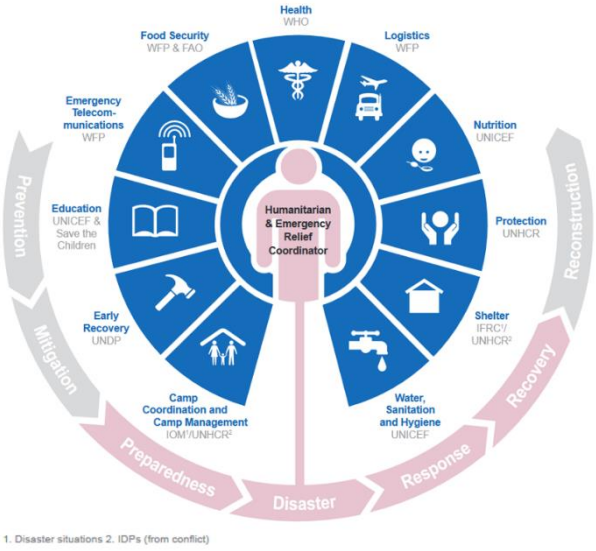

Figure 1 - Cluster approach and lead agencies (OCHA, 2012b)

Since the launch of the cluster approach, regular system-wide evaluations were conducted to evaluate and improve the cluster system (Stoddard *et al.*, 2007; Steets *et al.*, 2010, 2014). Their findings have suggested that the current architecture has contributed to improve the humanitarian response by reducing gaps and duplications and to disseminate good practices. However, clusters were pointed out to be too process-oriented and to achieve poor results in including local actors and linking with host government (Stumpenhorst, Stumpenhorst and Razum, 2011). The IASC Transformative Agenda (IASC, 2012a) was adopted by the IASC Principles in 2011 to address these issues and improve accountability, coordination and leadership. It led to the adoption of important guidelines, including the Cluster Coordination Reference Module (IASC, 2012b, 2015a) which tried to address some of these shortcomings. In particular, the Reference Module acknowledged as a good practice the fact that an NGO shares the leadership of the cluster with a UN Agency. This practice is referred to as cluster co-leadership or co-coordination. The terminology to refer to the NGO

undertaking this role is not harmonised and is referred to either as cluster co-lead, co-coordinator or co-chair.[1]

3.3 Protection cluster: architecture and co-leadership

The protection cluster, on which this research is focusing, has a complex architecture. The protection cluster plays an overarching role, leading on protection mainstreaming, protection monitoring, advocacy and general protection. It also includes four Areas of Responsibility (AoRs) which function like sub-clusters and are led by distinct agencies (see fig. 2).

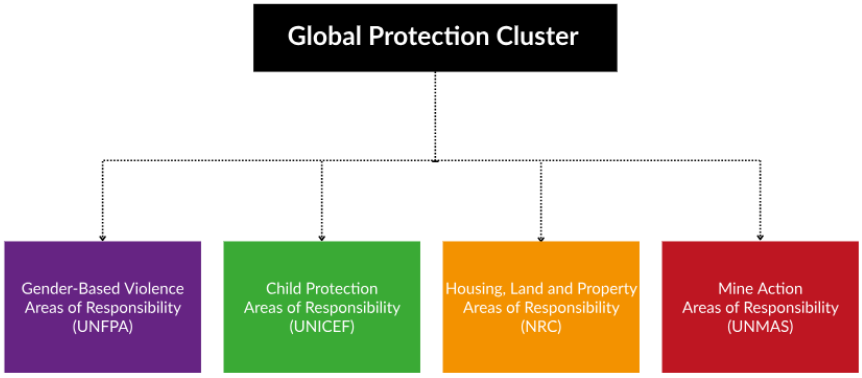

Figure 2 - GPC architecture (GPC website, 2024)

The wide scope of the protection cluster and its fragmentation has made the leadership of this cluster particularly challenging. The IASC Protection Policy Review (Cocking *et al.*, 2022) found that "UNHCR has struggled to provide overarching strategic leadership" and that the protection cluster is often the weakest of all clusters. It noted that some progress was made in including international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and national NGOs as co-leads of the cluster at the field level. "However, this is still not consistent from one country to the next, and has not led to a balanced approach between lead and co-lead, with INGO co-leads often marginalised." (Cocking *et al.*, 2022, p. 51). Whilst the GPC has consistently reiterated its commitment to cluster co-leadership, identifying the remaining barriers to a successful cluster co-leadership of the protection cluster remains a topical and relevant exercise.

[1] For the purpose of this research, the terms "co-lead" and "co-coordinator" are used interchangeably. They refer to the NGO staff delegated to the cluster to share the responsibility of the cluster leadership with the Cluster Lead Agency. This terminology is found in key reference documents from both the IASC (2012b, 2015a) and the GPC (2022).

3.4 Coordination at the field level: responsibilities of Cluster Lead Agencies and clusters' core functions

The CLAs are responsible to map the needs in their sector, in order to plan, monitor and coordinate the response accordingly. They are ultimately accountable for the well-functioning of the cluster and are providers of last resort (IASC, 2008) – in the case of co-leadership arrangements, these specific responsibilities are not shared with the NGO co-lead. CLAs have the responsibility to provide a cluster coordinator to facilitate the work of the cluster at national level. Sub-national clusters can also be established and are facilitated by sub-national cluster coordinators (IASC, 2012b). In a few cases, the sectoral groups are co-led by the host government which always retains the primary responsibility to coordinate the humanitarian response on its territory. In most country operations, clusters constitute an interface between the humanitarian community and the government (Egeland, 2005). Ultimately, accountability for coordination rests in each operation with the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) and the local authorities (UNHCR, 2023).

The UN RC/HC, the most senior UN official in country, leads the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). The HCT is tasked to lead and coordinate the humanitarian response by "building consensus among relevant organisations involved in humanitarian action" (IASC, 2009b, p. 1). It is a forum for strategic and policy decisions regarding the humanitarian response. It is composed of the head of UN agencies present in country, donors, elected representatives of INGOs, and in certain instances, of local NGOs. Clusters are below the HCT and are responsible for the coordination of the response in their respective sector. OCHA chairs the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) which oversees the coordination across clusters and is composed of cluster coordinators (IASC, 2015a).

According to the Cluster Reference Module (IASC, 2012b, 2015a) the "6 + 1" core responsibilities of the clusters are:

1. To support service delivery by providing a platform which ensures that it is driven by agreed strategic priorities and develop mechanisms to eliminate duplication.
2. To inform the HCT's strategic decisions through needs and gap analysis; identify and address gaps, duplications and obstacles; suggest relevant priorities.

3. To develop cluster strategies including objectives and indicators that directly support the country strategy; applying standards and guidelines; clarifying requirements and prioritising for funding allocations; agreeing on overall funding requirement for the sector.
4. To monitor and report on activities and needs, on the implementation of the cluster strategy and recommend corrective action.
5. To build national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning.
6. To support advocacy by identifying key concerns for HCT messaging and undertaking advocacy on behalf of the cluster.

+1. Accountability to Affected Population is also considered as an additional function of the clusters (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 66)

Cluster responsibilities are broad and go beyond coordinating the response (Grünewald, Binder and Georges, 2010; Culbert, 2011; Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2018). Clusters lead on the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), they manage the Humanitarian Programme Cycle. But they also play a critical role in pooled fund allocation processes which creates competition between members and has drawbacks regarding conflict of interest (UNICEF, 2022b). In most contexts, "Clusters do not have the resources to fully engage with all of these activities, and therefore focus on a smaller number" (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, p. 38).

In addition, the degree of collaboration expected of cluster members to fulfil clusters' objectives appears to be contradictory with the fact that cluster members are autonomous entities (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Knox-Clarke and Saavedra, 2015). This has been seen as reflective of the unclarity regarding what coordination means and how it is meant to be achieved in practice (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, 2018). The most recent guidance documents on cluster coordination (IASC, 2015a), HCT (IASC, 2009a) and Humanitarian Programme Cycle (IASC, 2015b) all point at a directive form of coordination where a centralised strategy, in the form of the HRP, should be implemented. If clusters are expected to set objectives and work towards the implementation of this vision, they are formally expected to lead a group over which they have little authority (Knox-Clarke, 2013, p. 11). As demonstrated by Knox-Clarke

and Campbell (2015, 2018), cluster members have developed in practice a looser form of coordination where "[they] are in fact planning and initiating their own organisation-specific activities, and then putting these all together to make a common strategy" (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, p. 7). This explains in part the contradictions and difficulties which are inherent to cluster leadership.

3.5 The concept of leadership

The concept of leadership in the humanitarian system has been explored by Knox-Clarke (2013, 2014). He demonstrates that the benefits of sharing leadership among a group are a promising avenue. Shared leadership promotes more effective work and direction. It also leads to better decisions in responding to complex problems through the representation of multiple perspectives, approaches and skill sets. It increases ownership and creates readiness for action (Cosgrave *et al.*, 2007; Murthy, 2007; Knox-Clarke, 2013). It is seen as an "optimal arrangement" which "combines the concepts of partnership and collective leadership" (UNICEF, 2022a, p. 12). However, shared leadership arrangements like the co-leadership of clusters between an NGO and a UN agency, are complex and fragile. They are fraughted with difficulties and dilemmas (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b). Knox-Clarke warns that "the costs might, in many situations, outweigh the benefits" (2013, p. 53).

In his literature review on humanitarian leadership, Knox-Clarke also demonstrated that in practice the humanitarian system tends to rely too much on individual leaders (2014). In subsequent work, Knox-Clarke and Campbell were able to establish that the same applies to clusters, highlighting "a fairly high correlation between an effective Cluster Coordinator and the Cluster's ability to set and implement a common strategy and prioritisation" (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, p. 75). This finding has significant implications on the importance of the role played both by the coordinators and co-coordinators as leaders of the clusters.

3.6 The leadership and shared leadership of clusters

Among CLAs, only UNICEF (2013, 2022b) and UNHCR (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017) have conducted an evaluation of their performance as cluster leads. At the country level, UNICEF and UNHCR assessed effectiveness against the six functions of the clusters. In

key leadership functions, UNICEF CLARE II Report notes “a particular gap [...] in setting vision and strategy” (2022b, p. 13) and adds that the work of the cluster is dominated by day-to-day tasks, leaving little time for strategic discussions. This is corroborated by UNHCR’s evaluation which found that “Where the clusters were the weakest was in determining strategic priorities, and monitoring their performance”(2017, p. 66). Both UNHCR and UNICEF’s evaluations came to the conclusion that “The CLA role is not adequately valued or prioritized across the organization” (UNICEF, 2022a, p. 13).

UNICEF's CLARE II Report also concludes that cluster co-leadership is not delivering on its potential. This is of particular interest as UNICEF is the only CLA officially having a formal co-leadership arrangement at the global level[2] and has made significant efforts to clarify what shared leadership means (Save the Children, 2012, 2019; Child Protection AoR, 2016; Global Education Cluster, 2020). While UNHCR also regularly draws on co-leadership to ensure predictable leadership at the field level, “this is compromised by a lack of clarity about how the lead-co-lead relationship is moderated and the uncertainties surrounding field-level cluster architecture and reporting” (2017, p. 8). The GPC has formally strengthened its support to co-leadership by releasing a Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination (2022) accompanied by an MoU Template standardising co-coordination arrangements. However, the implementation and impact of these tools on cluster co-leadership remains to be evaluated.

3.7 NGO participation in clusters and value of cluster co-coordination

The ambition of the cluster system is to strengthen “partnerships between NGOs, international organizations, [...] and UN agencies” (IASC, 2006). The participation of key humanitarian partners in the clusters is a vital element of their functioning, and is therefore listed as a top priority in the Generic Terms of Reference (ToR) for Sector/Cluster Leads at the Country Level (IASC, 2006). Nonetheless, evaluations following the first activation of the clusters found that NGO participation was weak (Stoddard *et al.*, 2007) and that “UN agencies treated [NGOs] simply as implementing partners, or actors to be policed, and did not allow them adequate input into conceptual thinking” (Street, ActionAid and Parihar, 2007, p. 33). Despite the endorsement of the

[2] The leadership of the education cluster at the global level is shared between UNICEF and Save the Children.

Principles of Partnership in 2007 (Global Humanitarian Platform, 2007; Mommers and Wessel, 2009), challenges around NGOs not being treated as equal partners to determine response strategies and the lack of transparency in coordination structures were consistently reiterated (Street, 2009; Featherstone, 2010; McIlreavy and Nichols, 2013). UNHCR and UNICEF's evaluations of their cluster leadership role have pointed at a perceived lack of neutrality, providing examples where CLAs have used the cluster to pursue their own agenda, seek funding or took positions on behalf of the cluster that were not shared by the cluster membership (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017; UNICEF, 2022b). This lack of accountability has fuelled NGOs' distrust of the cluster system. In 2014, a survey on the NGO perception of the state of coordination still noted "a strong desire" for the "relationship between the UN and NGO community [to] develop beyond the implementing partner level toward a strategic relationship" (ICVA, 2014).

The IASC Management Response Matrix to the first Cluster Evaluation (Stoddard *et al.*, 2007) first proposed that NGOs could take on cluster co-leadership roles. In the years which followed, NGOs raised concerns about clusters being led only by UN agencies and slowly gained more space in the cluster co-leadership system. The co-coordination of clusters by NGOs is not only used as a tool to increase trust (Reid and Stibbe, 2010) and enhance their participation. Providing cluster co-coordinators also aim at improving the effectiveness of the clusters and at strengthening their structures and tools (Culbert, 2011, p. 5). From 2010 onwards, donors started to invest in cluster co-coordination. Under the IASC Transformative Agenda launched in 2012 (IASC, 2012a), having an NGO as cluster co-coordinator has been recognised as having a positive impact on the functioning of the cluster, particularly on partnerships, advocacy and information sharing. This practice has been formally encouraged whenever possible (IASC, 2015a).

From the first review of experience of NGOs in cluster co-leadership (ICVA, 2010) to the publication of the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination (2022), several documents have attempted to capture the added value of co-leadership, in particular NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination (NRC, 2013b). The benefits identified by NRC are linked to providing "diversity in management", a wider "geographical access", "promoting inclusive cluster priorities and approaches", bringing diversity in technical expertise, and facilitating advocacy (2013b, p. 4). Strengthening the participation of other NGOs is seen as a key

outcome, as well as having a "direct link with the operational level" (ICVA, 2010; NRC, 2013b; Luff, 2015; Child Protection AoR, 2016, p. 5). To this list, the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination (2022) adds "a greater representativity" which ensures "that the perspective of NGOs is included in [...] decision-making structures". The GPC also recognises cluster co-coordination as "a key pillar of inclusive and transparent governance of the cluster" (ICVA, 2010; Child Protection AoR, 2016; GPC, 2022, p. 3). Cluster co-coordination is therefore commonly seen as "offer[ing] a balance to a strong UN agencies' focus (Child Protection AoR, 2016, p. 5).

A number of benefits are also highlighted for organisations investing in cluster co-coordination. They are related to a "strengthened profile and reputation" (NRC, 2013b, p. 5; Child Protection AoR, 2016), increased opportunities to attract funding (Child Protection AoR, 2016), a better access to information, a greater "access to decision makers" and the fact that co-coordination contributes overall to a "more effective humanitarian response" (NRC, 2013b).

3.8 Literature on cluster co-coordination

However, existing academic research focusing on co-coordination is scarce. Most research was conducted from a practical standpoint when cluster co-leadership started to gain traction in the coordination architecture and is now somewhat outdated. The first review of experience of NGOs in cluster co-leadership was conducted in 2010 (ICVA, 2010). At the time, NGO co-coordinators were programme staff dedicating a portion of their time to coordination – referred to as "double-hatting" – and the scope of their coordination role was not clearly defined. In 2011, Culbert gathered lessons learned on Oxfam's protection cluster project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This learning exercise first clarifies the distinction between the role of the cluster coordinator and co-coordinator. It also presents a list of benefits and limitations of the co-coordinator position and makes recommendations to better leverage this role (Culbert, 2011). The following year, another evaluation assessing the impact of the protection cluster co-facilitation in DRC was conducted (Kemp, 2012). This evaluation compared the state of the cluster before and after co-coordination was set up, allowing to draw a connection between co-coordination and an improved effectiveness of the cluster. It is to date the most recent evaluation of cluster co-facilitation and the only evaluation of a

project which formally tried to define "how co-facilitation could help to make the protection cluster more effective" (Kemp, 2012, p. 2). While focusing specifically on DRC, a brief comparison with clusters in other countries is included, allowing to draw wider conclusions on cluster co-coordination. In 2012, Save the Children analysed its role as co-coordinator of the education cluster since 2008, providing concrete examples of what co-coordination brings to the cluster and what are the gains both for the organisation delegating a staff to the cluster and for the NGO community (2012).

Practical guidance documents are an important source of information for cluster co-coordination. In 2013, based on an internal survey and a workshop with its co-coordinators, NRC released an NGO Manual on Co-Coordination to guide country offices engaging in co-coordination based on good practices and key considerations for a successful partnership. This manual remains a key reference. However, in the last ten years the landscape in which co-coordinators operate has greatly evolved with the release of global guidance documents (IASC, 2015b; Child Protection AoR, 2016; GPC, 2022) and NGOs have gained significant experience in this field which hasn't yet been captured in recent research.

The latest research on co-coordination conducted by Luff (2015) was envisaged as a follow up to the 2010 review of experience of NGOs in cluster co-leadership (ICVA, 2010). However, while setting the ambitious goal to assess the impact of cluster co-leadership roles, the analysis did not overcome this challenge, acknowledging that "finding evidential support that can measure impact of NGO co-leadership proved to be difficult as no metrics for measuring co-coordination impact exist." (Luff, 2015, p. 3). The evaluation of collaborative approaches and partnership remains indeed a challenge as the nature and scope of these collaborations remain unclear (Woodland and Hutton, 2012). Participants in the 30th ANALP annual meeting strongly highlighted the need to "understand the perceptions of those involved in the coordination process" to evaluate a partnership (Knox-Clarke and Saavedra, 2015, p. 25) and highlighted that effects are also difficult to attribute. Unfortunately, Luff's analysis is based on a survey with a low response rate and the interviews did not include field level cluster co-coordinators, limiting therefore the interest of the findings.

3.9 Conclusion

If the characteristics and added value of cluster co-coordination have been mapped out, a fundamental element has not been assessed: whether the space left to NGO cluster co-coordinators as cluster leaders allows them to leverage their position to deliver on its potential. It is also unclear whether the global guidance documents released in recent years have contributed to the establishment of a more equal collaboration structure. Consequently, an examination of the process of collaboration between cluster coordinators and co-coordinators in the protection cluster will provide insights into the factors that enables or impedes co-coordinators to achieve the objectives motivating this collaboration.

4. Disciplinary focus and theoretical framework

4.1 Disciplinary focus

4.1.1 Inter-Organisational Relations

Coordination in the humanitarian system is a form of inter-organisation relationship. Inter-Organisational Relations (IORs) is a field of research interested in "understanding the character and pattern, origins, rationale, and consequences of such relationships." (Cropper *et al.*, 2009, p. 4). IORs are widespread and go far beyond the humanitarian sector. In the last decades, they have expended in all sectors of activity to address complex problems such as climate change, human rights, education, refugee issues or social problems. These issues go beyond the scope of one single organisation and IORs are believed to produce results that could not be achieved otherwise (Brown, 1991). They indeed create a "more comprehensive appreciation of the issue/problem than any of them could construct alone by viewing it from the perspectives of all the stakeholders" (Gray and Purdy, 2018). In addition, inter-organisation relationships are believed to "benefit the various partners in the collaboration (Gray and Purdy, 2018, p. 5) and to be a necessary response to turbulent conditions (Gray, 1989).

Cropper et al. (2009) provide an overview of the multitude of terms used in the literature to refer to IORs. The most commonly used are: "alliance", "collaboration", "cooperation", "partnership" or "network". However, there is no agreed definition of these terms which, depending on the domain, can refer to different realities. In the humanitarian sector, "partnership" is prominently used since the endorsement of the "Principles of Partnership" (Global Humanitarian Platform, 2007) through which UN and non-UN entities commit to base their relation on: equality, transparency, result-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity. However, other terms such as "collaboration", "cooperation" or "network" encompass IORs similar to the interactions happening in humanitarian cluster co-leadership.

IORs can take a variety of forms: the smallest include at a minimum two organisations, when others may gather a multitude of organisations. Depending on their objectives and underlying motivations, they involve different type of organisations: firms, government, local community committees, non-governmental organisations, non-profit

organisations, public organisations, etc. Because IORs encompass a wide range of realities, they are studied from a variety of disciplinary angles: economy, law, management, public administration, organisation, political and social science. They were first studied in disciplinary silos, but over time, research became more multidisciplinary and a new stream of research focusing on collaboration emerged.

4.1.2 Organisational and collaboration theories

Organisational theories originally focused on the transactional aspect of the relations linked to the exchange of resources (Levine and White, 1961; Galaskiewicz, 1979), on network of organisations with similar characteristics (Fombrun, 1982), on resource dependencies (Pfeffer and Nowak, 1976; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) or on transaction costs (Williamson, 1981). Other theories introduced the notion of power in IORs (Cook, 1977; Pfeffer, 1981; Lister, 2000; Ran and Qi, 2018), which is a critical aspect in the case of cluster governance. Organisational sociologists have also looked at why and how to engage in IORs through contingency theories which introduced related concepts such as networks and strategy. This led to the development of social network analysis (Freeman, 2004) which "sees actors as embedded within networks of interconnected relationships that provide opportunities for, as well as constraints on, behaviour" (Kenis and Oerlemans, 2009, p. 290).

However, these traditional organisation theories did not capture the dynamic component of IORs: the process of collaboration in itself (Ring and Van De Ven, 1994). In 1989, in *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*, Gray criticised organisational theories and first described collaboration as a three-stage process (problem setting, direction setting and implementation), based on negotiated order theory. She also drew on organisational theories to elaborate four models to categorise and explore the dynamics of collaborations based on their motivation and the type of organisations involved. In 1991, in an attempt to build a more comprehensive and general framework for collaboration theories, Gray and Wood reviewed collaboration articles from different field and classified them using a three steps framework: the preconditions for collaboration, the process of collaboration and the outcomes produced.

Over the years, the field of collaboration theory slowly emerged as a distinct area of research (Gray, 1989, 1996, 2000; Wood and Gray, 1991; Ring and Van De Ven, 1994; Huxham, 1996; Huxham and Vangen, 2000a). In 2006, Thomson and Perry took up the challenge to unpack the process of collaboration - referred to as a 'black box' by Wood and Gray (1991). Thomson and Perry argue that the collaboration process has five key dimensions - governance, administration, organisational autonomy, mutuality, norms of trust and reciprocity - and that collaborating effectively requires to intentionally manage these dimensions. In 2007, Ansell and Gash further examined the collaboration process elaborating a cyclical model of collaborative governance including critical variables to determine its success. However, this model is not applicable to cluster co-leadership as this form of collaboration does not follow a cyclical model.

4.1.3 Collaboration: definition and challenges

Whilst important progress in the field of collaboration research were made, reaching a common agreed definition of collaboration remains, until today, a challenge (Wood and Gray, 1991; Huxham, 1996). Gray initially defined collaboration as: “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray, 1989, p. 5). In 2001, Thomson conducted a systematic analyses of collaboration definitions across disciplines and suggested the following definition:

> “Collaboration is a process in which autonomous or semi-autonomous actors interact through formal and informal negotiation, jointly creating rules and structures governing their relationships and ways to act or decide on the issues that brought them together; it is a process involving shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions.” (Thomson, 2001)

This definition encompasses key elements of the interaction happening in the context of cluster co-coordination and therefore serves as a basis for this research.

Despite a growing interest and exponential investment in inter-organisation entities, their functioning is challenging and their success remains hard to assess (Provan and Milward, 2001; Radin, 2006; Thomson, Perry and Miller, 2009). In sum, they are not the panacea one might think. Quite on the contrary, “the problems that coalesce stakeholders often involve conflicts and power struggles over values, ends, and means”

(Gray and Purdy, 2018). Important efforts were made to document these obstacles (Gray, 1994, 2000; Sink, 1996; Kern and Willcocks, 2000), but the complexities underlying both the construction and conduct of collaborations make them difficult to action and prone to fail.

4.1.4 Instruments to measure collaboration

As outlined by Thomson (2009), instruments to measure collaboration are scarce and difficult to adapt from one context to another. In addition, outcomes are difficult to define due to "the multiple pertinent perspectives from which performance is viewed and valued" (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015, p. 183). Scholars grappled with the difficulty to assess the outcomes resulting from collaboration (Provan and Sydow, 2009). Gray significantly contributed to answer this question, providing criteria to assess the success of four types of collaborations (1996), and later suggesting five innovative approaches to evaluate collective outcomes (Gray, 2000). Thomson, Perry, and Miller (2008, 2009) proposed a multidimensional model of collaboration to empirically assess patterns of collaborative outcomes. Woodland and Hutton (2012), building on earlier work (Wood and Gray, 1991; Vangen and Huxham, 2003; Gajda, 2004; Gajda and Koliba, 2007; Thomson, Perry and Miller, 2009) developed a Collaboration Evaluation and Improvement Framework. Going beyond direct outcomes, scholars also tried to unpack the broader impact of IORs on institutional fields (Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Emerson, 2009; Gray and Purdy, 2018).

In 1991, Wood and Gray outlined the need to assess collaborations through a theoretical lens encompassing different conceptual angles. Looking only at one angle, they argued, results in only one outcome being examined. For instance, a resource dependency theory looks at the shift in power outcome, while other outcomes of the collaboration are ignored. As outlined above, IORs in humanitarian coordination have been exclusively studied through a single lens, such as: power, leadership or the degree of collaboration (Gajda, 2004; Knox-Clarke and Saavedra, 2015).

As this research aims at increasing NGOs' capacity to engage in an efficient and effective collaboration, it is critical to obtain a comprehensive overview of the complex working relationship between the CLA and co-coordinating NGOs. Hence, this research uses a

holistic theoretical framework based on collaboration theories which allows to properly unpack the preconditions, the process, and the perceived outcomes of this collaboration.

4.2 Theoretical framework: Thomson and Perry's collaboration theory (2006)

This research uses the theory developed by Thomson and Perry in 'Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box' (2006) to analyse the process of collaboration in field protection clusters between the UN cluster coordinator and the NGO co-coordinator.

This theoretical framework allows to explore three distinct elements of a collaboration: the "antecedents", the "process" and the "outcomes", while unpacking the

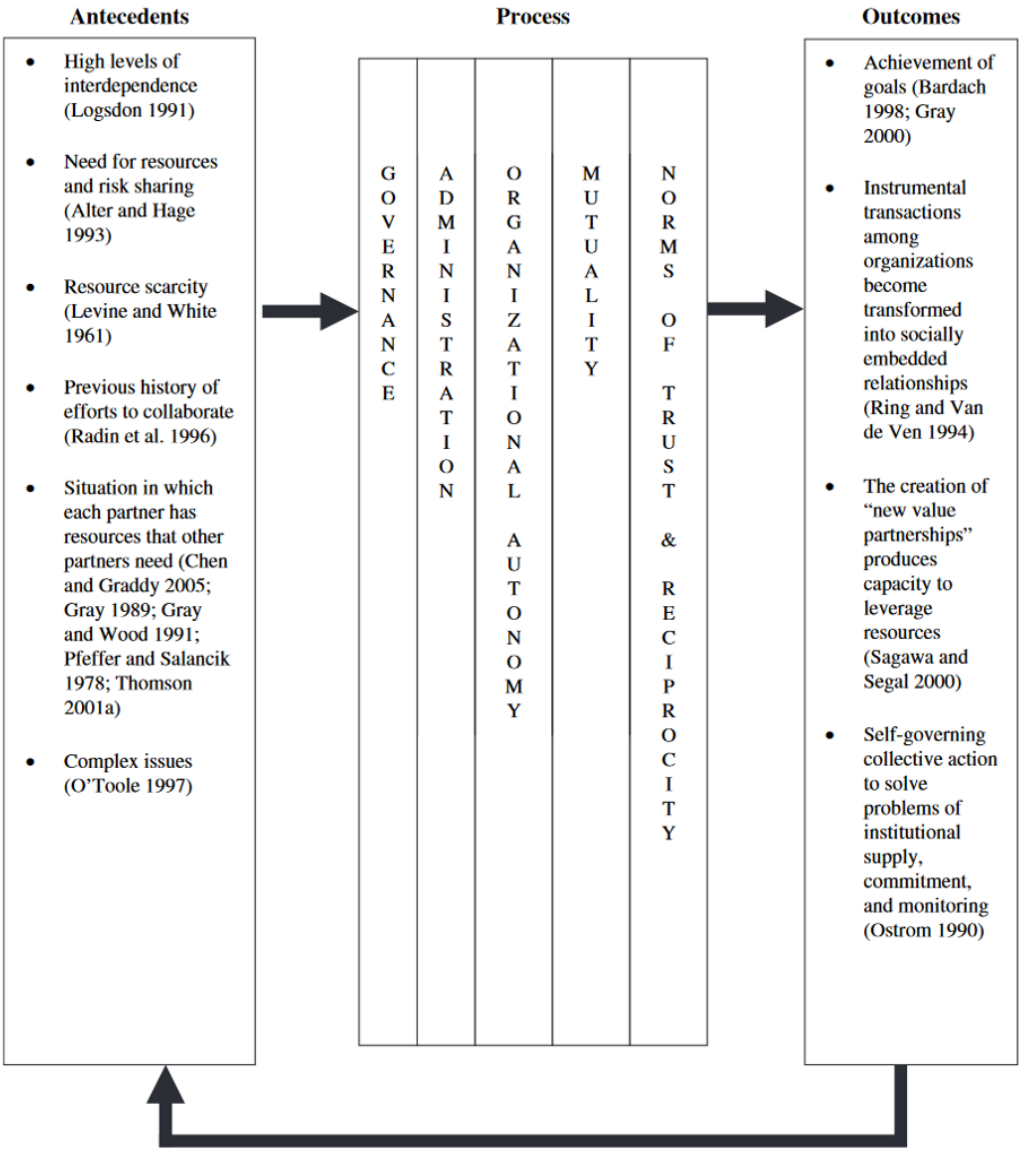

Figure 3 - The Antecedents-Process-Outcomes framework adapted from Wood and Gray 1991 (Thomson and Perry, 2006)

collaboration process through five key dimensions: governance, administration, organisational autonomy, mutuality, norms of trust and reciprocity (see fig. 3).

By looking at collaborations as being composed of distinct and dynamic elements influencing each other, this theory sheds light on the internal complexities of collaboration. It allows to understand what are the elements of this process which work or do not work well, which are the elements to which NGOs should pay particular attention to, and which are the variables over which NGOs have little control. Understanding the dynamics at play within the working environment of the coordinators[3] is a necessary step to understand if the co-coordination of clusters by NGOs is able to deliver on its potential, and to highlight how it could be managed more intentionally and effectively.

Thomson and Perry's theory is of particular interest in the case of cluster co-coordination because it moves away from a focus on outcomes solely to "[investigate] how innovation and change in currently unsatisfactory exchange relationships can occur" (Gray, 1989, p. 16). Measuring the impact of co-coordination is indeed challenging because the outcomes of this work are inextricably linked to the collaboration process and therefore difficult to attribute. A collaboration results in an "additional outcome that is shared" and "separate from the individual ends" (Thomson and Perry, 2006, p. 23). Understanding the dimensions of collaboration will allow to better seize and manage the shared outcomes resulting from a collaboration.

Moreover, clear specific outcomes for co-coordinators have never been defined and, as Luff contends, there is "no metrics for measuring co-coordination impact" (Luff, 2015, p. 3). However, NGOs invest in cluster co-coordination for specific reasons that have been clearly articulated in the literature on coordination and referred to as the "added value of cluster co-coordination" (see section 3.7, 6.6). This research is based on the hypothesis that the reasons put forward by both NGOs and the UN to justify the need for cluster co-coordination are the specific outcomes on which cluster co-coordinator are expected to deliver.

[3] Throughout this research paper, the term "Coordinators" refers to both the UN coordinator and NGO co-coordinator.

Building on Thomson and Perry's collaboration theory, this research paper proposes to first examine the conditions and motivations that drive NGOs to engage in cluster co-coordination, referred to as "antecedents". Then, the "process" of collaboration is analysed, focusing on the five key dimensions of the collaborative environment, and thereby allowing a deep dive into the conditions that enable or block a fruitful collaboration between the coordinators. Finally, the study assesses whether these conditions allow co-coordinators to achieve the expected "outcomes" of their role and to identify potential areas for improvement.

5. Methodology

This paper is the result of research that sought to understand why NGOs invest in co-coordinating the protection cluster, how the process of collaboration between NGO co-coordinators and UN coordinators unfolds in practice, and what results NGOs achieve through these endeavours. It is based on a detailed literature review and a series of semi-structured interviews. The analysis presented in chapters 6 to 8 follows the structure of the theoretical framework described in section 4.2.

5.1 Literature review

The research was informed by a literature review that considered a total of 113 documents. These documents include 53 academic papers, 22 reports and articles on cluster coordination that fall under the category of "grey literature", 18 key reference documents (IASC, global clusters guidance, UN General Assembly), 14 reviews or evaluations of the humanitarian system or of specific clusters, and six internal documents from co-coordinating NGOs which include secondary data. Other NRC internal documents which are not included in the bibliography were also reviewed: 12 job descriptions, seven handover notes, four MoUs/ToR, three workplans and minutes from GPC events.

5.2 Interviews and dataset

A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including eleven current co-coordinators, nine past co-coordinators, two co-coordinator's line managers, three senior representatives of co-coordinating NGOs, and one representative of the GPC.[4] In addition, although not included in the interviews, my own experience as a protection cluster co-coordinator has been included in the dataset. However, it is important to note that the paper only contains very few examples of my own experience, and only one direct quote. In total, the dataset includes a total of 21 people who have directly held the position of protection cluster co-coordinators.

Interviews were conducted with staff from the four NGOs holding co-coordinating positions (DRC, IRC, NRC, Right to Protection). The former and current co-coordinators

[4] The categories are none exclusive and two of the interviewees were counted in two categories.

interviewed worked in the following countries: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Colombia, DRC, Iraq, Lebanon, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria (North-West Syria hub and Whole-of-Syria cluster), Ukraine and Yemen. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and entered into an analysis grid (see Annex 4 and 5). This enabled comparisons to be made between experiences on specific themes and data to be extracted for use in the analysis.

The interviews took place in November and December 2023. Co-coordinators who held a position between June and December 2023 are considered as "current co-coordinators", while those that held a position between 2015 and June 2023 are considered "former co-coordinators". Unless otherwise stated, the charts in the research paper are based on a dataset including both former and current co-coordinators.

Out of the 21 co-coordinators represented in the dataset, 5 have more than one experience resulting in a total of 27 experiences. If the interview time allowed to cover their experiences in different contexts, their responses were disaggregated to increase the size of the dataset.[5] For the charts, the minimum sample size considered was 16 (9 current co-coordinators, 7 former co-coordinators). The maximum sample size was 24 (11 current co-coordinators, 13 former co-coordinators). In all charts, the compared groups are of similar sizes, the largest difference can be observed in chart 11, where former co-coordinators account for 40% of the total and current co-coordinators make up the remaining 60%. In the case where a response was not sufficiently detailed or missing, the interviewee's response was removed from that category[6] of the dataset.

To avoid distorting the analysis, if two co-coordinators held the position in the same context between June and December 2023, the context was only reflected once in charts related to the role setup (type of position, hosting arrangement, onboarding, MoU, reporting line).

[5] For example, if the respondent provided details on the setup of their position in two contexts, these two contexts were included in the dataset. If the respondent had experiences in two contexts, but provided information only on one context, only one context was included in the dataset.
[6] For example, the interviewee did not specify whether he had received an onboarding, and thus was not included in the onboarding analysis.

5.3 Research biases

My role as an NRC staff member gave me privileged access to NRC cluster co-coordinators. However, it also resulted in a slight over-representation of NRC cluster co-coordinators in the sample. To compensate for this bias, the perspectives of the other organisations were included in the narrative wherever possible. To ensure as much neutrality as possible when interviewing colleagues, the interviews were based on an interview protocol and a set of core questions were asked with only a few peripheral unstructured questions. In addition, when possible, the information provided by the co-coordinators were triangulated by interviewing line managers, and global representatives of co-coordinating NGOs and the GPC.

5.4 Research limitations

This research specifically covers the process of collaboration between the cluster coordinator and co-coordinator in field protection clusters at national level. The research does not examine the collaboration process at sub-national level, nor with the coordinators and co-coordinators of the Areas of Responsibility. In addition, the research does not aim to assess the performance of the cluster itself, but focuses on assessing the functioning of the collaboration from the perspective of the co-coordinators. Therefore, the extent to which the cluster performs better as a result of co-coordination is not fully assessed by this research. In addition, the subsequent impact of the cluster on strengthening protection outcomes for affected populations, fall outside of the scope of this research.

One of the limitations of evaluating a collaboration is that little quantitative data is available. However, qualitative data should not be overlooked. “Understanding the perceptions of those involved in the coordination process is critical” (Knox-Clarke and Saavedra, 2015, p. 25) and, indeed, provides a deep insight into complex human interactions. Due to time constraints, the co-coordinators’ perception of their impact on the functioning of the cluster was not further validated by cluster members – this would have been beneficial in strengthening the findings.

Finally, the research is centred on the co-coordinators and is not considering the views of the CLA. Including UN coordinators would have enriched the research, and possibly shed light on the CLA's own internal constraints in the collaboration. However, the fact that this perspective is not represented does not diminish the value of the views expressed by the cluster co-coordinators.

6. Antecedents: preconditions and motivations to protection cluster co-coordination

Collaboration is not a given but occurs under specific circumstances. In fact, organisations tend to maintain as much independence as possible, unless specific circumstances arise where entering in a partnership is required to solve a complex problem. In addition to achieving a collective outcome, a collaboration also includes a self-interest component: organisations engaging in a collaboration expect it to help them achieve their own organisational goals (Huxham, 1996).

The antecedents, as defined by Gray and Wood are "the preconditions that give rise to collaborative alliances" (Gray and Wood, 1991, p. 5) and "what motivates stakeholders to participate" (Wood and Gray, 1991, p. 140). Building on Gray and Wood's research, Thomson and Perry (2006) consider that six general circumstances drive the creation of collaborative partnerships:

1. Complex issues (O'Toole, 1997)
2. Previous history of efforts to collaborate (Radin et al., 1996)
3. Resource scarcity (Levine and White, 1961)
4. Need for resources and risk sharing (Alter and Hage, 1993)
5. Situation in which each partner has resources that other partners need (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Gray, 1989; Gray and Wood, 1991; Thomson, 2001; Chen and Graddy, 2005)
6. High levels of interdependence (Logsdon, 1991)

This section will unpack and apply these aspects to the co-coordination of field protection clusters by NGOs. It is of paramount importance to gain an understanding of the underlying motivating factors and incentives that drive shared cluster leadership. These factors indeed exert a significant influence on the manner in which both co-coordinating NGOs and the CLA engage in this collaboration. Furthermore, an analysis of the drivers of collaboration from the perspective of the co-coordinating NGOs involved allows for the identification of the anticipated outcomes of this collaboration.

6.1 A shared interest to solve complex issues

As defined by Thomson and Perry, a complex issue such as a humanitarian crisis, "go[es] beyond an individual organisation's mission"(2006, p. 27). Having a shared interest to

solve a complex issue is a motivational factor to engage in a collaboration. If a humanitarian response requires a degree of coordination in all sectors, among them, the protection sector stands out due to its wide scope. In addition to the general protection sector, the protection sector encompasses four technical sectors: Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence, Housing, Land and Property and Mine Action which are all "complex issues" in themselves. The protection cluster, as all other clusters, contributes to the centrality of protection and therefore encompasses a collective protection outcome. Finally, it has the ambition to enhance protection mainstreaming by ensuring protection programmes are delivered in a safe and inclusive manner. Hence, because of the complex nature of the protection issues tackled by the cluster, humanitarian actors have an interest to coordinate and engage in a collaborative approach to achieve greater protection outcomes.

More specifically, O'Toole (1997) identifies forces which encourage the creation of networks. The primary reason is that "complex issues are likely to require networked structures for execution" (O'Toole, 1997, p. 46). In the case of cluster coordination, these structures requiring collaboration are the core functions of the cluster: supporting service delivery, informing strategic decision-making of the HCT, strategy development, advocacy, monitoring and reporting, as well as improving preparedness. NGOs engaging in cluster co-coordination indeed put forward that co-coordination supports the protection cluster to deliver on its core functions (GPC, 2022).

O'Toole also argues that networks respond to "political demands for inclusion and broader influence"(1997, p. 47). Both the GPC and NGOs mention enhanced inclusiveness, accountability and transparency in cluster governance as an outcome of cluster co-coordination (ICVA, 2010; Kemp, 2012; Child Protection AoR, 2016; GPC, 2022, p. 3) particularly in relation to Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) allocations. Finally, according to O'Toole, collaborations extend the limited reach of programs (1997). In the case of cluster co-coordination, as NGOs often operate in remote areas where the UN presence is limited, the inclusion of an NGO as cluster co-coordinator is seen as allowing to cover a wider geographical area (NRC, 2013b; IASC, 2015a). Overall, the purpose of co-leadership is to "strengthen coordination and performance to improve quality and coverage of the [...] protection response" (Child Protection AoR, 2016, p. 4).

Wood and Gray also see as a precondition to collaboration a "need to achieve a shared understanding of and response to a problem" (Gray and Wood, 1991, p. 14). In that sense, collaboration allows to obtain a more comprehensive picture of a complex problem than any one organisation could obtain on its own. It also enables cluster co-lead to "providing ideas and plans, engaging partners in collective exchanges and proposing meaningful shared or common directions"(UNICEF, 2022b, p. 62). Influencing and setting the priorities of the sector explains why NGOs see value in investing in the co-leadership of the protection cluster.

6.2 Previous history of efforts to collaborate

In the case of protection cluster co-coordination, there is a long history of efforts to collaborate between UNHCR, the CLA, and NGOs. UNHCR combines the role of protection actor, donor and CLA and, as such, NGOs are used to work with UNHCR in different capacities. Many protection actors are UNHCR's implementing partner. In addition, UNHCR has been leading the protection cluster since the launch of the cluster system and its appointment by the IASC Principals as cluster lead in December 2005 (IASC, 2006). In the years following the launch of the cluster system, NGOs have started to informally engage in clusters' co-leadership.

Since the 2010s, three main INGOs have shared the co-leadership of the protection cluster with UNHCR: DRC, IRC and NRC (see fig. 4). For the first time in 2022, a local NGO – Right to Protection – was appointed as cluster co-coordinator in Ukraine. In 2023, 31 protection clusters were active and 18 (58%) of them had a co-coordinating organisation. Out of the 18 clusters with a co-leadership arrangement: DRC co-coordinated six clusters, IRC two, NRC eight, Right to Protection one, and one co-coordinator is shared between DRC and NRC in Colombia.

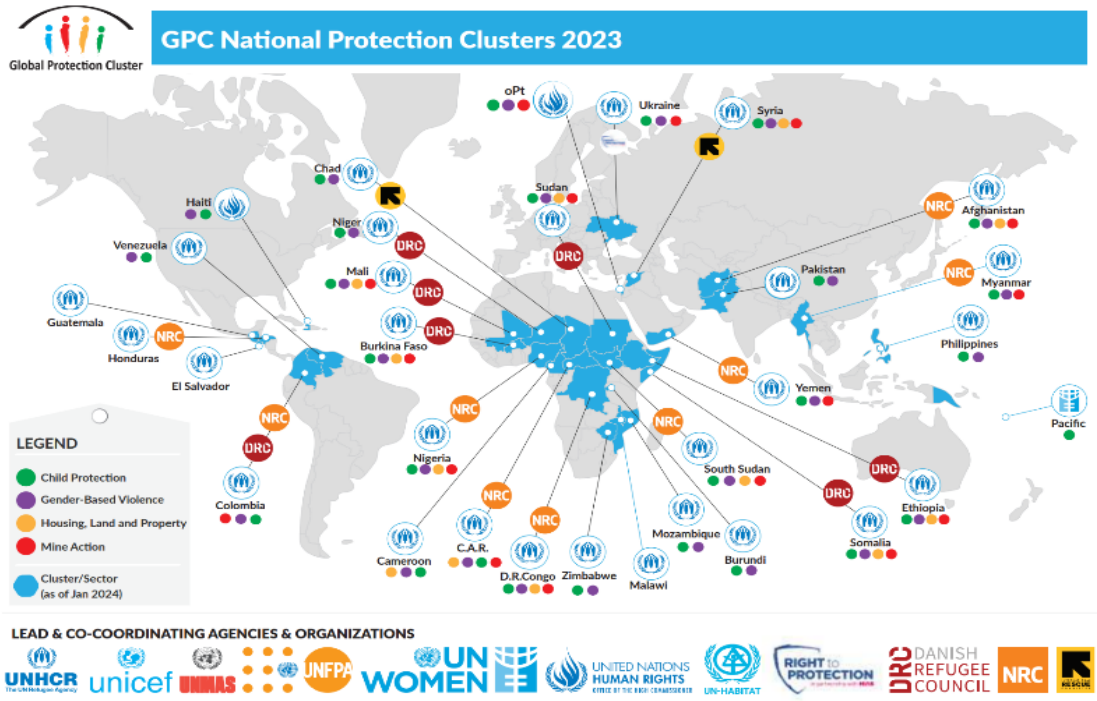

Figure 4 - Overview of national protection clusters 2023, lead and co-coordinating agencies and organisations (GPC, 2023)

According to the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination, the selection of a co-coordinating NGO should be done through a transparent and inclusive process based on the following criteria: "operational and technical relevance in the emergency; capacity to provide appropriately experienced staff; commitment to contribute to coordination requirements consistently; demonstrated capacity to contribute strategically; complementarity with the CLA" (2022, p. 4). DRC, IRC and NRC, the main co-coordinating NGOs, all have a strong operational presence and are well established protection actors. Knox-Clarke also highlight that being part of the leadership team should go to "those who control important resources, and who are willing, in principle, to put these resources towards the achievement of a common objective" (2013, p. 61). Influencing "the humanitarian community to invest in the right specialised services" (NRC, 2023b, p. 2) and contributing to make the coordination system more effective is for instance an important aspect of NRC's protection sector and a motivation to invest in cluster co-leadership.

Arrangements for the co-coordination of the cluster often have a validity of one to two years. In practice it appears that renewals are frequent practice, and elections are not open on a regular basis. Overall, we observe a low turnover of the organisation that

takes on co-leadership in a country. In certain countries, organisations have an exceptionally long history of holding the co-coordinator position. For instance, in South Sudan, NRC has been consistently co-leading the protection cluster since 2013. But on the contrary, staff holding the position have a high turnover, co-coordinators interviewed stayed on average 13 months in their position (see section 7.2.1).

6.3 Need for resources and interdependence

According to Levine and White, resource scarcity means that an organisation does not have access to all the essential elements needed to achieve its goals. Organisations "have to turn to other agencies to obtain additional elements" as "under actual conditions of scarcity, [...] interorganizational exchanges are essential to goal attainment" (Levine and White, 1961, p. 587). Resources that organisation might need which are relevant for cluster coordination are time, money, expertise, access to information or legitimacy according to Alter and Hage (1993). The motivation for investing in cluster co-coordination, as expressed in evaluations and NGO organisational documents (3.7), show a strong interdependence between the resources required by the CLA to ensure that the cluster operates to the highest standards in fulfilling its core functions, and the added value that NGOs can bring to the table. This is because the good functioning of the cluster is intricately linked to the meaningful participation of NGOs.

6.3.1 Additional resource and expertise

While the effective functioning of the cluster is one of the responsibilities of the CLA (IASC, 2015a), NGOs also have an interest in benefiting from a well-functioning cluster. Because cluster work implies a heavy administrative workload, in a context where financial resources are limited, the CLA has an interest to work collaboratively with an NGO to ensure that the cluster is adequately resourced. When NGOs can provide additional staff to the cluster to make it more efficient, they also insist on being equal partners and make it clear that they do not want to be confined to a mere secretarial role. In addition to time and money, they also emphasis their ability to bring complementary expertise to the table, either through their technical and programming expertise (Culbert, 2011; NRC, 2013b; IASC, 2015a; DRC, 2022), or by bringing diversity

in facilitation and management style in the cluster coordination team (NRC, 2013b; IASC, 2015a; GPC, 2022).

6.3.2 Access to information

Both the CLA and NGOs have an interest in accessing information. Being able to regularly gather comprehensive protection monitoring data is vital for the cluster to provide regular updates on the protection situation to cluster partners, donors and the HCT. In addition, keeping an up-to-date overview of protection activities allows to map the coverage of the protection response, to identify gaps and potential duplications as well as to establish referral pathways. NGOs have in this regard a key role to play. As operational actors, they have access to firsthand information and cover a wide geographical area as they implement activities in remote locations where UN have limited or no presence (Culbert, 2011; NRC, 2013b; IASC, 2015a; DRC, 2022; GPC, 2022). Contributing to enhanced information sharing is seen as an added value NGOs can bring as cluster co-coordinator (IASC, 2015a). NGOs delegating staff to the cluster also have an interest in being at the centre of the cluster's activities, as this gives them constant access to a wide range of information that they can use for their own benefit.

6.3.3 Strengthening NGO participation and buy-in

Cluster co-coordination is also widely acknowledged in the literature as having the potential to strengthen the participation of other NGOs in the cluster (Steets *et al.*, 2010; Kemp, 2012; NRC, 2013b; IASC, 2015a; Child Protection AoR, 2016; GPC, 2022). A stronger engagement of NGO partners not only results in more information transfer in the cluster, but it also has the potential to increase their contribution to collective advocacy (Steets *et al.*, 2010; Kemp, 2012; NRC, 2013b). Mobilising other NGOs, ensuring their interest are reflected in cluster priorities and contributing to a strong NGO voice through the cluster is an important motivation for NGOs engaging in cluster co-coordination (Kemp, 2012; NRC, 2013b). In addition, strengthening linkages with sub-national clusters is also mentioned as another added value of co-coordination, which has the potential to increase NGOs participation (Kemp, 2012). Nevertheless, NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination (2013b) notes that the impact on strengthening the participation of local NGOs is less obvious.

The presence of an NGO coordinator in the coordination team, who can play the role of an honest broker, is overall seen as a balance in a coordination mechanism that is perceived as having a strong UN focus (Kemp, 2012; Child Protection AoR, 2016; DRC, 2022). Therefore, NGO co-coordinators contribute to increase NGO buy-in and bring legitimacy to the cluster (Steets *et al.*, 2010; NRC, 2013b; Child Protection AoR, 2016).

6.3.4 Benefits for the co-coordinating NGOs

A number of other motivations, which are directly beneficial to the co-coordinating NGOs, are also highlighted in the literature. NRC sees the co-coordination of the cluster as a strategic role, giving direct access to decision-makers (2013b). This visibility, as a result, strengthens its "profile and reputation" (NRC, 2013b, p. 5). It can also "increase opportunities to attract funding" (Child Protection AoR, 2016). NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination clearly states that: "It is of note that the main benefits are not related to pooled funding" (2013b, p. 5). Finally, this role is seen has having the potential to bring "a stronger alignment of cluster and NRC priorities [which] may facilitate more mutually beneficial synergies in programme and advocacy" (NRC, 2013b, p. 5).

6.3.5 Interdependence

For Logsdon (1991), organisations engaging in a collaboration need to perceive their interdependence "as necessary for the social problem to be addressed effectively" (1991, p. 26). As demonstrated above, there is an inherent interdependence due to the fact that a complex issue cannot be solved by a single organisation. In addition, there are strong interlinkages between the motivation of NGOs to engage in cluster co-coordination and resources that are of interest for the CLA. As interdependences have the potential to increase the willingness to engage in a mutually beneficial partnership, being aware of them is an important precondition to enhance the success of a collaboration.

Logsdon also mentions that "in the case of asymmetry, organizations may join because of a need or desire to control the outcome of a collaboration" (1991, p. 26). In the case of cluster co-coordination, there is a clear power imbalance between NGOs and the CLA, both in terms of resources and political weight. One motivation of the co-coordinating NGOs is to better control the functioning of the cluster, to make it less UN-centred and

more inclusive of their priorities (Kemp, 2012; Child Protection AoR, 2016; DRC, 2022). The need for inclusivity is also recognised by the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination: “co-coordination is a key pillar of inclusive and transparent governance of the cluster” (GPC, 2022, p. 3). However, despite the formal recognition of co-coordination as a good practice both by the IASC (2015a) and the GPC (2022), it is important to acknowledge that global guidance documents (IASC, 2009a, 2015a, 2015b) also point at a more directive form of coordination. The IASC Reference Module for the Implementation of the Humanitarian Programme Cyle for instance clearly states that the “HC provides leadership to the planning process and, together with the HCT, sets the priorities and strategy and ensures that the Cluster response plans comply with that strategy” (2015b, p. 9). As Knox-Clarke and Campbell point out, this means that clusters are expected not only to adhere to a strategy decided at the top, but also to "ensure compliance from their members" (2018, p. 6). It is therefore unclear, on the basis of formal documentation alone, to what extent the CLA sees this interdependence as a two-way street.

6.4 Collaborating to influence interactions in a domain

Organisations are also investing in a collaborative approach to change the way interactions happen in a specific arena. Radin and colleagues argue that collaboration aims at solving a problem in a sector by creating a new type of interaction where a more equal relationship with dominant partners can emerge. This less hierarchical interaction aims at achieving changes in decision making and leaves room for innovation and change (Radin *et al.*, 1996).

In the case of cluster co-coordination, NGOs have indeed consistently reiterated that co-leadership is based on the Principles of Partnership - equality, transparency, result-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity. Co-coordinating NGOs put a particular emphasis on the dimension of equality, indicating that they are on an equal footing with the CLA in this collaboration. The fact that co-coordination arrangements should be based on the Principles of Partnership is clearly highlighted in the GPC Guidance Note on PC Cluster Co-coordination stating that “Mutual trust, collegiality and partnership are key elements of effective co-coordination” (2022, p. 8), and that this arrangement should be “grounded in the principles of partnership” (2022, p. 6). This

acknowledgement represents a major achievement for NGOs which have worked over a period of nearly ten years for this guidance to be released.

Through cluster co-coordination NGOs are trying to be involved in the way decisions that impact their domain of activity are made. As explained by Gray, "Collaboration transforms adversarial interaction into a mutual search for information and for solutions that allow all those participating to insure that their interests are represented" (1989, p. 7). As reported by interviewees in Knox-Clarke and Campbell study, NGOs like coordination, but they don't like to be coordinated (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015). In other words, despite a shared vision on the ultimate protection outcomes to be achieved and the need to join forces to solve a problem that none of the stakeholders can address alone, conflicts arise over how this vision should be realised (Gray, 1989).

In addition, conflicts are more likely to arise when organisations have a long history of efforts to collaborate as "Working on opposite sides in these arenas allows the parties to continually reconfirm their stereotypic impressions with hard evidence" (Gray, 1989, p. 13). Gray contends that collaboration is a way to test these assumptions and have a constructive confrontation which can unlock creative potential. In cluster co-coordination, the inherent distrust between NGOs and UN Agencies is to be acknowledged to understand the ground on which this collaboration is set up. For instance, the Review of the Engagement of NGOs with the Humanitarian Reform Process pointed out that: "The UN has continued to appoint unqualified Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) who do not adequately understand humanitarian action; who underestimate the importance of NGOs; who do not understand the critical importance of partnership" (Street, 2009, p. 3). Several co-coordinators interviewed as part of this research referred to an implicit hierarchy in the co-coordination team and to stereotypical UN domination behaviours. They also highlighted that as NGO co-coordinator they are seen as natural ally by other NGOs.

6.5 Risk sharing

According to Alter and Hage (1993) the need for risk sharing is also a necessary condition to enter in a collaboration. In the case of cluster co-coordination, risk sharing would consist in sharing the accountability of the well-functioning of the cluster. However, the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination mentions that only "the CLA and

national/local authorities are overall responsible and accountable for the vision and governance of the Cluster" (2022, p. 3). This is justified by the fact that UNHCR Country Representative is "ultimately accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator on behalf of the Protection Cluster" (2022, p. 10). This statement is in line with the IASC guidelines which specifies that "Sharing leadership [...] does not displace the core responsibilities and accountability of the designated in-country CLA, including its role as Provider of Last Resort" (2015a, p. 21). Hence, from the perspective of the CLA, cluster co-coordination is seen as reinforcing cluster leadership, but not as a risk sharing arrangement. From there, it will be important to see how this discrepancy between NGOs' demand for leadership space and the vision set out in key documents plays out in the process of collaboration.

6.6 Perceived benefits of co-coordination for the cluster, the NGO community and the co-coordinating NGO

Applying Thomson and Perry's theoretical framework to cluster co-coordination reveals that preconditions and motivations to engage in this collaboration are varied. They can be classified in three categories. Firstly, there is a joint interest on the part of the NGOs and the CLA to better address complex protection issues. Secondly, there is an interest from the NGO community to be better included and represented in cluster decisions. Thirdly, there is a self-interest from the co-coordinating NGOs that this role will benefit their organisation. These expected benefits of cluster co-coordination are summarised in the table 1 below. They form the basis of the rational used by co-coordinating NGOs to justify their engagement in cluster co-coordination and, as demonstrated above, are reflected in global level documentation.

These benefits provide a useful baseline of the expected outcomes of cluster co-coordination on the part of the NGOs investing in these positions. As a next step, exploring the process of collaboration will provide insights on the practical reality of the functioning of cluster co-coordination and shed light on what enhances or impedes the achievement of these outcomes.

Collective outcomes	NGO community outcomes	Co-coordinating NGO outcomes
- Additional capacity, expertise and resources - Strengthened NGO participation - Strengthened NGO buy-in - Strengthened linkages with sub-national clusters - Wider geographical coverage and diversification of access to local authorities, leaders and other stakeholders	- Inclusive cluster priorities and approaches - Strengthened transparency in cluster governance - Strengthened accountability in cluster governance - Strengthened collective advocacy	- Improved access to information - Strategic positioning: access to decision-makers - Strengthened profile and reputation - Increased opportunities to attract funding - Stronger alignment between cluster priorities and co-coordinating NGO priorities

Table 1 - Perceived benefits of co-coordination for the cluster, the NGO community and the co-coordinating NGO

7. The process of protection cluster co-coordination: inside the collaboration black box

The process of collaboration is the stage at which a partnership becomes operational, moving from theoretical intentions to operational reality. Organisations should, in principle, know why they invest in co-coordination and what results they expect to achieve. However, what happens during the process of collaboration and how to achieve these objectives is often less clear.

The process of collaboration has been described as a 'black box' by Wood and Gray (1991), and it is only in 2006 that Thomson and Perry took on the challenge of unpacking this phase. According to Thomson and Perry (2006), collaboration processes are composed of five key aspects:

1. Governance
2. Administration
3. Organisational autonomy
4. Mutuality
5. Trust and reciprocity

As collaborations are fragile and prone to dead ends, a better understanding of the process of collaboration and its five dimensions is crucial to managing collaborations effectively and for achieving the results that motivated the investment of the co-coordinating NGOs.

Based on the interview sample, this section explores these five dimensions with the aim of understanding what factors have facilitated or impeded the smooth functioning of the collaboration. Furthermore, this section aims to identify good practices and lessons learnt that could be replicated, and outlines how cluster co-coordination has evolved over the past decade.

7.1 Governance dimension

As outlined by Thomson and Perry (2006), when engaging in a collaboration, it is essential that partners jointly agree on the rules which will govern the functioning of their collaboration. They “need to create structures for reaching agreement on collaborative activities and goals through shared power arrangements” (Thomson and Perry, 2006, p. 24). In the case of cluster co-coordination, a power-sharing arrangement

takes the form of an MoU, which includes the following elements that are examined here: a conflict resolution mechanism, a joint decision-making mechanism and the rules for the hosting arrangement.

7.1.1 Memorandum of Understanding for cluster co-coordination

In 2022, as part of the Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination the GPC endorsed a template MoU with the view to strengthen co-coordination arrangements across national clusters. The explicit purpose of the guidance is to "set out some essential principles and minimum expectations for the effective design of a co-coordination arrangement and ways of working at field level" (GPC, 2022, p. 1). It is worth to note that having either a ToR or an MoU is a requirement from the IASC when engaging in shared cluster leadership (IASC, 2015a). The GPC guidance is aligned on the IASC Reference Module for Coordination and strongly recommends to the CLA and co-coordinating NGO to formally sign an MoU.

7.1.1.1 Value of a Memorandum of Understanding for cluster co-coordination

From the perspective of senior representatives from co-coordinating NGOs and the GPC, the endorsement of the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination is seen as an important step in formalising cluster co-coordination arrangements and defining an equal partnership (NRC, 2022b). The adoption of a formal MoU template has been a lengthy process. The first draft dates back to August 2013, and consistent advocacy with the GPC by co-coordinating NGOs was required to achieve this endorsement.

At field level, there is a certain degree of consensus among the cluster co-coordinators interviewed that having a signed MoU is important, regardless of whether it is based on the endorsed template. The MoU is seen as a means of ensuring equality, uniformity and continuity in the collaboration. By clarifying roles and responsibilities, the MoU puts in place the ground rules for the partnership to be based on equality. When the collaboration is functioning well, the co-coordinators tend to view the MoU as less crucial. Conversely, co-coordinators who were in strained relationships highlighted the importance of an MoU "explaining the role of the co-coordinator". As one interviewee noted, "it is this kind of thing where nobody cares […]. When things go well, you don't need it. But the moment there is a little bit of an issue. That's where the lack of an MoU

is really going to bite you." The co-coordinators also emphasised that while an MoU is beneficial, it is not a sufficient condition for ensuring the effective functioning of the collaboration.

The lack of global guidance has been identified by former co-coordinators as a factor that allows CLA country offices to perpetuate an unequal power system between the protection cluster coordinator and the co-coordinator. For instance, one situation was reported in which in 2019 the Director of a co-coordinating NGO had to intervene after the CLA drafted a ToR for the co-coordinator role which only included subordinate tasks. In addition, the risk to be reduced to a position of assistant with no or minimal strategic role was frequently mentioned in interviews. The global MoU template can therefore help to ensure consistency as the endorsement of core principles around equal responsibilities facilitates the negotiation with the CLA and promotes a culture of equality.

Finally, an MoU can provide a degree of continuity by avoiding the new co-coordinator having to formally establish the collaborative space. Co-coordinators who have recently joined said that the MoU helped them in better understanding their role and what they should accept or request from the CLA. Given the high turnover in coordination teams, this efficiency in the transition is much needed.

7.1.1.2 Overview of signed Memorandum of Understanding in protection clusters and challenges

At the global level, both DRC and NRC consider the endorsement of the Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination to be a success and they have publicly acknowledged the efforts of the GPC in producing these documents. However, despite the perception at the global level that "there is good visibility among regional and country level colleagues that [the MoU] exists" interviews revealed a low level of uptake. In November 2023, in 11 countries, only three had signed an MoU (27%) and were using the GPC template (see chart 1). This does not indicate a push towards a more systematic adoption of MoUs.

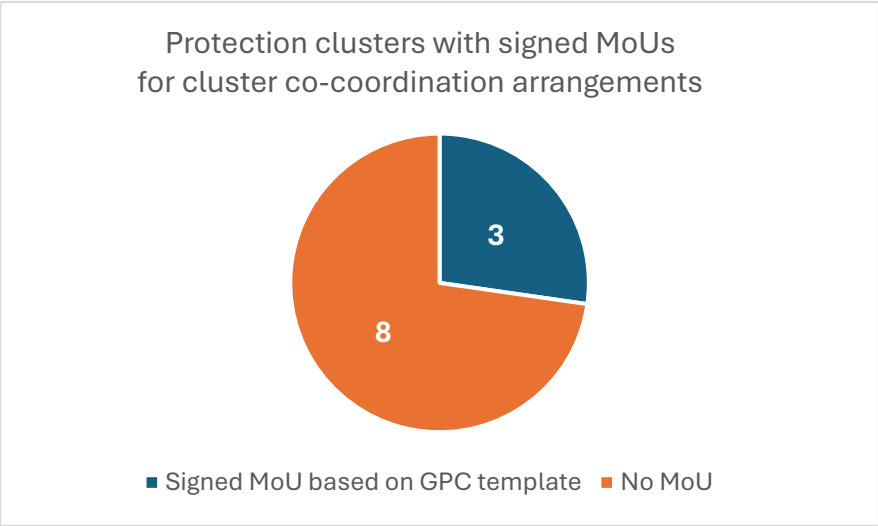

Chart 1 - Protection clusters with signed MoUs for co-coordination arrangements in 2023

Despite the request of the co-coordinating NGOs sitting on the GPC SAG, the GPC did not formally encourage UNHCR Representatives at country level to systematically use the template and sign an MoU where a co-coordination arrangement is in place. Furthermore, in protection clusters where co-coordination was newly established in 2022, an MoU was not systematically signed. The protection cluster in Ukraine, for instance, does not have one. Hence, further efforts are required from the CLA to comply with the recommendation of the evaluation of its protection cluster leadership, which requested that protection clusters "routinely have MoUs in place with all co-leads" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 10).

In addition, the MoU is not a silver bullet. While co-coordinators tend to view it as a useful document, they also emphasise that it is not a cure-all for effective collaboration. In some cases, despite the existence of an MoU, the working conditions fail to align with the agreement. In other cases, although an MoU may be signed, it is often not developed in consensus with all parties involved, which can result in a lack of clarity regarding the role of the co-coordinator within the cluster coordination team and/or with the sub-clusters.

In the majority of cases, the CLA is the primary source of resistance to the signing of an MoU. However, there may also be some reluctance on the part of NGOs. This may be due to a fear of committing to something that is seen as 'too formal', especially if there is uncertainty about funding for the position. The co-coordinating NGO may also be

concerned to lose the position, as engaging in this process should in principle trigger an election to determine which NGO will hold the position.

Whilst the adoption of the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-coordination represents a significant step forward, further efforts are still required at the global level to facilitate and explain the value of transitioning towards a more systematic adoption of MoUs. This will allow the potential of the MoU to be leveraged through a better institutionalisation and comprehension of the role of the cluster co-coordinator.

7.1.2 Dispute resolution mechanism

Shared power arrangements do not entirely prevent conflicts between partners to occur, but should allow them to become marginal and to happen within "a larger framework of agreement on the appropriateness of jointly determined rules that ensure a collaborative environment" (Thomson and Perry, 2006, p. 26). In order to resolve conflicts that cannot be addressed directly between the coordinator and co-coordinator regarding their ways of working, a dispute resolution mechanism is mentioned in the MoU template: "In case of disagreement regarding the implementation of this MoU, the issue will be referred to the coordinator and co-coordinator's respective supervisors" (GPC, 2022, p. 12) and the issue should be discussed between them. If the supervisors are not the country representatives, the issue should be escalated to them. As a last resort, if the issue cannot be addressed in country, the issue should be escalated to the GPC who will act as a mediator.

In practice, none of the co-coordinators interviewed have formally initiated this mechanism. In addition, at the exception of one country, no regular meetings are taking place between the coordinators' line managers. This means that a space to diplomatically handle sensitive issues does not exist. Even in contexts where the collaboration was evidently dysfunctional, co-coordinating NGOs have demonstrated a notable reluctance to confront the CLA. A former co-coordinator stated that having an MoU would not have been beneficial, as they believed that their organisation lacked sufficient influence with UNHCR. They argued that UNHCR had such a significant degree of influence that the existence of an MoU would have been of little consequence. In one country, although the Country Director (CD) was aware that the coordinator was

underperforming, and there was a platform for regular exchange with the UNHCR Representative where the issue could have been escalated, the decision was taken to circumvent it. This resulted in the co-coordinator assuming a substantial workload over a period of one year.

In addition, the option of last resort to use the GPC as a mediator also appears to be underutilised. According to the GPC, a mediation from global level was formally requested once, following a "significant issue". It is also important to note that even if the GPC was to act as a mediator, it does not have authority over the CLA. As established by the IASC: "There is no direct reporting line [...] between sectoral groups at the country level and global level clusters" (IASC, 2006, p. 6).

Throughout the interviews, the capacity to manage situations of conflict in the collaboration has been identified as a significant weakness. Interviewees confirmed that conflicts frequently perpetuate until the person causing it is removed from the cluster. The fact that the dispute resolution mechanism is dysfunctional means that in the majority of cases, conflicts are not addressed, and power abuses are not reported. Overall, cluster co-coordinators are at high risk of being exposed to power abuses, with 20% of the interviewees reporting behaviours which resemble harassment. In the interviews, three direct cases of abuse were mentioned. Of these, only one case of sexual harassment was formally reported. It is of grave concern that in most instances, abuses are not reported because accountability mechanisms are believed to be dysfunctional and triggering them can result, in the words of an interviewee, in "reputational risk and harm to future employment".

Given the significant power imbalance between the two parties, it is questionable whether it is possible to implement a dispute resolution. Co-coordinators have reported that their line management would avoid by all means to confront the CLA because of the inherent risks associated with the power imbalance. In one country, the cluster coordinator was forced out after approximately two years. This was not due to the co-coordinating NGO standing up but rather a combination of external pressure from donors, the GPC, the HC and heads of UN agencies. This illustrates that without strong political support, there is minimal chance that the co-coordinating NGO by itself can hold the UN accountable.

7.1.3 Joint decision-making mechanism

When engaging in a collaboration, partners agree to "collectively develop sets of working rules to determine who will be eligible to make decisions" and "what information will need to be provided" (Thomson and Perry, 2006, p. 24). This element of joint decision-making is indeed a core component of cluster co-coordination arrangements, as set out in the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination: "The coordinator and co-coordinator commit to joint decision-making and information-sharing between them in all aspects of the cluster functions. [...] The coordinator or co-coordinator should not make decision pertaining to the cluster without consulting each other beforehand" (2022, p. 8). By whom and how decisions are made is at the heart of a transparent and inclusive cluster governance, which are expected outcomes of cluster co-coordination. It is also where conflicts are more likely to arise as, even if there is an initial shared interest to collaborate, "conflicts inevitably ensure over plans for how the vision should be carried out" (Gray, 1989, p. 9).

7.1.3.1 Evolution in the conception of equality in joint decision-making mechanism

In the early literature on cluster co-coordination, it was explicit that the practical difference between the coordinator and the co-coordinator was that "the lead holds final decision-making power" (Culbert 2011 p,11). NRC Manual on Coordination also mentioned that "options for joint or shared decision-making, [should give] recognition to the lead role of the Cluster Lead Agency" (NRC, 2013b, p. 14) and the ToR should define in which cases the CLA has the right to make a final decision. Since then, NGOs have continuously advocated for a more equal collaboration and the MoU endorsed by the GPC in 2022 places a strong emphasis on the Principles of Partnership and joint decision-making. However, the evolution in terms of what this "equal partnership" entails in terms of equality in decision-making is relatively limited.

The recommendations for final decision-making laid out in the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination are the following: "the cluster cannot defend a position that is not supported by the CLA" and it is "recommended that the Coordinator seeks the sign off or guidance from the CLA Country (Deputy) Representative on particularly sensitive matters" (2022, p. 10). As defining what constitutes a sensitive matter remains open to

interpretation, this means the CLA still possibly retains the final say on a wide range of decisions made by the cluster. Nonetheless, an important limitation to the CLA's authority is introduced: "the CLA cannot defend a position on behalf of the cluster without the cluster having endorsed such a position." In addition, the decision made at the level of the coordinators should be based on consultations as they speak on behalf of the cluster partners. In line with the IASC recommendation, having a small steering group such as a Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) is also recommended by the GPC in order to "develop and adjust a cluster's strategic framework, priorities and work plan" (IASC, 2015a, p. 19).

7.1.3.2 Joint decision-making in practice

In practice, interviews reveal that the degree to which joint decision-making is functioning greatly depends on the coordinator's willingness to share the leadership space and the effectiveness of the strategies put in place by the co-coordinator to gain or maintain this space.

When joint decision-making is functioning, it requires the coordinators to work closely together and engage on a very regular basis, as certain decisions must be made quickly. The mechanism consists of the two coordinators meeting frequently to discuss and reach an agreement on decisions. Disagreements are discussed behind closed doors and a compromise is found before taking a common public stance. Having two coordinators speaking the same language and supporting the same position was presented by a co-coordinator as a means to build the credibility of the coordination team. Compromising was seen as a healthy open dialogue within the coordination team.

However, co-coordinators also nuance what they are able to obtain through joint decision-making processes. One co-coordinator asserted that decisions are not made unilaterally, yet he expressed reservations about the level of compromise reached. Others have stated that while they are involved in decision-making, it does not necessarily imply that the final decision is a compromise: "At least I was consulted, but the final decision does not always include my perspective."

Almost all co-coordinators are aware that they do not have the same level of influence in decision-making as their counterparts. As one co-coordinator put it, "Under the

cluster system, it is very clear that there is a leader and a co-lead. [...] UNHCR has sometimes some strong positions regarding some subject and there is no way we can do anything about it." Another said, "Even in my best experience as cluster co-coordinators I have always known that I did not have the power. And I have acted differently knowing that UNCHR ultimately had the power in the relationship and I was able to manoeuvre and manipulate it." Whilst the majority of decisions are discussed and not imposed, the following situations were mentioned as having triggered a veto from UNHCR: meetings with donors or partners - not necessarily high-profile nor particularly sensitive -, advocacy messages, the use of certain language in advocacy messages and the mention of certain protection issues in strategic documents. This indicates that the delineation of what constitutes a sensitive matter that requires UNHCR's sign off would need further clarification as it allows the CLA to take excessive advantage in certain circumstances.

It is of interest to note that six of the co-coordinators interviewed have worked with at least two different coordinators during their assignment in a country. When transitioning from one coordinator to another, in three cases the decision-making mechanism, which was reported as dysfunctional earlier on, became functional after the change of coordinator. While in three cases the decision-making system which was functional became dysfunctional. This demonstrates that regardless of the presence of formal rules governing the partnership, the coordinator plays a crucial role in enabling the joint decision-making mechanism to function effectively. A change in the line management of the cluster coordinator also appears to impact the ability of the coordinator to preserve the well-functioning of joint decision-making between the coordinators when the separation between the distinct roles of UNHCR as protection agency, donor and lead of the protection cluster is not well understood. Following a management transition, barriers can also emerge in the form of increased scrutiny of the cluster co-coordinator's work, interference in decision-making processes, more frequent vetoes and the exclusion from platforms where the co-coordinator was previously included.

Co-coordinators have indicated that in certain contexts, the joint decision-making mechanism was entirely dysfunctional, with either the coordinator or the UNHCR

Representative making unilateral decisions. A co-coordinator reported that the coordinator tended to be extremely unilateral. “He was kind of convinced to know and understand everything better than everyone else because he had so many years of experience. [...] He was making statements without really checking on having anyone's backup.” Additionally, the coordinator in some instances attempted to exercise complete control over communication. A co-coordinator for instance mentioned that the coordinator demanded that all communication come from her. Unilateral behaviour in the cluster can also come from the UNHCR Representative. A cluster co-coordinator stated that the UNHCR Representative made decisions on returns of displaced populations that were “completely supported by UNHCR, against the positions of all the NGOs.” A former co-coordinator asserted that UNHCR frequently made unilateral decisions and pressured NGOs in the process: “There was no consultation [...]. They would make decisions without us, they would speak to donors without us. UNHCR’s implementing partners would only say what UNHCR wanted them to say, and they would threaten people to lose funding if they didn't.” As a result, the co-coordinator commented, partners did not feel heard and in fact strategic decisions were made by UNHCR alone and not by the cluster.

Joint decision-making process is a key challenge of cluster co-coordination. Overall, 43% of past and present cluster co-coordinators reported being excluded from communications, not being aware of what was happening or where decisions were made in at least one of their cluster experiences.

7.1.3.2 Strategies used to influence decision-making processes

If finding a compromise is a fundamental principle of joint decision-making, it appears that co-coordinators use different strategies to influence the process. Some, while acknowledging that the coordinator has more power, are able to cultivate a strong relationship that they leverage to influence decision-making. Others employ alternative approaches, such as circumventing and using backups. They receive support from other NGOs through the SAG or the INGO forum, or they leverage the support of donors or OCHA to avoid being the person always challenging the CLA. Other co-coordinators may assume a more confrontational role. One co-coordinator explained that whenever the coordinator presented a position as a cluster decision in which she had not been

involved, she would always follow up bilaterally and question who had made the decision. This proved to be an effective method to discourage the occurrence of this type of non-inclusive behaviours. Finally, the last strategy employed is to simply comply with the decisions made by the coordinator and adopt a position of subordination. Interestingly, as a former co-coordinator explained: “We tended to think that clusters where there was no conflict between the coordinator and co-coordinator was a success story, but I'm not always sure that was the case. Certain co-coordinators do not necessarily speak up, and they just kind of follow what the coordinator says. Sure, there's no strife but have you actually done something that helps the NGOs? - that’s a different story.”

Hence, it is of paramount importance for the co-coordinator to maintain a critical eye on the manner in which decisions are made within the cluster. This entails ensuring that these decisions are inclusive of perspectives other than the CLA’s perspective, that a common ground is reached through joint decision-making or that strategies are put in place to alert relevant stakeholders when strategic unilateral decisions are made.

7.1.4 Hosting arrangement

Hosting arrangements vary from one context to the other. In the interview sample, current co-coordinators either work fully from UNHCR’s office (36%), have more flexible arrangements where the co-coordinators work two to three days from UNHCR’s office (45%), work remotely due to access constraints (18%) or work exclusively from the NGO's office (9%). Colocation, the fact for the NGO co-coordinator to work from UNHCR’s office, is acknowledged by the GPC as a good practice “contributing to better working relations, trust building, transparency, information sharing and collaboration resulting in more effective coordination of the cluster” (2022, p. 11). Over time, practices have evolved and the data collected indicates that co-coordinators are increasingly working full-time from UNHCR: 36% against 23% in the past (see chart 2). On the contrary, the proportion of co-coordinators working exclusively from their organisation has declined from 23% to 9%. It is interesting to note that in countries where co-coordinators fully work from UNHCR’s premises, the arrangement appears to be stable over time. This suggests that incoming co-coordinators benefit from the preexisting practice.

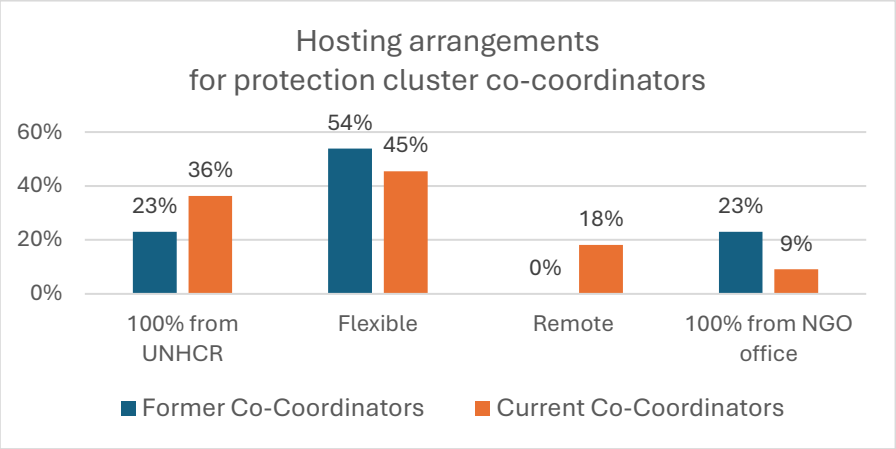

Chart 2 - Hosting arrangements for cluster co-coordinators

The decision to opt for one arrangement over another is often influenced by practical considerations, such as the distance between UNHCR's office and the NGO's office, and the adequacy of the office setup. This includes the availability of a desk and a quiet working space. However, three out of five current co-coordinators interviewed and who worked full time from UNHCR's office did not have a dedicated desk. They utilised vacant offices of colleagues on leave, or they occupied the coordinator's office and sit at the table which is normally dedicated for guests. The fact that co-coordinators are the ones dedicating time to visit their counterpart, and in many instances do not have a desk at UNHCR, further contributes to a perception of inequality between the two roles.

The advantages of working at UNHCR's office for at least a few days a week are related to better communication, as in person communication is generally faster: "you sit next to each other, you can see whether the person is busy or not, [...] and it allows to get answers right away." Additionally, it increases the flow of information, as there is naturally more awareness of what is happening and opportunities for informal interaction. Sharing the same office also contributes to build trust and a positive relationship. A mapping conducted by the GPC indicated that: "Although a correlation cannot be directly established, in all operations (except one) where co-coordinators were positive about the interpersonal relationship between coordinator/co-coordinator, the team shared an office" (2022b, p. 2). However, this information should be interpreted with caution. Three co-coordinators who were sidelined mentioned that they had tried to work more from UNHCR in order to be better involved in communications, but this didn't solve the dysfunctional relationship. Therefore, working

from the same office can strengthen the relationship between the coordinators, but does not guarantee a positive relationship.

On the other hand, co-coordinators also perceive a number of risks associated with working 100% from UNHCR. These include the risk of losing independence, difficulties in arranging visits from NGO partners, and being drawn into work that is not related to coordination. As one co-coordinator said, “the downside is that the UNHCR colleagues forget that you are an [NGO] staff and they keep dragging you into their internal dynamics and politics.” Conversely, by being less connected to the delegating NGO, the co-coordinator has less access to programme staff and, in turn, is less aware of the priorities and information updates which constitute part of their countervailing power.

Ultimately, while there is no one-size-fits-all hosting arrangement, it is important to strike a balance between the advantages and risks associated with the setting chosen. Maintaining a certain degree of flexibility between working from UNHCR’s office and the NGO’s office seems better suited to coordination work, which is not a static role. A good example can be found in the current arrangement in Colombia, where the co-coordinator while having a desk at UNHCR is able to flexibly work from both NRC's and DRC's offices which are both hosting the co-coordination role. As the co-coordinator stated, “I need to be kind of everywhere”. This flexibility seems to maintain the right level of independence toward the CLA, while allowing for sufficient in-person interactions both with the delegating NGOs and the coordinators.

7.1.5 Governance: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

Jointly agreeing on the rules which govern the functioning of a collaboration appear to be critical to set the basis of a healthy collaboration. The table 2 below captures the key factors discussed in section 7.1 which can facilitate or impede the well-functioning of the collaboration in the governance dimension.

Enablers	Blockers
Governance	
Officialisation of the role: - MoU agreement signed	Lack of formal structures for the role: - No MoU or ToR
Understanding of the role: - In the cluster at national and sub-national levels	Lack of understanding of the role: - From the CLA (coordinator, coordinator's manager, UNHCR protection staff) - From the coordination team (Information Management Officer) - From sub-national cluster coordinators
Clear ways of working: - Joint decision-making mechanism in place - Clarity on CLA sign off procedure for cluster products - Flexible hosting arrangement: working from both UNHCR and NGO offices	Clear ways of working: - Unilateral decisions, exclusion from communications - Cumbersome sign off procedures for cluster products leading to delays or inaction - Strict working arrangement: working exclusively from UNHCR or NGO office

Table 2 - Governance: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

7.2 Administration dimension

To achieve the purpose of a collaboration, Thomson and Perry (2006) argue that a number of administrative tools should be in place. Indeed, collaborations are peculiar in the sense that traditional mechanisms such as hierarchy and contractual arrangements do not apply to the same extent. In addition, leaders are not only setting the agenda but also implementing it. Therefore, it is of critical importance to provide administrative capacities, which take the form of predictable and adequately experienced staffing, with particular attention paid to their communication and interpersonal skills. Furthermore, establishing clearly defined roles and responsibilities, along with achievable objectives, is also a key element of collaboration.

7.2.1 Human resources

A number of parameters enter into play when considering the staffing dedicated to a co-coordination role. The position can be either full-time or part-time ("double hatted"). Funding must be secured and, to the extent possible, separate from the CLA. The individual recruited to fill the role must possess the right level of expertise and skills. These parameters are explored in greater detail below.

7.2.1.1 Part-time or full-time position

Over time, NGOs have strengthened their cluster co-coordination staffing capacities. In the 2010s, protection cluster co-coordinators were not fully dedicated to this role (Culbert, 2011), their cluster role was a side activity they conducted along programme responsibilities. In 2013, for instance, none of NRC's cluster co-coordinators were fully dedicated (NRC, 2013a). Over time, donors and NGOs have increasingly recognised the time and specific expertise required to fulfil this role. As a result, the proportion of co-coordinators double hatting dropped from 46% to 9% (-37%) between former and current co-coordinators, and nearly all co-coordinators are now fully dedicated to their position (see chart 3).

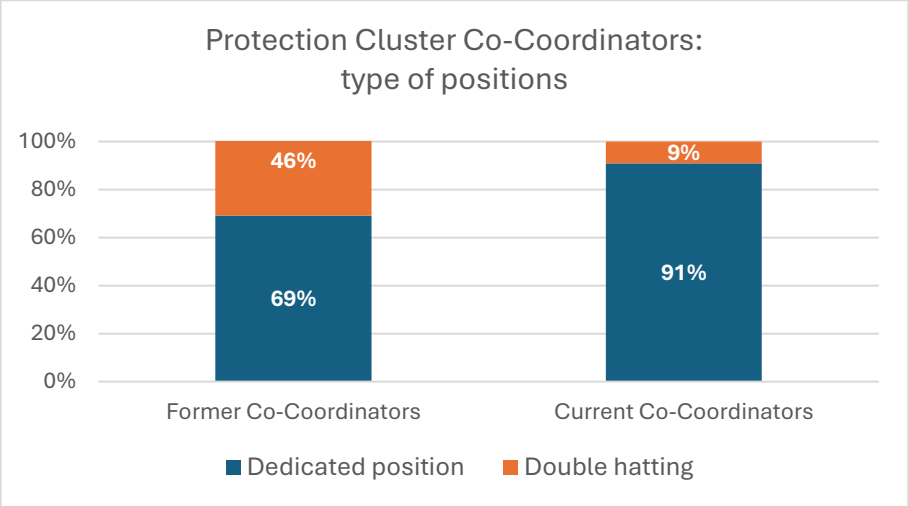

Chart 3 - Protection cluster co-coordinators: type of positions

Co-coordinators interviewed who were in a part-time arrangement were working as advocacy, protection mainstreaming or protection programme advisers. In the majority of cases, the time allocated to programme work in their ToR was around 20-30% of their total working time. In practice, co-coordinators stressed that it was not possible to undertake both roles simultaneously, and that the support provided to the NGO programmes was minimal. Only two of the co-coordinators interviewed had a formal fifty-fifty split and both reported extremely challenging working conditions. One stated, "I was working 18-hour a day, quite literally. I was working from 7am until 12am-1am almost every day for 8 months." The fact that "double hatting is negative and it should be avoided at any cost" (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, p. 61) was reiterated in UNHCR's evaluation of its role as CLA (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017). In addition to ensure decent working conditions and adequate support to the cluster, dedicated positions are also perceived as enhancing the neutrality of the interagency role and avoiding a conflict of interest (NRC, 2013a; GPC, 2022). This is particularly true in instances where the co-coordinating NGO is an implementing partner of the CLA or has implementing partners that are cluster members.

7.2.1.2 Funding for co-coordinator position

In the early days of cluster co-coordination, NGOs taking on this responsibility were utilising programme funds to cover the cost of co-coordinator positions which impacted their operational capacity (Kemp, 2012). However, since 2015, this practice appears to have evolved as none of the co-coordinators interviewed reported that their

organisation was using programme funds to cover their position. The majority of NGOs receive bilateral funding on an annual basis dedicated to cluster co-coordination work, and a few positions are funded through the CBPF. One of the interviewees reported that their position was funded by the humanitarian fund, which was renewed every six months. This funding model was perceived as being uncomfortable, as it did not allow for the pursuit of longer-term objectives. Short-term funding and its discontinuity were identified as a significant barrier for NGOs in providing reliable cluster co-coordination. Having a clear funding strategy included in the NGO country strategy and advocacy from the GPC to encourage funding of co-coordination (NRC, 2022b) would help to avoid gaps and contribute to build the credibility of co-coordination.

In line with the GPC's recommendation (2022) and based on the pool of interviewees, none of the cluster co-coordinator positions are currently funded by UNHCR. This is of critical importance, as it would otherwise create a conflict of interest and a de facto hierarchy between the coordinator and co-coordinator. In the majority of cases, cluster co-coordinators have indicated that their organisation was not an implementing partner of the CLA in their context. This is an important factor to enable effective cluster co-coordination. As a co-coordinator in the position of implementing partner noted, "if a donor is giving you money, you cannot really criticise it." This limited her capacity to provide feedback to the CLA due to potential repercussions.

7.2.1.3 Recruitment

Clusters should be managed by adequately trained, experienced and skilled coordinators (IASC, 2015a; GPC, 2022). However, "recruiting the right people with the right skills at the right time" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 8) remains one of the most significant obstacles to effective cluster co-coordination.

In addition to funding constraints, failed recruitments are another common issue faced by co-coordinating NGOs as very few people have the required profile and skill set. Finding experienced co-coordinators proves to be difficult. Among the current co-coordinators, three quarter of them were new to this role (see chart 4). Of the 21 co-coordinators interviewed, only four had previous experience in this role and only one

had accumulated three experiences.[7] On average, co-coordinators stay 13 months in their role.

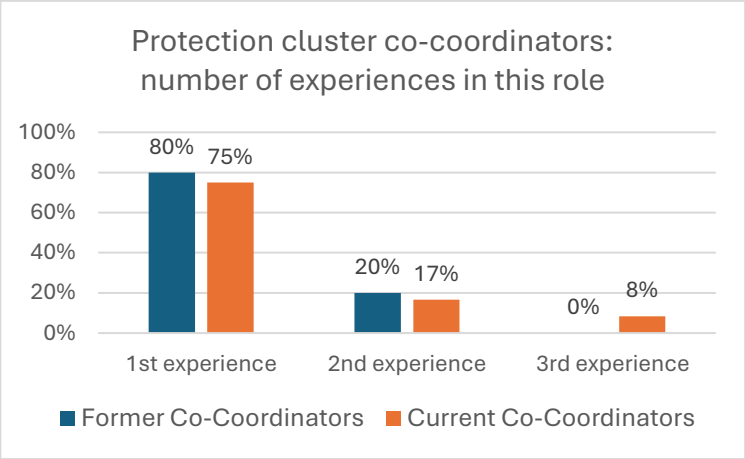

Chart 4 - Protection cluster co-coordinators: number of experiences in this role

The difficulty to both attract and retain talents in co-coordination role is due in part to a lack of career pathways. Despite a perception that cluster co-coordinators use their position to enter the UN system, only two co-coordinators interviewed transitioned to a UN position. In reality, most co-coordinators then move to NGO managerial positions, such as protection specialist, regional adviser or area manager, which are often on a higher grade. Cluster positions, despite being leadership roles with important responsibilities, are often quite junior and their isolation from the co-coordinating NGO make them undervalued. A co-coordinator noted that the grade of the position prevents to attract qualified staff and two others stated that if the position was on a higher grade they would come back to cluster co-coordination.

The GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination (2022) states that the CLA and the co-coordinating NGO can consult each other during the recruitment process. However, it is more common for the CLA to be included in the recruitment of the co-coordinator than vice versa (NRC, 2022b). When the CLA is invited to join the interview panel, the NGO hiring manager should retain the final word on selecting the candidate. As reported by two interviewees, this is not always the case. One potential drawback of including the

[7] One of the co-coordinators interviewed was in a roving position, this role is counted as one experience in chart 4.

coordinator on the interview panel is that it could exacerbate existing power dynamics, reinforcing a perceived hierarchy between the two positions.

While the establishment of a roster was frequently cited in interviews as a potential solution to shorten gaps when a co-coordinator role is vacant, NGOs' global staff have highlighted that maintaining a roster for protection programme staff is already a challenging task. A former co-coordinator noted that maintaining a communication channel with co-coordinators and keeping them informed of cluster co-coordination opportunities significantly contributed to reduce gaps. In 2023, the appointment of a roving cluster co-coordinator shared between the three co-coordinating NGOs helped to temporarily cover gaps in two countries and to set up the co-coordination arrangement in one country. However, in these three countries, recruitment processes were not accelerated as a result of the deployment, and positions were left vacant for several months.

Co-coordinators interviewed had a variety of backgrounds and technical skills. According to NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination, to be effective in this role requires analytical and writing skills, a good sense of strategic planning, the capacity to facilitate meetings and training, and the ability to share information. Co-coordinators should also have "advocacy, communication, representation and negotiation, as well as inter-personal and teamwork skills" (NRC, 2013a, p. 15). Overall, research on coordination (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Featherstone *et al.*, 2017) found that the right profile is a fine balance between technical skills, a good understanding of coordination role, of system processes and of the context, aligned with strong interpersonal skills and interagency experience. While an emphasis is often placed on technical skills, the majority of co-coordinators interviewed placed a strong emphasis on communication and interpersonal skills.

7.2.2 Reporting line and support

7.2.2.1 Reporting line

As the role of protection cluster co-coordinator has become more structured over time, the practice regarding reporting lines has evolved accordingly. In 2013, it is noted in NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination that there are a variety of reporting lines for co-

coordinator roles: “from Country Director to programme/project managers, area manager, or protection and advocacy management” (NRC, 2013a, p. 5). Over the year, reporting to the CD was strengthened with 77% of the former co-coordinators interviewed reporting to the CD and reporting lines to the Head of Programmes (HoP) were justified by the fact that the co-coordinators were double hatting.

In line with the GPC recommendation (2022), there was a consensus among co-coordinators interviewed that the reporting line should be with the CD. This ensures a separation from programmes and avoids a conflict of interests. In addition, as coordinators report to UNHCR Representative or Deputy, balancing the seniority of the line manager on the UN side shows the consideration given to the position and allows to create a platform for regular engagement. Having regular meetings between the managers allows the CD to steer the conversation around MoU arrangement and to ensure accountability through regular progress review meetings. This channel of communication is very important as it provides an opportunity to raise issues related to the ways of working. These issues are much harder to solve without this preexisting relationship between the managers. As CDs are connected to the political and strategic work, and often have a seat at the HCT, they both have a better understanding of the role and a greater ability to use information shared by the co-coordinator than the HoP.

However, despite both DRC and NRC global protection staff mentioning that they advocate for the reporting line to be at the CD level, this good practice appears to be declining. Currently, only 55 % of the co-coordinators are reporting to the CD, a 22 percentage point decrease compared to former co-coordinators (see chart 5).

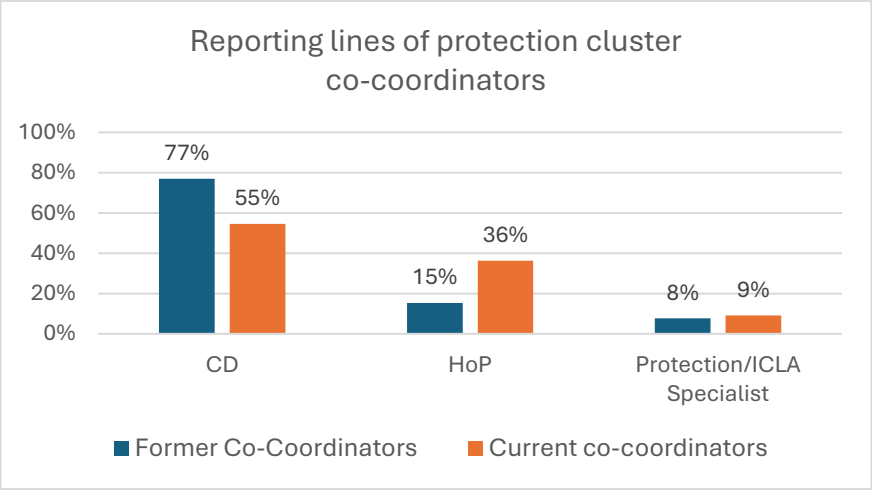

Chart 5 - Reporting lines of protection cluster co-coordinators

7.2.2.2 Support received from the co-coordinating NGO

As summarised in figure 5 below, co-coordinators receive support from different parts of their organisation. At the country level, most co-coordinators receive strategic advice and should as well receive political support when reporting to the NGO Director. Overall, the co-coordinator position seems to remain quite isolated with two co-coordinators reporting that their line managers have little oversight on what they are doing. While reporting to the CD is a good practice, the amount of support provided still varies from one context to another. The investment of the line manager appears to be correlated with the level of understanding of the role. Organisations with less co-coordinators seem to have a more hands off approach to line management and CDs who do not have a political vision for the role also tend to be more distant and, according to an interviewee, "do not have a lot of expectations". A HoP interviewed reported fulfilling minimal supervision functions, mainly administrative tasks. Furthermore, they stated that they would deprioritise the co-coordinator compared to other programme staff if they had to.

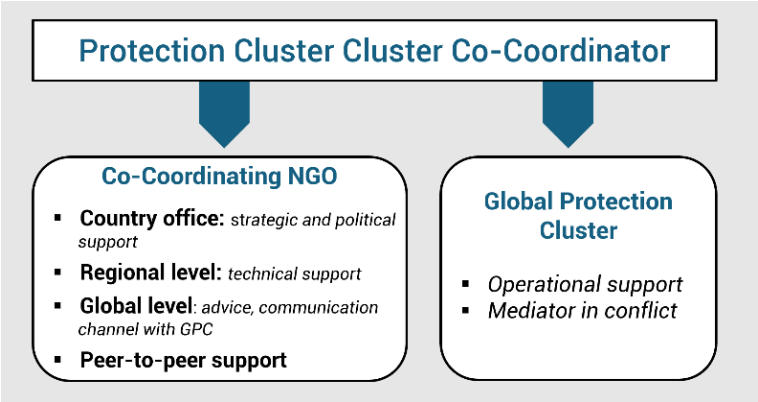

Figure 5 - Support available to protection cluster co-coordinators

All co-coordinators report that they do not receive technical support from their line manager, and some have said that they would like to be supervised by someone with more coordination experience. Technical support is often provided by regional advisers. One of the delegating NGOs has a formal technical line at the regional level whereas this line appears to be less formal for the two other NGOs, resulting in a lower level of support. Regional advisers serve as a sounding board, they review and provide input on documents. They frequently act as intermediaries, connecting co-coordinators to

colleagues with experience in specific domains or to other co-coordinators grappling with similar technical questions.

The role of NGOs' global protection staff is of an advisory nature. The three delegating NGOs have connections with the GPC, they all sit for instance on the GPC SAG. Hence, they can use bilateral informal channels to escalate issues that have not been resolved at country level. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that issues should be primarily resolved at the country level between line managers, with the use of informal bilateral channels at the global level regarded as a last resort.

Peer-to-peer support is of significant importance, as evidenced by NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination, which states that "exchange with other co-coordinators is valuable" (NRC, 2013b, p. 6). The development of Skype groups and Microsoft Teams channels has facilitated greater connectivity among current co-coordinators. However, these groups have not been entirely effective, as they tend to be relatively inactive and serve primarily as a platform for requesting resources. Interviewees indicated that it was beneficial to be connected with either a more experienced co-coordinator or with another co-coordinator working on the same technical issue, for example exchanging tools and ideas when setting up a protection monitoring system. Co-coordinators reported that they had established connections with their peers through either their regional adviser or at the GPC annual face-to-face conference.

Finally, one key support function carried out by the delegating NGO is the onboarding of incoming co-coordinators. Interviewees indicated that this type of orientation is of significant importance, especially as assignments are short and co-coordinators are often inexperienced. However, despite the increased frequency of inductions, it is concerning to note that only half of the current co-coordinators (56%) have received one (see chart 6 below). While the GPC is delivering a Specialisation Programme on Protection Coordination in partnership with the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law, there is still a need at a minimum for a dedicated onboarding for co-

coordinators provided by the co-coordinating NGO as the GPC Programme often does not align with the start of a new position.

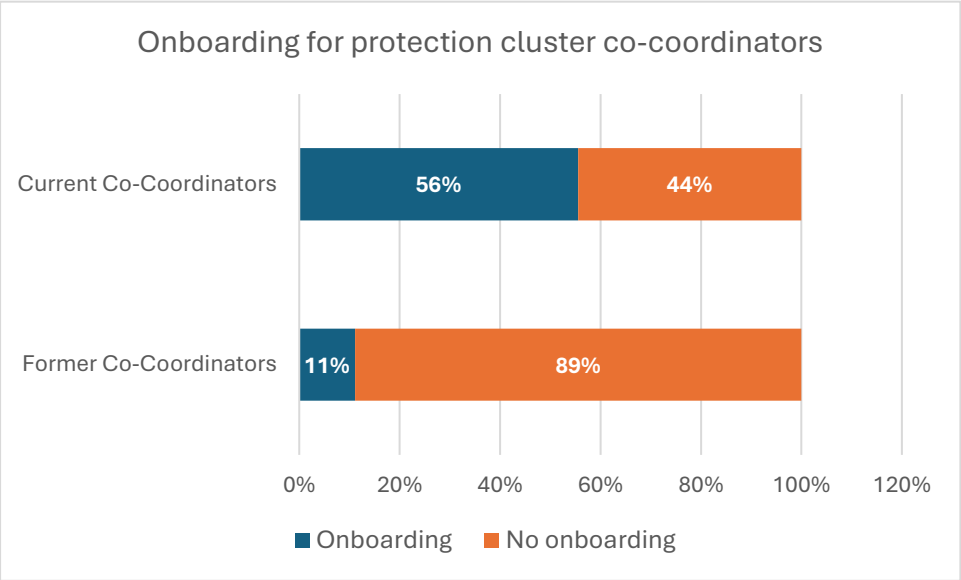

Chart 6 - Onboarding for protection cluster co-coordinators

Co-coordinators who did not receive an onboarding stated that they learned by doing with whatever resources were available to them. Several said they were not introduced to the coordination team nor to UNHCR protection team or OCHA. One stated: "What I have missed is to understand what [my organisation] was expecting from this position, what they would like to gain out of it to guide my investment in this role." According to the GPC (2022), handover notes should be mandatory. Co-coordinators who did receive one from their predecessor stressed that it was a tremendous support that they used continuously throughout their time as co-coordinator.

7.2.2.3 Support from Global Protection Cluster

Previously, the level of support provided by the GPC was limited. In 2013, the NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination (2013b) revealed that half of the co-coordinators had not had any contact with the GPC in the last year. Similarly, former co-coordinators reported minimal contact with the GPC and indicated that the GPC lacked the capacity to respond to their needs. Nevertheless, support improved over time. UNHCR's evaluation of its role as CLA (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017) noted that an increase in funding to the GPC allowed them to strengthen their support capacity. This was corroborated by the current co-coordinators, who have received support from the GPC on different occasions. For

instance, technical support on Protection Analysis Updates (PAUs) and cluster strategy was provided and support missions were conducted during HRP season. Additionally, a co-coordinator mentioned that an in-person mission was conducted to address the dysfunction of the cluster.

However, several co-coordinators have raised a number of barriers in accessing support from the GPC. The lack of clarity regarding whom to contact and the type of technical support that could be provided were highlighted. There is a general perception that contacting the GPC, even to request technical support, might result in cumbersome procedures or be negatively perceived by the coordinator.

Finally, the GPC can act as a mediator in a conflict. This role is only activated at the request of the CD and UNHCR Representative when a conflict cannot be resolved at the country level and all other avenues have been exhausted. In practice, this mechanism is rarely triggered, and the GPC reported that it was formally activated only once. However, it is more common for the GPC to assume this mediation role in an informal manner.

7.2.3 Roles and responsibilities

7.2.3.1 Cluster Strategy

Being able to clearly define roles and responsibilities first requires to be clear on the goals and priorities of the collaboration. In the case of the protection cluster, strategic goals should be defined in the protection cluster strategy and the workplan should build upon the strategy to delineate concrete activities that will be implemented to achieve these objectives.

However, the evaluation of UNHCR's performance as CLA found that "Where the clusters were the weakest was in determining strategic priorities [...]. Very few UNHCR-led clusters had strategies or work plans in place, which negatively impacted on the ability of the cluster to prioritise its activities and monitor its work" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 66). This was confirmed by the recent IASC Protection Policy Review which stated that "as the lead of the protection cluster, UNHCR has struggled to provide overarching strategic leadership [...]. Overall, the protection cluster has been drawn in many directions and lacks strategic focus" (Cocking *et al.*, 2022, p. 50). The protection

cluster strategy should be aligned on the country-level strategic objectives laid out in the HRP. However, the lack of clarity surrounding the scope of protection as a sector and the means of achieving protection outcomes has resulted in the HCT protection strategy often being left to the protection cluster to implement. In other instances, an important overlap between the HCT protection strategy and the protection cluster strategy is noted.

Overall, due to structural challenges, there is a significant degree of confusion regarding the strategic direction that the protection cluster should pursue. This, in turn, impairs the ability of the coordinators to set a clear direction for their work. Co-coordinators interviewed confirmed that very few clusters had a strategy. One stated, “The protection cluster does not have its own Protection strategy, which often translated into scattered, not-organic, ad hoc interventions.” Another noted that when there is one, “it is so generic that it could be applied to any context.” Nevertheless, when a cluster strategy is drafted co-coordinators have reported having a high level of influence over it (Luff, 2015).

7.2.3.2 Workplan and division of tasks

Using a workplan is recommended to ensure a fair distribution of the workload, to hold both the cluster coordinator and co-coordinator accountable, and to monitor progress. It is a means to discuss priorities, divide tasks based on technical skills, personal strengths and interests, and ensure the administrative workload linked to information sharing, organising and facilitating meetings and providing inputs to OCHA-led processes is equally shared. This good practice is reflected in the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination (2022).

More importantly, in an inter-agency setting, a clear division of tasks is necessary to increase efficiency and avoid conflicts. Indeed, having a clear overview of whom is leading on which task allows faster decision-making and avoids discussions on who should do the work. As a workplan creates predictability, it is a means to increase trust in the collaboration (Knox-Clarke, 2013). In addition, it is less likely that cluster co-coordination will achieve specific strategic objectives if co-coordinators do not build time for these activities in their workplan. As an annex to the MoU, the workplan is an

opportunity for the co-coordinator to reach a common understanding on the nature of the role.

However, in practice, only half of the current co-coordinators interviewed have a workplan, and only 18% are in fact using it (see chart 7 below). The practice over the use of a workplan seems stable overtime: 54% of clusters currently have one against 44% in the past, but this does not translate into a more frequent use (18% against 22% in the past). This is corroborated by UNHCR's evaluation of its performance as CLA, which reported that "key issues that have affected progress in the collaboration with co-coordinators is a lack of clarity about the division of responsibilities between the lead and co-lead" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 66).

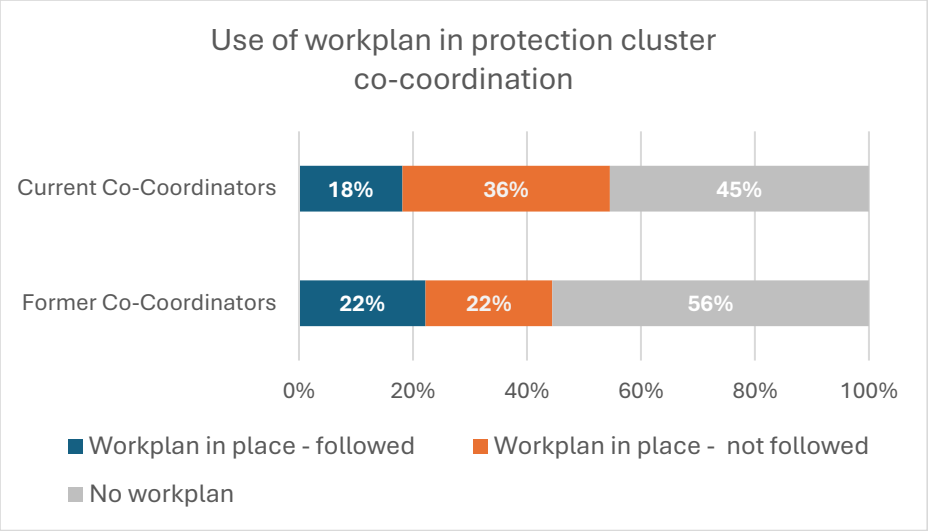

Chart 7 - Use of workplan in protection cluster co-coordination

In the majority of clusters, the division of tasks is done on an ad hoc basis, either during regular meetings between the coordinators or organically based on personality and expertise. Some co-coordinators interviewed have expressed some frustration over the lack of a clear process to divide the tasks, which they perceive as a limitation in their ability to organise their schedule and oversee the distribution of workload. In one case, the absence of a clear division of labour was used to sideline the co-coordinator who was only delegated tasks if the coordinator was overburdened. This type of functioning is described in the evaluation of UNICEF as CLA as a suboptimal form of co-coordination (UNICEF, 2022b). As evidenced by Knox-Clarke and Campbell (2015), the practice of sharply delineating responsibilities is not the optimal approach to cluster work either. In one cluster, the co-coordinator reported working in isolation on three specific areas. On

the contrary, Knox-Clarke and Campbell's study (2015) found that clusters where there was clarity on who leads which activity while coordinators shared information, supported each other, and worked jointly were perceived as performing well.

The absence of a template has been identified by interviewees as a barrier to the utilisation of workplans. It was also frequently observed by co-coordinators that the workplan required flexibility, given that the timeline of the coordinators often changed as the response evolved. One good example was reported where the workplan was used by the NGO Director, through quarterly review meetings with the UNHCR Representative, to show that the coordinator was not doing his part. As a result, the CLA provided additional human resources to support the coordinator.

In conclusion, the absence of a strategy and workplan can result in the cluster failing to fulfil the aspirations of its members (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017) and impair the capacity of the co-coordinator to deliver on the value added by co-coordination.

7.2.4 Administration: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

Paying attention to the administrative dimension of collaboration appears to be key to set up the role adequately, recruit a co-coordinator with the right profile and equip the co-coordinator with the right level of support. These main enablers and blockers are summarised in the table 3 below.

Enablers	Blockers
Administration	
Setup of the role: - Fully dedicated position - Reporting line to NGO Director - Position not funded by the CLA - Co-coordinating NGO is not an implementing partner of the CLA	Setup of the role: - Part-time position (double-hatting) - Reporting to Head of Programmes or to protection programme staff - Position funded by the CLA - Co-coordinating NGO is an implementing partner of the CLA

Strategic recruitment: - Experience in interagency role, strong understanding of the cluster system - Co-coordinator position filled consistently	Non-strategic recruitment: - Lack of experience in coordination - Gaps and high turnover
Vision for the role: - Onboarding - Clear objectives included in workplan - Deliverables and indicators to assess progress	Lack of objectives for the role: - No onboarding - No workplan/workplan not followed - Lack of benchmark to assess co-coordinator's performance and progress
Support from parent NGO: - Co-coordinator introduced to relevant coordination bodies (UNHCR, OCHA) - Regular progress meetings with manager - Regular progress meetings between CLA and NGO coordinators' managers - Access to technical line with coordination expertise	Lack of support from parent NGO: - No introduction of the co-coordinator to relevant coordination bodies (UNHCR, OCHA) - Minimal supervision - No meetings between CLA and NGO coordinator's managers - Limited technical support, learning by doing
Clear ways of working: - Agreement on division of tasks	Inappropriate ways of working: - Unclarity on roles and responsibilities - Work in silo

Table 3 - Administration: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

7.3 Organisational autonomy dimension

A fundamental aspect of collaboration highlighted by Thomson and Perry is the dual identity of the partners which creates an "intrinsic tension between self-interest [...] and collective interest" (2006, p. 26). The authors argue that maintaining "a distinct identity and organisational authority separate from (though simultaneously with) the collaborative identity" (2006, p. 26) is a source of frustration in the collaboration, but also a powerful motivation to engage as it can bring an added value to the participants' own organisational goals. This is a fine balance which, according to collaboration theories, is rarely found unless stakes are high, and organisations have no alternative but to collaborate to achieve their goals. This section therefore examines the points of tension between the collective and individual interests of the CLA and the co-coordinating NGO in their relationship with the cluster, and the impact it has on the collaboration.

7.3.1 Neutrality of the CLA in protection cluster coordination

The literature on humanitarian coordination emphasises the necessity for the CLA to be neutral with regard to the cluster (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Featherstone *et al.*, 2017; Cocking *et al.*, 2022; UNICEF, 2022b). NRC's Manual on Co-Coordination for instance recommends to mention in the MoU that both the CLA and the co-coordinator "commit to neutrally representing the Cluster and not their parent organisation" (NRC, 2013b, p. 14). However, the GPC Guidance Note on PC Co-Coordination (2022) introduced an important nuance in this regard, indicating that "The coordinator and co-coordinator commit to represent the interests and positions of the Cluster [...], including but not limited to that of their parent agency/organisation" (2022, p. 8). This variation in the language could be seen as a way to legitimise the CLA's ability to pursue its own interests through the cluster. However, it also captures the practical reality of the cluster: both coordinating organisations have a self-interest in cluster coordination, and this self-interest needs to be adequately understood and balanced in order for the collaboration to function.

7.3.1.1 Lack of neutrality and consequences

Recent reviews have highlighted a strong perception of a lack of neutrality from the CLA (Niland *et al.*, 2015; Featherstone *et al.*, 2017; Cocking *et al.*, 2022). UNHCR's evaluation of its role as CLA (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017) showed that the neutrality of the coordinator is unequally understood by the CLA, resulting across countries in different levels of independence which directly impact the functioning of the cluster. In the highest level of independence, the CLA is "indifferent" resulting in a lack of strategic support at HC/HCT level. In an optimal form of "collaboration", the line between the cluster and the CLA's interests is clear, and the cluster receives backing and strategic support from UNHCR. When this line is unclear, this can lead to a situation of "co-option" where the cluster is subordinated to reflect UNHCR's country priorities (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Featherstone *et al.*, 2017). This results in a deterioration of trust with the cluster membership and therefore less active engagement.

This unclarity in the relationship between the cluster and UNHCR has led to micromanagement of the cluster coordinator by the CLA, to incoherent situations such as "the UNHCR Representative insist[ing] on signing off products from cluster discussions", or to "the protection cluster [being] said to have 'vetted' all advocacy positions of its members" (Cocking *et al.*, 2022, p. 46). In addition, informants have reported that their counterpart was often dragged into UNHCR internal processes and asked to perform tasks that are not directly linked to cluster work, such as writing UNHCR's protection strategy.

Interviewees have reported situations where the CLA is excessively trying to pursue its self-interest through the cluster. This was the case when, for instance, the budget in the HRP was set by UNHCR head of protection programmes or when UNHCR language and modality had to be included in the cluster strategy. Several interviewees also mentioned that language in advocacy messages was tuned down to preserve the relationship with the host government, and UNHCR was interfering and vetting key messages shared with donors. In addition, as highlighted by the IASC Protection Policy Review, the protection "analysis is often focused on the institutional priorities of UNHCR [...] rather than driven by a detailed analysis of risks" (Cocking *et al.*, 2022, p. 59).

The evaluation of UNHCR's role as CLA also flagged that "UNHCR's advocacy positions have been extended to the cluster despite being contrary to the views of the membership" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 54). This was confirmed by several interviewees. In one country, four co-coordinators who held the position between 2013 and 2020 mentioned that UNHCR consistently tried to impose its views on durable solutions and returns on the cluster. In other contexts, operational positions such as the use of armed escorts were enforced through the cluster.

7.3.1.2 Good practices to enhance the neutrality of the CLA

Good practices enhancing the independence of the coordinator vis-à-vis the CLA have been identified, such as avoiding double-hatting, having a funding stream separate from the CLA activity to cover the coordinator position, and ensuring that a programme staff from the CLA represents its positions in cluster meetings (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015). In addition, having a co-coordinator is also perceived as a means of counterbalancing the CLA perspective in cluster coordination (Kemp, 2012; Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Luff, 2015).

The co-coordinators interviewed have indeed mentioned different strategies to reinforce the independence of the cluster vis-à-vis the CLA. They mentioned "trying to hold UNHCR accountable for representing not just UNHCR's position in the HCT, but also the cluster members' position." A co-coordinator requested the support of the GPC and succeeded in making both the cluster strategy and the PAU more balanced and less focused on UNHCR's priorities. In order to counter a strong focus on UNHCR's priorities, a co-coordinator recommended in her handover to "make strong connections with partners who have good linkages on the ground. [...] They will give you a much better sense of priorities and approaches than [what] you'll get from UNHCR." When the coordinator was asked to support the CLA on tasks not related to coordination, a co-coordinator said he was playing the role of a mediator: "I really feel that we manage to push back a lot of times. Sometimes I have to come on board and it is a strategy between the coordinator and me. [...]. I explain the role of the coordinator and say what we are able to do and what the protection cluster will not do because it is not part of our mandate."

Counterbalancing sensitive operational issues, such as UNHCR returning people prematurely from a Protection of Civilians site or trying to enforce its position regarding a pause of operations, proves to be more delicate. It requires the co-coordinator to mobilise other actors and leverage their support in order to have enough political pressure to hold the CLA accountable. A co-coordinator recommended in her handover note “to find other partners who share the same concern and then convene a meeting to discuss it – this way the issue comes forward without you pushing it alone.” Several co-coordinators mentioned reaching out to their CD, the NGO community, donors, OCHA or the NGO forum to avoid a backlash and “mobilise power against [UNHCR] to stop them or at least reach a middle ground.” A co-coordinator also ensured that the opinion of the cluster membership was clearly communicated to the coordinator, this is particularly important in cases where the coordinator took decisions and made public statements that were at odds with the cluster membership's opinion.

7.3.1.3 Lack of neutrality of the CLA regarding funding

Defining a funding strategy for the sectors through the HRP and preparing pooled fund allocations has become an important part of the role of the clusters. As part of the HRP, clusters set the strategy for the response and identify specific priorities or projects for funding which should, at least in principle, guide how donors will fund the sector. Clusters are also in charge to prioritise projects and decide which one will be funded through pooled fund mechanisms (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015).

There is a persistent perception among cluster partners that, across sectors, CLAs lack neutrality with regard to their self-interest to access funding through the cluster (UNICEF, 2022b). The Evaluation of UNICEF as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency clearly highlighted this conflict of interest, questioning whether the CLA is “primarily concerned about its own funding or whether it works to mobilise resources for the collective” (UNICEF, 2022a, p. 7). As the CLA is both in a position to decide on the funding and to receive it, there is a clear self-interest for CLAs to push for their own programmes to be prioritised through the cluster. As a global staff from a co-coordinating NGO observed, in addition to determining the recipients of the pooled fund allocation, the CLA's status

also affords them the opportunity to attend every donor meeting, thereby enabling them to shape the discourse surrounding the prioritisation of funding in the sector.

Several co-coordinators interviewed pointed out that pooled fund allocations are a significant source of contention. They reported that the CLA employed unfair strategies in scoring proposals and in their applications for pooled fund allocations. For instance, a co-coordinator stated that both "UNHCR and UNICEF used to ask for the entire pot of pooled funding". As often, actors would receive 75% of their ask, the proportion of the funding they received was then higher than the one received by other actors. In the same cluster, "Child Protection AoR representatives were [also] deliberately skewing the numbers. They were throwing their scoring to advantage and disadvantage different proposals". By scoring certain proposals very low and others very high, this would advantage their proposals when taking the average of the composite score of the scoring group. These strategies were reported in the same cluster overtime. In addition, pooled fund "allocations were one of the major dividers within the partners and with the AoRs, because they felt there are closed meetings that are happening [to decide which needs and locations to prioritise] and the decisions are skewed towards UNHCR strongholds." Overall, there was a perception of a lack of openness on the criteria for both the allocation of funds and the prioritisation of HRP projects.

In order to balance the CLA's self-interest in accessing funding through the cluster, co-coordinators indicated to pay particular attention to how scorings are done during pooled fund allocations. They also advocate for transparent criteria when it comes to the prioritisation of needs and locations. They push for pooled funding to be allocated to NGOs, for instance by encouraging them to apply directly rather than being included as sub-grantees in UN proposals.

Although these strategies have not been consistently applied by all co-coordinators, they seem to confirm Luff's assumption that transparency is improved and funding allocations are more likely to be based on need when there is an NGO co-lead (Luff, 2015).

7.3.2 Neutrality of the co-coordinating NGO

As co-coordinators have a dual identity, their role cannot be completely neutral. The issue of their neutrality is not discussed as a point of contention in the literature reviewed, and co-coordinating NGOs continue to emphasise their neutrality. However, it is interesting to note that views varied on the purpose of investing in this position, the level of independence it should have, and the extent to which it should benefit the co-coordinating NGO.

7.3.2.1 Mitigating the lack of neutrality in protection cluster co-coordination

The interviews showed that most co-coordinators understood the inherent challenges associated with balancing the duality of their role, which entailed representing both their own organisation and the other NGOs in the cluster. They highlighted the importance of not emphasising their own NGO identity, in order to avoid irritating the CLA. A co-coordinator in her handover noted, “UNHCR will notice every time you say you’re “from” [your organisation]. YOU are a representative of the cluster and have NO AFFILIATION with [your organisation]. This is a sore spot for UNHCR and it’s good for them to know that YOU know you are impartial (even though it’s absolutely not reciprocated).” Conversely, by not emphasising their identity, co-coordinators can gain the trust of other NGOs in their ability to act as an honest broker. Several co-coordinators reported being encouraged by their line manager in this sense: “I was told to make sure [my NGO]’s view was reflected and to make sure NGOs had a voice.” In the view of a manager, it was very important that co-coordinators are “managed in a way to make sure that they are not seen, or that the person doesn't think that they are working for [my organisation]” with the idea that if they are too involved in the work of their organisation, their neutrality would be compromised.

Mitigation measures to preserve the neutrality of the role are also often in place. The proportion of co-coordinators double-hatting has clearly decreased over time. Currently, 91% of the co-coordinators interviewed are fully dedicated to the cluster, against 69% (+22%) among former co-coordinators. To avoid a conflict of interest, 55% of the current co-coordinators also report to the NGO Director. Furthermore, it is understood that technical protection staff from the co-coordinating NGO must attend

cluster meetings to preserve the neutrality of the co-coordinator's role. In the majority of cases, this appears to be implemented.

7.3.2.2 Co-coordination as a strategic outcome

Often, the co-coordinator's position is mainly seen as a means to improve the protection environment and the functioning of the coordination system. For instance, to have a better protection mainstreaming system or a better inclusion of the centrality of protection in the response. A co-coordinator, trying to define the approach of her organisation, stated: "The CD was really trying to separate cluster and programme. I think her point was, this is a big protection crisis, we need to make sure that the key messages in terms of big advocacy on human rights violations are going to reach the right people in the right forum." When the NGO Director has this perspective, the co-coordinating NGO is pursuing a collective protection outcome, with a wider strategic impact, rather than attempting to leverage the co-coordination for the benefit of their organisation.

In accordance with the GPC recommendation (2022), in contexts where the NGO Director is an elected member of the HCT, co-coordinators have reported briefing their Director ahead of meetings. This is regarded as a strategic approach to utilising the co-coordinator position. The HCT indeed constitutes a highly strategic entry point to ensure the consideration of NGO perspectives in decision-making and policy at country level. Co-coordinators have reported a high correlation between the understanding of the cluster system, the political and strategic ambitions of their line manager, and how their organisation invests and supports their role. "It wasn't very strategic until the new CD arrived." Another co-coordinator said, "The CD is very strategic. He always goes to the HCT and asks me for strategic points. He knows what we, as the protection cluster, have been working on or the fights we are having. He really understands what is going on and he uses it". Nevertheless, in contrast to UNHCR which has a permanent seat at the HCT, NGO directors only attend the HCT when they are the elected representative of the NGO community. In 2023, NRC held a seat at the HCT in four countries (44%) out of the nine where they held the co-coordinator position, which means this synergy cannot always be leveraged. This is nonetheless an important tool for co-coordinating NGOs to

maintain protection on the agenda as, according to GPC data, only half of the protection clusters were regularly briefing the HCT on protection issues in 2020 (GPC, 2020).

At the other end of the spectrum, a few co-coordinators have also encountered a situation in which their NGOs have not defined any strategic goals for this position. “Literally, if I had stayed at home not doing anything and UNHCR had told no one, no one would have asked what I was doing.” One particular organisation was reported to have minimal connections with their co-coordinators. In a few other instances, the NGOs did not have a strategy when the co-coordinators took up their positions. They were either approached by UNHCR even though they “were not looking into coordination and weren’t planning to add this to [their] portfolio”, or they “just applied because no one else did [but] no one really understood why we were applying.” In both cases, the role was not strategically leveraged by the co-coordinating NGO.

7.3.2.3 Benefits for the programmes of the co-coordinating NGOs

None of the co-coordinators reported being under any pressure to excessively use their position to foster their parent NGO’s self-interests in relation with their programmes. When there was a perception that the role could benefit the co-coordinating NGO’s programmes, this advantage was mainly related to a privileged access to information. Because co-coordinators are in close contact with donors, they have this perspective on what donors are looking for: “I always bring those lines to my organisations. Being like, this is not interesting to [this donor] anymore, or these are the needs in this territory and I know some donors are interested.” Co-coordinators also have access to information on the situation in areas covered by the cluster and can provide situation analyses that are useful for their organisations’ programmes. However, this use was reported as being fair and was unequally exploited. Co-coordinators who worked with different co-coordinating NGOs, or with the same NGO in different contexts, report varying practices: “[My organisation] is using the potential of the cluster co-coordinator role too little. [It] needs to be very strategic. I have been in coordination roles with the UN and other INGOs, and where I was least used by the host agency is actually [with my current organisation].”

While HRPs are not particularly seen as useful for programme design, the sector objectives are nonetheless better recognised by donors and can help access funding (NRC, 2013a). Hence, there is a stake for co-coordinating NGOs to influence the HRP and create synergies between their programmes and sector priorities. Interviews clearly showed that through the co-coordinator position co-coordinating NGOs can contribute to the orientation of strategic documents both for the benefit of their organisation and of other NGOs. Three of the current co-coordinators interviewed reported for instance being the lead penholder for the HRP: "I am trying to include priorities from [my organisation] and other INGOS through the SAG in the HRP. I am solo leading on the HRP [...] so I have a huge influence on this." A co-coordinator also said their director was reaching out to ensure the priorities of their organisation were considered, and another one said: "Is [my NGO] trying to leverage the position? Yes, absolutely. For me it was clear that the protection framework of [my organisation] was reflected in the HRP." Additionally, NRC conducted an analysis of the HRPs released in 2022 and 2023 which revealed that the protection priorities of their organisation were more reflected in the HRP of the countries where they co-lead the protection cluster (see chart 8).

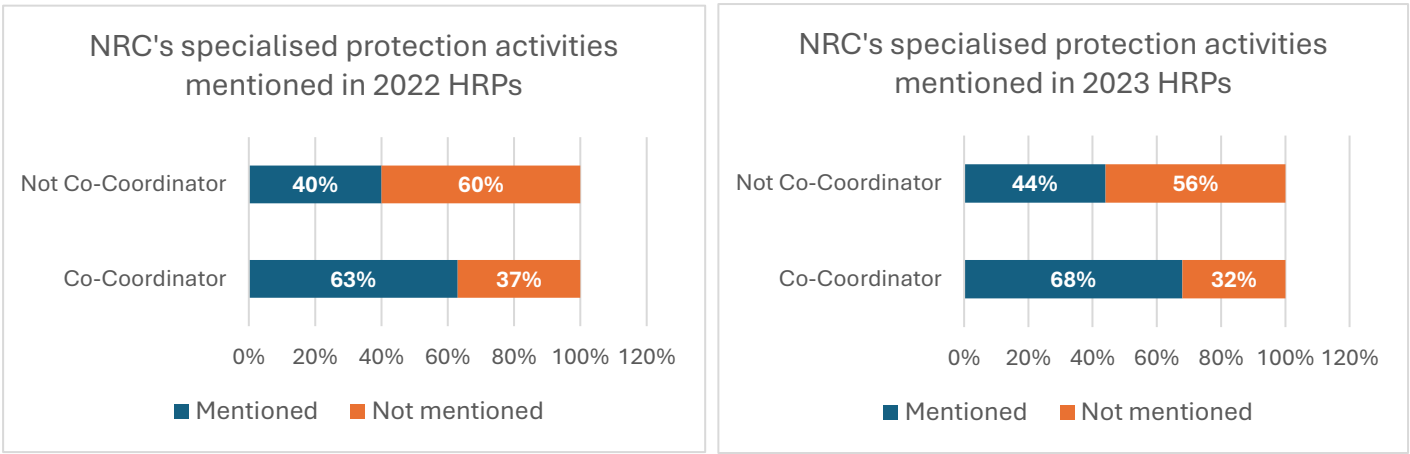

Chart 8 - NRC's specialised protection activities mentioned in 2022 and 2023 HRPs, adapted from NRC (2022a, 2023a)

Nevertheless, the intentionality demonstrated by co-coordinators in pursuing the interests of their organisation in influencing HRPs needs to be considered with a certain degree of nuance. In several instances, the protection cluster co-coordinators were not aware of the type of protection programmes their organisation were implementing. While a roving co-coordinator reported that her organisation "wanted to see different things in the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO)/HRP and influence them." She

nonetheless thought “it [was] more an HQ perspective. When I was in country, I wouldn’t actually experience much pressure from the NGO whatsoever, because that relationship between the co-coordinator and the NGO is not always as strong.” At global level, perspectives were mixed regarding this push to be more intentional with regards to influencing HRPs: “We would start to get nervous if we see NGOs instrumentalising their role as cluster co-coordinator too much, but we also want NGOs to engage in cluster co-coordination [and see a benefit].”

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that the co-coordinators are in a position of power to influence the direction of strategic documents, both for the benefit of their own organisation and for other NGOs. While some organisations expressed an interest in influencing strategic documents, the extent to which this is applied in practice varies considerably depending on the context.

7.3.2.4 Benefits in terms of funding

Co-coordinating NGOs are cognisant that there could be a conflict of interest regarding CBPF allocations as the co-coordinator is also in a position to determine areas and activities to be prioritised and to evaluate proposals. However, most co-coordinators note a willingness to mitigate it.

Interestingly, none of NRC’s co-coordinators who participated in NRC’s Manual on Co-Coordination “mentioned handling pooled funding applications from NRC as causing a conflict of interest, indicating that clusters have procedures to prevent this” (NRC, 2013a, p. 9). A number of good practices are indeed well established, for instance none of the co-coordinators reported being involved in drafting their organisations’ proposals. Co-coordinators pay a particular attention to the process of scoring to keep it as neutral as possible. A co-coordinator reported that to make clear to the cluster that she is not promoting her organisation, someone from UNHCR was scoring her organisation during CBPF and HRP prioritisation, and she added her opinions after they had read their scores. In her experience, this led to a very transparent process where she was then the lead scorer on UNHCR’s proposal. Co-coordinators also advocate to report to the NGO Director rather than to the Head of Programmes to avoid pressure around CBPF allocations. A HoP interviewed confirmed the necessity to have this

separation by stating that “there are expectations that if we were to apply [for a pooled fund allocation], we would get this funding.”

Only one co-coordinator interviewed said the process was not completely neutral on the part of the co-coordinating NGO. He indicated trying to orient the prioritisation to areas where its organisation was intervening, by asking the organisation’s team “to collect information on specific areas and send evidence”. This benefited the organisation who was then a step ahead to prepare upcoming proposals.

When asked if there was a financial interest for their organisation to hold the co-coordinator position, respondents said there was no direct interest. However, they saw a “collateral benefit” linked with the visibility provided by the position: “Without having to be dramatically explicit and heavy, obviously, you get that visibility. It's an NRC staff who is there, or DRC staff or an IRC staff or whoever”, said a GPC staff member. This visibility contributes to build the NGO’s reputation as a protection actor which creates, in turn, funding opportunities. Several examples were provided, where the co-coordinating NGO was approached by donors due to this visibility. For instance, a co-coordinator said that after highlighting priorities around Housing Land and Property with a donor, her organisation was approached to look at their programming in this area. Another stated: “[my organisation] was chosen to implement an inter-agency area-based programme that was endorsed by the HC because of me”. In another context, the co-coordinator helped to provide extensive feedback on a donor’s monitoring and evaluation framework for protection mainstreaming. In developing a proposal for this donor, he suggested that his organisation would include internal training on protection mainstreaming for their staff across sectors. As a result, the donor asked them to conduct training not only for their staff, but across all clusters, which significantly increased their protection budget. A co-coordinator concluded: “No matter how much you split it, and you mitigate it, that agency is going to benefit from doing cluster coordination.”

7.3.2.5 Disconnect between co-coordinators and their parent NGO

This perception of a need for a high degree of neutrality on the part of the NGO has also resulted in many instances in a disconnect between the co-coordinator and their parent

NGO. A co-coordinator reported that she expressed interest to support her NGO's strategy but was only "called to do a presentation during their strategy workshop as if she was an external agent". Another shared information on the contingency planning the cluster was drafting but her organisation nonetheless did not involve her and drafted a contingency plan that did not align with the cluster one. In these two contexts, being perceived as an outsider in their own organisation had negatively impacted their ability to perform their role. The first one was unclear about the type of protection activities her organisation was conducting, as a result she could not represent the interests of her own organisation to the same extent as she would with other organisations. The other one had difficulties to obtain information from the programme team: "One of the area managers was even like: "who are you? You are from UNHCR's side, why do you want information from us?" Ironically, a co-coordinator reported that "In defining protection strategies, all other agencies consult the cluster and look at the direction donors are taking except [my organisation]."

There appears to be a lack of understanding on the part of the co-coordinating NGOs of the adverse effect of a complete segregation between the co-coordinator and its parent organisation. Indeed, having a privileged access to a parent NGO gives access to information which is greatly valued in the collaboration and contributes to develop the credibility of the co-coordinator as a worthy partner. Some co-coordinators highlighted that their link with their organisation was critical "to bring a bit of reality check [and] put on the table actual practice from the ground". A co-coordinator who holds a position shared between two NGOs placed significant emphasis on the value of having access to two parent NGOs, stating, "it is a good thing that we are sharing this leadership. I have information from all the protection teams from NGO 1 and NGO 2 and it is my card to play. Because it used to be UNHCR sharing what UNHCR officers give to them. Right now, [both the coordinator and I] have really good information from territories." Having two organisations backing her and being a valuable source of information was indeed putting her on a more equal footing in the collaboration.

7.3.3 Organisational autonomy: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

In conclusion, the high political and financial stakes involved in cluster coordination make it challenging for the CLA to maintain an adequate level of neutrality in its role. A number of mitigation measures have been implemented, yet they do not appear to offset the lack of neutrality on the part of the CLA. In contrast, co-coordinating NGOs continue to place a strong emphasis on the neutrality of the co-coordinator's role, and mitigations measures are frequently implemented to maintain a high degree of independence with regard to programmes and CBPF. The role is frequently perceived as contributing to a collective strategic interest rather than directly benefiting the organisation. Although co-coordinators are not explicitly pursuing the interests of their organisation, the co-coordinator position may still benefit the NGO's programmes due to the visibility, access to funding opportunities, information and influence over strategic priorities of the cluster it confers. However, this potential is not consistently understood or leveraged across contexts.

The main enablers and blockers to cluster co-coordination in relation to the self-interests of the two partners engaged in the collaboration are presented in the table 4 below.

Enablers	Blockers
Organisational autonomy	
Balanced neutrality: - Separation with progamme to enhance capacity to play an honest broker role	Lack of neutrality: - Involvement in programmes impacting the capacity to play an honest broker role
Powerful counterpart - Ability to request transparency and accountability when CLA's self-interests are excessively pursued	Weak counterpart: - Compliance when confronted with lack of transparency or accountability in cluster governance
Vision for the role: - Understanding of the value of the role by line management	Lack of objectives for the role: - Lack of understanding of the value of the role by line management

Support from parent NGO: - Understanding of the value of the role within parent co-coordinating NGO Team	Lack of support from parent NGO: - Lack of understanding of the role within parent co-coordinating NGO Team

Table 4 - Organisational autonomy: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

7.4 Mutuality dimension

As outlined by Thomson and Perry (2006), a collaboration should be a mutually beneficial relationship based on complementarity and interdependence in order to function well. Knox-Clarke and Campbell (2015) have demonstrated the crucial role played by cluster leaders in the effective functioning of clusters. This section therefore examines the skills and complementarities of coordinators as they are of paramount importance to the success of a collaboration. Additionally, for a collaboration to be beneficial, partners should bring unique resources to the collaboration that the other partner needs. As the CLA has an interest in the potential that co-coordination brings to both enhance NGOs' participation and to strengthen linkages with sub-national clusters, this section will explore these interdependencies.

7.4.1 Complementarity

7.4.1.1 Additional human resource

As Salomons and Dijkzeul correctly observed, human resources represent a fundamental aspect for the functioning of a cluster and, as a result, a cluster lacking capacity is “essentially dead on arrival” (Salomons and Dijkzeul, 2008, p. 192). Given the high demands placed on clusters, the additional capacity provided by the co-coordinator facilitates the progress and completion of the numerous tasks that fall under the cluster's responsibility. An evaluation confirmed that “an increase in human resource capacity was identified as a key factor improving the performance of a ‘weak’ Cluster” (Culbert, 2011, p. 80). In addition, having a coordination team helps to cope with the isolation of the role as both the coordinator and co-coordinator are removed from their organisations. Furthermore, three co-coordinators have indicated that they have successfully advocated with donors to bring additional human resources to the cluster. For example, in the areas of information management or protection analysis where they had identified gaps. Hence, co-coordinators can also contribute to strengthen the overall capacity of the cluster.

7.4.1.2 Diversity in skill set and expertise

As previously discussed in section 7.2.3.2, agreeing on the division of tasks should be an opportunity for coordinators to discuss the complementarity of their respective skill sets

and expertise, with the aim of optimising their contributions. Co-coordinators interviewed have reported good practices in this regard. They have often mentioned that they are able to use their technical background to contribute to specific tasks or activities. For instance, using their legal background to support the creation of standardised protection case management tools, or their protection mainstreaming expertise to develop tools and organise training. Those who had a workplan used it to include deliverables on which they have a specific added value.

In addition, co-coordinators indicated that their personality and interests also influenced the division of tasks. A co-coordinator who was less at ease with cluster representation mentioned that they had agreed that the coordinator would be more vocal at the HCT and ICCG, while the co-coordinator would still be able to provide inputs but would focus more on programmatic guidance documents. The knowledge and access to programmatic expertise was reported as a key strength that co-coordinators bring to the collaboration. It allows them to share information such as protection analysis and information on specific geographic areas which are considered valuable inputs. Co-coordinators also benefit from more flexible administrative processes, which allow them to travel at short notice for example. However, this complementarity cannot always be leveraged due to financial constraints. As one co-coordinator observed, “it is easier for me to travel and organise workshops, but I do not have the budget to do so!”

Three of the current co-coordinators are local staff, and they have identified this as an important aspect of complementarity. Local staff are better placed to connect with local partners and facilitate training in their language. They are also more likely to have a better understanding of the security environment and to be able to anticipate and mitigate risks. Furthermore, they are able to navigate the legislation, which is an important asset for the protection sector. However, there is a downside to this, in that local staff involved in protection work are exposed to a heightened risk. However, an interviewee noted that local staff are often assuming much more frontline protection work in many other positions, such as protection monitoring teams or case workers.

Co-coordinators with strong interpersonal skills are a particular asset to the cluster. Their communication skills can be used intentionally by the coordination team as boundary spanners. For instance, one co-coordinator said she was playing the role of

"the communicator" in the cluster. When the coordinator was drafting policy documents, he would then ask her to engage with the partners and do the relationship building. This is further compounded by the fact that in certain contexts the co-coordinator has greater access to visit partners and field locations due to fewer administrative constraints.

7.4.2 Organisational complementarity and interdependence

In addition to their skill set and expertise, it is also crucial for coordinators to understand the complementarity of their respective organisations. The table 5 below summarises the comparative advantages of the co-coordinating NGO and the CLA in their cluster lead roles.

As an intergovernmental organisation holding accountability for the well-functioning of the cluster the CLA must ensure continuity in cluster governance and is responsible to provide sufficient secretariat resources for information management. It also has the capacity to mobilise other UN agencies and has privileged access to high-level decision fora such as the HCT. It is the focal point for interaction with the host government and peacekeeping missions. In addition, it has the capacity to mobilise sub-national clusters.

Co-Coordinating NGO	Cluster Lead Agency
Transparency in cluster governance	Continuity in cluster governance
Legitimacy with other NGOs	Authority and accountability as cluster lead
Capacity to mobilise NGOs	Capacity to mobilise UN agencies
Independence from host government	Links to host government
Independence from integrated mission	Links to integrated mission
Field-level analysis	Information management capacity

Access to programmatic technical expertise	Access to high-level decision fora
Strengthen linkages with sub-national clusters	Capacity to mobilise sub-national clusters

Table 5 - NGO and CLA complementarities, adapted from Kemp (2012)

As a civil society organisation delivering protection programmes, the co-coordinating NGO has legitimacy with other NGOs and the capacity to mobilise them. It contributes to build the reputation of the cluster by enhancing transparency and inclusivity in cluster governance. It is independent from the host government and integrated missions, which contributes to a greater neutrality of the cluster. It has a privileged connection with protection programme implementation and can therefore bring field-level analysis, technical expertise and can contribute to strengthen linkages with sub-national clusters.

As the well-functioning of the cluster depends on the participation of NGOs, this privileged access coupled with the capacity to strengthen links with sub-national clusters constitute an important resource that co-coordination can bring to the collaboration. These two aspects of interdependence will be explored in more details in the following sections.

7.4.2.1 Strengthening NGO participation

It is the joint responsibility of the CLA and the co-coordinating NGO to encourage the participation of a broad range of actors in the cluster (GPC, 2022). Co-coordinating NGOs have a comparative advantage in this regard as they can utilise their natural proximity with other NGOs to build trust, represent their interests and encourage their participation. However, the work of the co-coordinator should not be limited to this area, nor should they be solely responsible for relations with NGOs.

The assumption is that increased NGO participation creates a virtuous circle. It improves the knowledge of needs, gaps and strategic priorities of partners, which in turn are reflected in cluster strategies and plans (NRC, 2013b). This leads to more “ownership of and adherence to cluster [...] strategies and priorities” (NRC, 2013b, p. 26). Furthermore,

it increases NGOs' awareness of funding opportunities and processes, as well as their awareness of technical standards. This allows NGOs to strengthen their response with resources obtained through pooled funding (NRC, 2013b). In addition, "the cluster [is] more consistently basing action and recommendations on field-level analysis, increasing the participation and capacity of [local] NGOs, and developing evidence-based advocacy" (Kemp, 2012, p. 2).

7.4.2.1.1 A particular area of focus for co-coordinators

Encouraging NGO participation is often mentioned in cluster co-coordinators' ToRs and 88% of the co-coordinators interviewed strongly felt it was an important part of their role (see chart 9). They are either encouraged by their line manager "to raise the voice of the NGOs and be really the "rep" of the NGOs there". In other instances, they found out by themselves that it is a role for them to play, or took "this space as an entry point because it wasn't taken". Only one of the co-coordinators interviewed didn't know this was a particular area of focus for the co-coordinator and had not taken this particular role. Several co-coordinators reported seeing a correlation between their role and a growing interest and participation from protection actors in the work of the cluster. They also reported an increased perception that NGOs were represented at the cluster table through their role. A downside is that this engagement is often based on the individual capacity of the co-coordinator to mobilise other NGO partners. One co-coordinator for instance reported that after she left, a staff of OCHA told her that NGOs had begun to disengage.

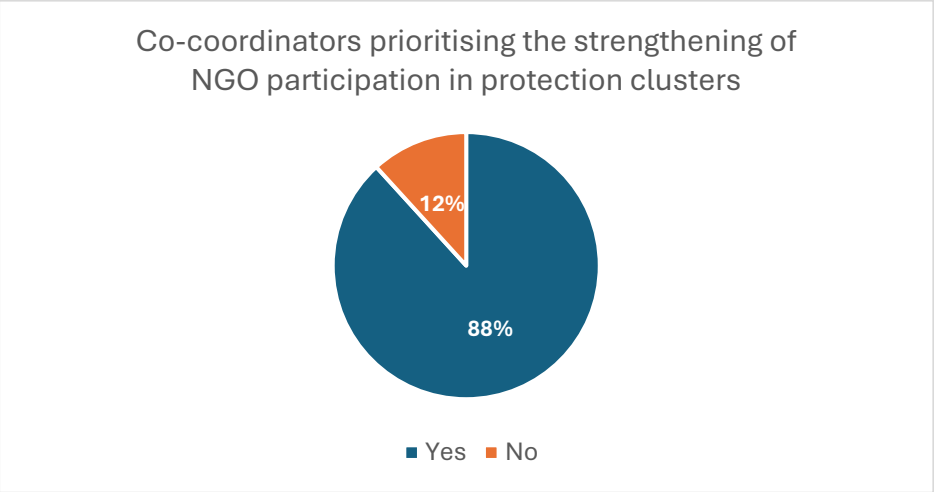

Chart 9 - Percentage of co-coordinators prioritising the strengthening of NGO participation in protection clusters

To engage partners, co-coordinators liaise with international and national NGOs on a regular basis through bilateral channels. This allows them to understand their challenges and needs. They are able to include them in cluster conversations and priorities, to channel their needs when meeting with donors, or to act as a mediator to solve issues they might have with a partner or a donor. They enquire on how to make the cluster beneficial for the members, try to identify training needs and gaps in programmatic tools.

Co-coordinators mentioned a variety of means they use to build trust. They try to be as responsive to needs as possible, they ensure to include inputs in cluster documents or to provide feedback. They also "actively bring [partners] into conversations, if this would benefit their organisation". They aim at being consultative when drafting key strategic documents: "When working on the PAU and formulating the recommendations, I always worked as a team to receive all the inputs so that it is not contested." In clusters where there is a low level of trust between the NGO community and the CLA, several co-coordinators emphasised the importance to respect the confidentiality of sensitive information that a more readily shared with them.

7.4.2.1.2 Involving key protection actors and building a SAG

Co-coordinators who particularly invested in strengthening NGO participation tend to be strategic in building key alliances with strong protection partners. There is an implicit understanding that simply expending a network does not necessarily result in strengthening it. Hence, bringing key players into the cluster is seen as a necessary first step which creates a snowball effect as it increases the relevance of the cluster which then helps to attract other partners. However, one co-coordinator rightly pointed out that being the NGO voice is also about "finding who in the broader NGO community [beyond traditional protection actors] has useful insights on these issues and then bringing that into the work".

Co-coordinators perceived building relationships with other protection actors as key to ensure inclusivity in cluster perspectives. In addition, it is also a means to avoid "the perception of a conflict between [the co-coordinating NGO] and UNHCR where there are different opinions". These reasons often motivate co-coordinators to set up a SAG.

The function of a protection cluster SAG is to act as a sounding board, and to contribute to strategic documents and advocacy products. SAG members also provide rapid inputs on documents or decisions that must be delivered or made on short notice. This last aspect is fundamental as, as a co-coordinator noted in her handover, it would otherwise be questionable "what constitutes a cluster opinion versus a coordinator opinion".

The support of a SAG is therefore a critical enabler for cluster co-coordinators to perform their role. However, only 56% of the clusters represented in the interview sample currently have a functioning SAG (see chart 10). Although the number of functioning SAGs has increased (+27%), co-coordinators continue to face resistance in trying to set up a SAG. A GPC member said that "it is still a challenge to get a SAG up and running, because a SAG is a check." This is confirmed by the experience of co-coordinators, who reported pushbacks to revive or create SAGs. A co-coordinator was told by the coordinator: "You don't want a SAG that will just ask questions. You need a SAG just to touch base with. But you don't want a strong parliament, you want a rubber stamp."

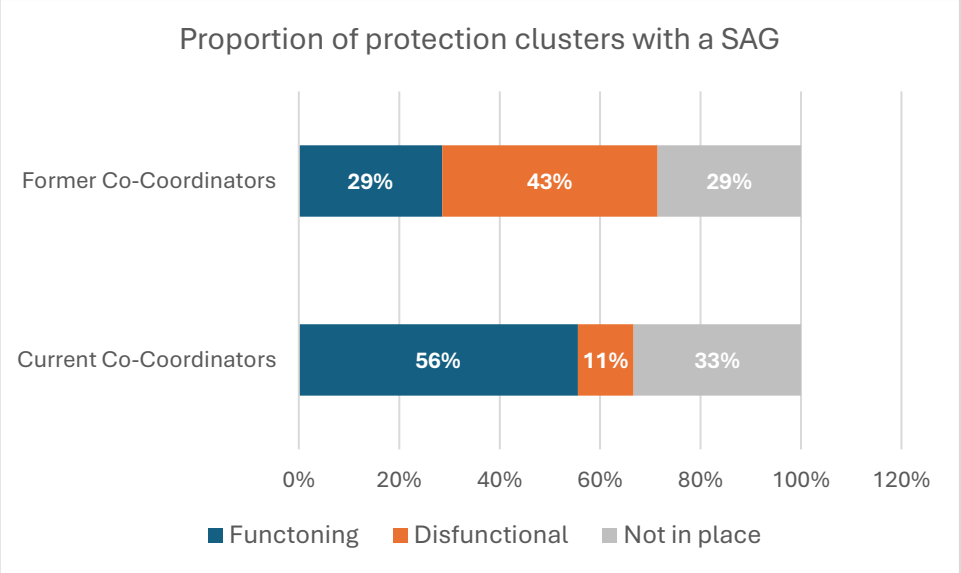

Chart 10 - Proportion of protection clusters with a SAG

7.4.2.1.3 Strengthening the participation of local and national actors

When the data collected confirmed an apparent positive impact on the "increased buy-in and participation in clusters from international NGOs due to the presence of an NGO Co-coordinator" (NRC, 2013a, p. 10), strengthening national NGO participation remains an area that is overlooked. Only 28% of the co-coordinators interviewed saw a particular role in engaging with local/national actors (L/Nas). When they were actively engaged in

this area, the co-coordinator stated that the decision was based on the cluster membership analysis in one case, with the rationale being that L/Nas constitute 70-80% of the protection cluster membership. In another case, the co-coordinator had a specific indicator related to the strengthening of L/Nas participation in his project deliverables.

Strategies used to involve local partners consisted in adapting communication, by following up on emails with phone calls or simplifying technical language to ensure that partners understood that they could contribute. Support was also provided to officialise their status, “many local NGOs were missing a document, or had not paid a fee to officialise their status. We […] provided support to gather the necessary paperwork, when funding was missing we were providing it.” The most structured support provided was around the submission of funding proposals, sharing and explaining requirements to apply, organising dedicated training and “proposal clinics”. A co-coordinator noted that “Traditionally, UNHCR and the cluster coordinator were relatively hostile to systematically include local NGOs. But this was in my project, so I was sharing information that was coming in with local NGOs.” As a result, the proportion of the protection response delivered by national NGOs had increased from 4% to 17% in this cluster. This illustrates the considerable impact a targeted effort can have on localisation.

7.4.2.1.4 Limitations in strengthening NGO participation

In some contexts, cluster co-coordinators have reported being restricted in their ability to meet with partners as this would be seen as “doing something being the back of the CLA”. In another context the CLA had explicitly prohibited its local partners to talk with the co-coordinator. At global level, there was a perception from one informant that “If the co-coordinating NGO gets too proactive at engaging NGOs often the CLA tries to rein them in”. As a co-coordinator pointed out, “the UN also want their voice to be heard, so you have to be strategic. [...] You have to make sure that at the most appropriate time, all issues or voices are actually considered.”

While there is a clear positive contribution of co-coordinators to a strengthened NGO participation, other factors also come into play. For instance, a co-coordinator reported that while she had been able to strengthen the participation of NGOs, NGOs started to

drop out following a change in cluster leadership which negatively impacted the functioning of the cluster. NGOs in fact behave rationally and engage in the cluster if there is relevance for their work (ICVA, 2014), weighing the "various benefits against the costs of time, loss of advantage and loss of autonomy" (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, p. 33). According to Kemp, the factors enhancing participation are, "how far cluster meetings and processes focus on results, to what extent they are perceived as UN-dominated or as a more collective enterprise, and whether members feel that sensitive information can be shared with confidence" (2012, p. 16). In addition, despite the good intentions of the co-coordinators in trying to make the cluster a space beneficial for its members, the IASC Protection Policy Review noted, that protection clusters still "require[ed] a great deal from partners rather than cluster staff understanding what they could contribute to partners' work" (Cocking *et al.*, 2022, p. 47). Finally, co-coordinators seem to be particularly successful in gathering support from like-minded NGOs while expanding beyond these actors remains a challenge.

7.4.2.1.5 Strengthened advocacy

A strengthened NGO participation should also have a positive impact on cluster advocacy. A co-coordinator noted that they "did a lot of advocacy through the cluster, for example situation flash updates [...], which were much more informed for having had the trust of the NGO community." Another co-coordinator mentioned having developed both local and high-level advocacy messages around the protection of civilians for the HCT. However, despite the potential of collective action to "decreasing the (political) costs of action to the individual organisation" (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015, p. 30), it appears that collective advocacy on sensitive matters through the cluster remains weak. Operational advocacy is limited as, even when NGOs witness operational practices on the part of the CLA that are inappropriate, "they cannot provide any feedback, because most of them receive funding from UNHCR." In addition, there appears to be a certain incompatibility in terms of advocacy approach on sensitive protection issues between the CLA and NGOs, with the CLA being particularly wary on what is "seen as more strident NGO advocacy tactics" (Kemp, 2012, p. 15). As it can prove difficult for the co-coordinator to work through the cluster on sensitive topics, co-coordinators have reported trying to find ways around. For instance, producing and

sharing unbranded advocacy products with relevant regional and global focal points, using the NGO forum, or setting up an alternative forum of like-minded INGOs to discuss and address these issues.

7.4.2.2 Strengthening linkages with sub-national cluster

Although the strengthening of links between national and field-level clusters is mentioned in several cluster co-coordinator ToRs, it appears to be a more ad hoc area of focus for the co-coordinator. According to the IASC, the responsibility to "coordinate effectively with [its] sub-national counterparts" (2015a, p. 24) falls on the CLA. However the GPC (2022) has made clear in its recommendations that the coordinators can agree to share this task. Hence, when it is not unusual for the co-coordinators to be this link with sub-national levels, the decision as to whether the co-coordinator oversees this area depends on how coordinators decide to divide their responsibilities.

UNHCR's evaluation of its role as CLA noted that "there is often a challenging relationship between the protection clusters and sub-clusters in countries" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 48). This results in limited shared priorities and ad hoc information sharing, which is often confined to a list of activities and leaves gaps on key protection developments. As a result, it is not uncommon for co-coordinators to "try to actively contribute to stronger contact between national and provincial clusters, and prioritize support to clusters and partners in the field" (NRC, 2013a, p. 9). In addition, the ability to connect with sub-national clusters and visit these locations is a means of bringing concrete field programmatic experience and information in the work of the cluster at national level, as well as allowing a wider geographical coverage. In that sense, this area of work very much complements what is already seen as an added value of co-coordination.

Activities conducted to strengthen linkages include conducting field visit, identifying needs for support, ensuring the use of common systems for data collection and data management to monitor and share protection updates, providing support and capacity building on funding processes, response planning and protection analysis (NRC, 2013b). In addition, co-coordinators can also play a particular role in promoting upstream advocacy. For example, a co-coordinator indicated that they encouraged sub-national

clusters to initiate their advocacy messages, providing them with language and formatting support and then circulating them at the national level. This both strengthened the national protection cluster which became “the go to platform for any protection issues”, as well as the visibility of the sub-national clusters which “were getting invited to give proper updates in ICCG meetings”.

However, in certain contexts, co-coordinators interviewed have reported that sub-national level coordinators are reluctant to engage with them. “They don’t like to receive emails from me asking for inputs or for an update. [...] Sometimes they even go to my counterpart asking why [...] I am following up with them.” On the contrary, sub-national clusters where an NGO co-coordinator is in place offer an entry point for the co-coordinator to be able to strengthen interactions. However, there is not necessarily a strategic investment in this area of work on the part of the co-coordinating NGO. For instance, one of the co-coordinating NGOs currently has important resources at sub-national level (one co-coordinator and two Information Management Officers), but the national co-coordinator is not investing in this specific area. Another co-coordinator stated that while she “saw [this] 100% as a specific area to engage”, she nevertheless didn’t have the time to invest in this role.

Strengthening linkages with sub-national level can nonetheless be a clear area of investment for donors. In South Sudan, a specific position was created under the umbrella of the co-coordinating NGO specifically to address weaknesses in the coordination structure between national and sub-national levels. This position allowed to demonstrate to the deep field clusters that the national cluster could respond to their needs and advocate for their sites. As a result, deep field partners were much more willing to share information and coordinate with the national level.

Hence, strengthening linkages with sub-national level clusters is highly complementary with the perceived added value of co-coordination in terms of strengthening field-level analysis, and promoting access to programmatic technical expertise and a wider geographic area. While it is not by default an area of priority for the co-coordinator, it would be beneficial for co-coordinating NGOs to evaluate their comparative advantage in this area.

7.4.3 Mutuality: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

As demonstrated in section 7.4, co-coordination has the potential to bring unique resources, skills and complementarities to the collaboration, in particular with regards to strengthening NGO participation, advocacy and linkages with sub-national clusters. Nevertheless, co-coordinators face a number of limitations in their ability to leverage this potential, which will be further explored in section 7.5.

Some of the factors which facilitate or impede complementarities and interdependences to be beneficial for the collaboration are summarised in the table 6 below.[8]

Enablers	Blockers
Mutuality	
Strategic recruitment: - Networking/interpersonal skills - Technical skills	Non-strategic recruitment: - Lack of communication and/or diplomatic skills - Lack of technical skills
- Capacity to mobilise the support of other actors - Functioning SAG	- Isolation from NGO cluster partners - SAG not in place or dysfunctional
- Access to information and programmatic expertise from parent NGO	- No access to information and programmatic expertise from parent NGO

Table 6 - Mutuality: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

[8] Enablers and blockers relevant for this dimension which were already captured in table 4 and 5 are not repeated in this table.

7.5 Trust and reciprocity dimensions

Trust and reciprocity are, according to Thomson and Perry (2006), critical to collaborative endeavours. “In collaboration, individual partners often demonstrate a willingness to interact collaboratively only if other partners demonstrate the same willingness” (Thomson and Perry, 2006, p. 27). In addition, this reciprocity builds on trust and the capacity partners have to make good faith efforts to act in accordance with their commitments, and not to take excessive advantage over their partner when an opportunity arises (Cummings and Bromiley, 1996). This section examines how co-coordinators build trust and reciprocity in cluster coordination, and what factors undermine the construction of their collaborative efforts.

7.5.1 Co-coordinators’ strategies to build trust and reciprocity

Cultivating a good relationship with their CLA counterpart was mentioned throughout the interviews as a key aspect of the co-coordinators’ strategy to create an enabling work environment. To do so, strong interpersonal skills are required on the part of the co-coordinators. They are attentive to the way in which they interact with the coordination team and try to be strategic on when and how to tackle sensitive subjects. Many co-coordinators also use their capacity to create social ties to build a personal connection outside of the working space with their counterpart. Even when the relationship is contentious, co-coordinators try to keep engaging. In a context where the relationship was fragile, a co-coordinator recommended to her successor to “keep engaging, even on a small scale: buying coffee from the machine at UNHCR, sitting at UNHCR three times a week, asking [the coordinator] to look at something you’re doing to get buy in before it is finished, going to lunch with the team [...]. These small acts of friendship will go a long way.” When the relationship isn’t functioning well, they try to find creative solutions such as working more often from the same space, contributing to a specific piece of work where they can have an added value or developing relationships with sub-national clusters that can also be beneficial for the coordinator.

Co-coordinators also emphasise that it is down to the individual to make the collaboration work, implying that structures such as MoUs, ToRs or workplans are not key enablers. However, it is interesting to note that in clusters where the relationship is

strained, the basic structures of the collaboration are often not in place, resulting in the exclusion of the co-coordinator from tasks and information (NRC, 2022b). In addition, when the relationship breaks down, the entry point for NGO Directors to reengage is also around agreeing on the ground rules of the collaboration. Hence, administrative structures are a corner stone which provide stability and continuity in the relationship between the two organisations, even though in the daily work of the coordinators the dynamic aspect of the relationship is a much more apparent enabler. As highlighted by Knox Clarke, “It would appear that both structures and skills are necessary conditions for effective emergency leadership, and, in most cases, neither are sufficient by themselves to ensure effective response” (2013, p. 38).

A key strategy repeatedly emphasised is to build a reputation for trustworthiness. The most common strategy used by co-coordinators is to put themselves as a support for the coordinator: “When I do coordination, I come from a very humble space. [...] I'm here to support. And at the end of the day, it is your decision.” They try to show that they can be an added value by being very responsive to communication, working long hours, being proactive to take on tasks and making themselves invaluable. “I am really putting myself out there. Everywhere where I can contribute, I am doing it.” They mentioned trying to be transparent, inclusive in their communication, and as reliable as possible: “I also don't take on something I know I don't have the time to do. And I think that on the interpersonal side it is really important, because it creates trust.” In their perspective, building trust also requires showing self-confidence and leadership skills, to create connections with key actors and demonstrate their ability to be an asset in the collaboration. However, an important challenge is to develop the trust necessary to a collaboration in the short period of time that is the characteristic of humanitarian work, while procedures cannot entirely replace the experience of working together (Knox-Clarke, 2013).

Hence, as in other leadership roles in the humanitarian sector, co-coordination rests upon exceptionally talented individuals with a wide range of skills (Knox-Clarke, 2013). In addition to their communication and interpersonal skills, co-coordinators are expected to be technically sound, experienced in coordination, effective facilitators and leaders, and able to work both in teams and independently under minimal supervision.

It is unsurprising that such individuals, both on the part of the CLA and of the co-coordinating NGO, are not always available, which has a significant impact on the functioning of the collaboration.

7.5.2. Actions undermining trust and reciprocity in the collaboration

Trust and reciprocity are undermined in cluster co-coordination when the Principles of Partnership are not respected. According to the IASC Reference Module on Cluster Coordination (2015a), one of the minimum requirements to participate in cluster activities is to commit to the principles of equality, transparency, result orientation, responsibility and complementarity. However, if these principles should be at the core of the collaboration, it appears to be in these areas that the co-coordinators face the greatest challenges in their relationship with the CLA.

7.5.2.1 Hierarchy in cluster coordination

UNHCR's evaluation of its role as CLA "found that UNHCR most frequently adopted a hierarchical model, which placed the international NGO co-lead as subordinate to the UNHCR lead" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2017, p. 48). This approach is justified by the different level of accountability of the CLA and its responsibility as provider of last resort (IASC, 2015a). The fact that the CLA remains ultimately accountable to the HC for the functioning of the cluster, de facto introduces a higher level of responsibility which prevents risk sharing and reciprocity in the collaboration as the responsibility for the outcome of their joint efforts isn't shared. In addition, being the provider of last resort is also used to justify a higher degree of responsibility over the cluster by the CLA. However, what this role entails is unclear, and it is rarely actioned in practice (Culbert, 2011).

This hierarchy is reflected in the terminology used to refer to the co-coordinator's role, with variations across contexts including using the terms co-chair, co-lead or co-facilitator. These terms all convey a certain level of authority from the lead on the co-lead, which also influence how the role is seen externally. As a co-coordinator pointed out, "when partners reach out to the cluster, they reach out to the coordinator and not to the co-coordinator".

Some good practices have been reported, where the coordinator for instance makes clear that the coordinators are co-coordinating the cluster together and this understanding is shared across national and sub-national levels. However, co-coordinators have indicated that in the majority of their collaborations (52%), they did not feel treated as an equal partner (see chart 11)[9]. Worryingly, this perception has gotten worse over time with 62% of the current co-coordinators not feeling treated as an equal partner against 40% in the past (+22%).

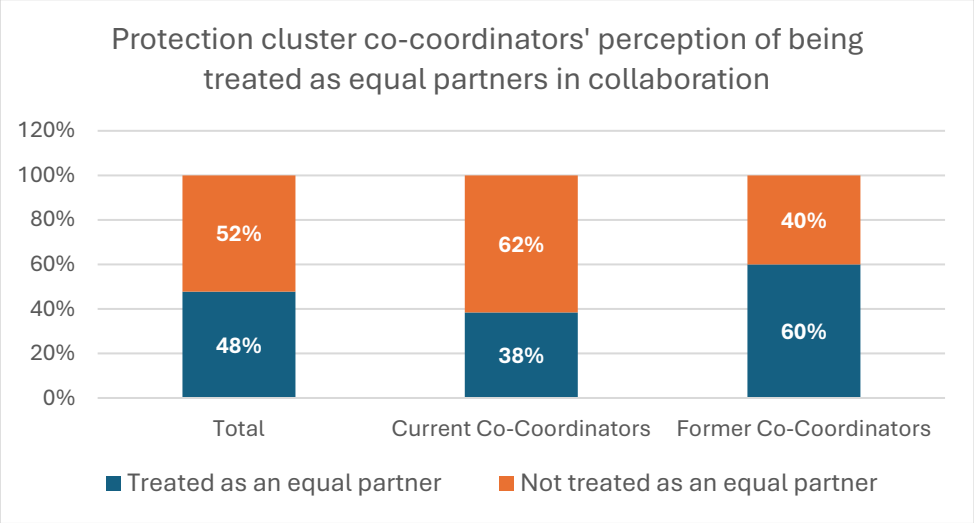

Chart 11 - Protection cluster co-coordinators' perception of being treated as equal partners in the collaboration

In addition, there is often an imbalance in the level of seniority, with the coordinator being P4 or P5 and the co-coordinator being more junior. When it is the case, it results in an implicit hierarchy in the collaboration where the coordinator often perceives its role as a managerial position: “She was a P5. And P5 don't do work, they delegate to others. And that for me was a problem. You need two people who are both willing to do the work.” When the coordinator is senior but has less experience in coordination, this makes it difficult to build on complementarity and learn from each other: “The coordinator has no experience, but I cannot teach her anything because it is so hierarchical.” The seniority of the coordinator also often prevents the co-coordinator to be included in representation roles on an equal footing: “when it comes to

[9] In chart 11, where respondents indicated different perceptions when working with different coordinators during the same assignment, these experiences have been disaggregated to allow for a balanced and meaningful representation of both positive and negative experiences.

representation, I don't think that a P5 will ever be like: yes, sure, let the co-coordinator take the lead."

The feeling of not being treated as equal partners seems to be further exacerbated when the co-coordinator is a national staff member. Two out of the three national co-coordinators interviewed strongly emphasised that they were not treated as equal partners: "I would say that I consider myself more as a deputy. I had my three dedicated [areas of work], I was getting feedback on that in the form of approval/disapproval rather than a dialogue." The other one reported not being listened to and not being given credit for her work: "All coordinators are international and co-coordinators are national. This is where you see the gap. [...] We are national teams and we complete each other [...]. But when I give any technical advice, because I have worked in this sector for 10 years, l am most of the time ignored [...]. You reach a point where you wonder if it is worth to say your opinion."

Furthermore, in both of the above examples, the co-coordinating NGOs were either taking on this role for the first time in this context or had no previous experience of coordination. While global guidance exists (GPC, 2022) and could have been used by the CLA to establish the collaboration, instead in both contexts no MoU was signed and the CLA drastically limited the scope of action of the co-coordinator in the collaboration. This reveals that if the co-coordinating NGO cannot draw on its experience to navigate and negotiate the establishment of a collaborative space, the CLA treats the co-coordinator as a subordinate.

Overall, these experiences show that a lack of responsibility sharing, results in a lack of equality and complementarity in cluster co-coordination.

7.5.2.2 Lack of transparency and bad faith behaviour

Sharing information in a collaboration shows the willingness to share control (Thomson and Perry, 2006). However, in cluster co-coordination trust is often undermined by the deliberate exclusion of the co-coordinator from information flows, which breaches the principles of transparency, equality and results orientation. "When I arrived, I would not be copied in email. I had no idea what was happening and they only involved me when something would go wrong." Excluding co-coordinators from information appears to be

a stumbling block, as 45% of the current co-coordinators have mentioned that they have been deliberately excluded from communication. An information breakdown is commonly reported with the sub-national level, because “the cluster focal points would often only write to the UNHCR coordinator [...] which meant she was getting that information and wasn’t sharing it.” Co-coordinators can also be deliberately excluded from information on key protection priorities: “At this time one of the hot topics was protection concerns around the closure of camps. [...] [The Coordinator] went there [...] and when she came back, I asked her what was the update on the closure of the camp. And her answer was: “What camp? What closure?” In another context, the co-coordinator said: “UNHCR is very protective of protection monitoring data, they are not shared with me.” Co-coordinators can also be excluded from processes they have initiated. For instance, a co-coordinator shared a template with field coordinators to collect their inputs and urgently update a service mapping following an escalation. The field coordinators responded to the UNHCR coordinator who organised a meeting with them but did not convene the co-coordinator. Afterwards, the co-coordinator could not obtain any update on the process: “When I tried to follow up the coordinator pushed back saying it is not a priority, when all the partners are requesting the service mapping.” Hence, being excluded from information impacts in turn the ability of the co-coordinator to perform core tasks of their work.

The CLA can also try to take excessive advantage over the co-coordinator, by dictating what they are allowed to do and thereby restricting the scope of their work. This type of restriction is often experimented by co-coordinators in their interactions with donors. Some co-coordinators mentioned not being entitled to respond to emails sent by donors, being requested not to take the floor in meetings, having to receive the approval of the CLA to meet with donors and talking points had to be vetted by the UNHCR Representative. In other instances, co-coordinators have also been prevented to simply meet with partners: “I was told that it was not right for me to meet partners alone, that I could not set up meetings with them and everything was put on hold.” Another said: “It got to a point where I wasn't even allowed to speak to anyone who was sitting in a state capital. It was really that horrible.” Co-coordinators can also be micromanaged on low-risk secretarial tasks. A co-coordinator was for instance prevented to issue letters

to confirm that local NGOs were cluster members, while these NGOs were already on the membership list. These behaviours show, in many instances, an unwillingness on the part of the CLA to uphold the Principles of Partnership in cluster coordination.

Finally, bad faith behaviours are also observed in relation with co-coordinating NGOs bringing additional human resources to support the functioning of the cluster. As this contributes to strengthen the representation of the co-coordinating NGO in the cluster, this is often perceived as a threat by the CLA: “UNHCR did not like that we had more staff. So then they added staff on top to make sure that they had more staff in the cluster team.” The recruitment process can give rise to tensions, with the CLA often insisting on selecting the candidate. Additionally, there can be issues around reporting lines, with the CLA placing excessive pressure on the coordinating NGO to obtain an undue reporting line over the NGO staff recruited.

Both in interviews and in the literature, the CLA has been criticised for seeking to control the visible and sensitive advocacy function of the cluster (Kemp, 2012; Featherstone *et al.*, 2017; Cocking *et al.*, 2022). As mentioned in section 7.3.1.1, a number of strategies are used by the CLA to preserve its self-interest through the cluster with regard to its advocacy function. A co-coordinator stated that the CLA imposed its vision by developing advocacy products without consultations: “sometimes UNHCR will write whatever they want to write without caring whether this is what the partners want or not”. Softening the language in joint advocacy products is a common strategy. However, this can be done in bad faith if the product is subsequently released without further consultation and no longer reflects the concerns of the cluster members (Kemp, 2012). A lack of transparency on approval procedures can also be used to limit the development of advocacy products and preserve the interests of the CLA. A co-coordinator pointed out that the publication of advocacy documents can be delayed by multiple layers of approval until they become irrelevant. These clearance requirements can also be used to hinder the co-coordinator’s inputs, with a requirement for their inputs to be cleared by the CLA, for instance inputs on OCHA’s draft intersectoral part of the HNO (NRC, 2022b).

In sum, the CLA does not always act in good faith with regards to its commitment to uphold the Principles of Partnership. Because responsibility is not shared, the CLA

retains the final say on the functioning of the cluster. This in turn creates an underlying perception that the CLA is inherently in a higher position in the collaboration and, in many instances, it practically results in co-coordinators not being treated as equal partners. When the relationship is unbalanced, it is harder for the complementarity between the coordinators to be leveraged. A strong focus is placed on the interests and reputation of the CLA, and bad faith behaviour is common to preserve them.

7.5.3 Co-coordination: building trust and collaborating at all costs?

There is a clear perception on the part of the co-coordinators that if the relation with their UN counterpart breaks down this would impact their ability to perform their work (Kemp, 2012). As a result, they "are willing to bear initial disproportional costs [with the expectation that] their partners will equalize the distribution of costs and benefits over time out of a sense of duty" (Thomson and Perry, 2006, p. 27). In practice, this translates in co-coordinators accepting work conditions which are not in line with the CLA's commitment to the Principles of Partnership. Many co-coordinators do not hesitate to place themselves as subordinate to the coordinator to achieve results: "For me, it was more important to have result out of protection cluster activities, than showing that I am not a deputy here." But this can also lead to accepting an unfair repartition of the workload: "It's someone else who told me that I was doing more work than [the coordinator] [...] I also never went on leave. I lost 35 days of leave." Even when they are deliberately excluded from the core tasks of the cluster and cannot perform their work, co-coordinators are being cautious in escalating the issues they face: "If my line manager or higher management was involved, it would create kind of a mess. I need at least to build this trust and see."

There is a perception among co-coordinators that co-coordinating NGOs have limited recourse to resolve unfair work conditions and that escalating abusive behaviours would have a negative impact both on their organisation and their career. Co-coordinators, for instance, often believe that they would not receive the support they need from their director: "Country directors will try every single way, every single excuse before they get to a dispute resolution with UNHCR. Including saying that it's a personal issue, a communication issue, that this is your fault: you are not communicating correctly." Because the power imbalance is so important, accountability mechanisms are

dysfunctional and there is a perception that escalating issues would have a backlash effect on the co-coordinating NGO. A senior representative of a co-coordinating NGO said that "NGOs feel that when they get critical of UNHCR, UNHCR cuts them out of the cluster: they cut them out of their own funding, sideline them and banish them out of the cluster". Even when there is a real reluctance from UNHCR cluster team to give space and collaborate, the most common strategy adopted by the co-coordinating NGO is to collaborate at all costs: "I have chosen the patient and collaborative path, and sometimes questioned if it would have been better to escalate the challenges faced. […] I rather believe that on a long-term perspective, this may not have helped [my organisation] to reach its objective."

Consequently, it can be argued that the imbalance of power in cluster coordination favours the occurrence of abuse of power. In the course of the interviews, some respondents reported having experienced extremely challenging working conditions. A co-coordinator said: "In my entire career, it was my most toxic relationship, honestly. I was like, this is going to burn me out." When the same co-coordinator was asked what was her biggest success in cluster co-coordination, her answer was "staying alive". A senior representative from another NGO stated, "Our colleagues are put in situations which should not take place and where there should be accountability mechanisms. [But] colleagues know that the mechanisms are useless, so they are not going to raise the issue because it is going to impact their career."

The recurring unwillingness of the CLA to act in good faith, and the frequent abuses of power reported by co-coordinators, raise questions about the extent to which the role of the co-coordinator, as representing the voice of the NGOs and bringing transparency to a collective and collaborative mechanism, is welcomed by the UN. The establishment of trust is not always a one-sided endeavour and, in some contexts, the collaboration appears to be functioning. Nevertheless, it is concerning to observe that when the collaboration is dysfunctional, co-coordinating NGOs have consistently continued to engage, with co-coordinators bearing a disproportionate cost of this trust-building and non-confrontational collaborative strategy.

7.5.4 Trust and reciprocity: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

The additional factors identified in this section that enable or hinder the good functioning of cluster co-coordination are listed in the table 7 below.[10]

Enablers	Blockers
Trust and reciprocity dimensions	
Powerful counterpart: - Leadership skills - Seniority	Weak counterpart: - Compliant personality and/or self-censorship when confronted with lack of transparency or accountability in cluster governance - Lack of seniority
Credible counterpart: - NGO has experience in cluster co-coordination or other coordination roles	Weak counterpart: - Lack of experience from parent NGO in coordination

Table 7 - Trust and reciprocity: enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

In conclusion, the most critical barriers co-coordinating NGOs are facing in the process of collaboration are due to the lack of willingness of the CLA to engage in good faith and to share the collaboration space (7.3, 7.5). The analysis of the five dimensions of this process nonetheless reveals that co-coordinating NGOs have an important role to play in setting up the collaboration properly (7.1, 7.2), in order to maximise access to the collaboration space. It also appears that co-coordinating NGOs should play a critical role in providing a strategic direction for the position (7.2, 7.3.2). However, at present, the research demonstrates that they tend to provide limited support to these roles, thereby limiting the ability of the co-coordinators to fully deliver on the potential of their positions.

[10] Enablers and blockers relevant for the trust and reciprocity dimensions which were already captured in table 4, 5 and 6 are not repeated in this table.

8. Outcomes of protection cluster co-coordination

As suggested in Thomson and Perry's framework of collaboration (2006), one common method for evaluating the performance of a collaboration is to assess "whether the partners have achieved their strategic objectives" (Gray, 2000, p. 245). In the case of protection cluster co-coordination, the collaboration seeks to achieve results at three levels. It should:

1. result in a shared positive outcome on the functioning of the cluster,
2. benefit the wider NGO community,
3. contribute to the co-coordinating NGO's organisational goal.

This section therefore explores the extent to which co-coordination is delivering on its expected outcomes, whether progress has been made over time, and how co-coordinating NGOs could create a more enabling collaborative environment to achieve better outcomes.

8.1 To what extent is co-coordination delivering on its expected outcomes?

First, it is important to note that the existing literature on cluster co-coordination, while limited, has correctly identified the potential outcomes of cluster co-coordination (see 6.6). Only one additional outcome was captured in the interviews, related to the positive impact of co-coordination on protection monitoring systems and analyses.

The table 8 below provides an overview of the outcomes achieved through cluster co-coordination, categorised according to the degree of success: rarely or not achieved (0-33%), partially achieved (34-66%), frequently achieved (67-100%). Based on the interviews, the different outcomes were rated as either 1 (fully achieved), 0.5 (partially achieved) or 0 (not achieved), then an average of the scores is calculated according to the number of respondents for each question and shown as a percentage by topic.[11] The following sections provide further details on the reasons why specific outcomes are met with different degrees.

[11] The number of respondents per outcome ranges from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 19.

Collective outcomes	NGO community outcomes	Co-coordinating NGO outcomes
Additional capacity, expertise and resources **100%**	Inclusive cluster priorities and approches **45%**	Improved access to information **32%**
Strengthened NGO participation – including a wider geographical coverage **88%**	Strengthened transparency in cluster governance **34%**	Strategic positioning: strengthened political stance and access to decision-makers **67%**
Strengthened L/Nas participation **28%**	Strengthened accountability in cluster governance **22%**	Strengthened profile and reputation **68%**
Strengthened NGO buy-in **47%**	Strengthened collective advocacy **42%**	Increased opportunities to attract funding **50%**
Strengthened linkages with sub-national clusters **53%**		Stronger alignment between cluster priorities and co-coordinating NGO priorities **31%**
Strengthened protection monitoring system and analysis **59%**		

Table 8 - Degree of achievement of protection cluster co-coordination outcomes

Overall, while delivering on low-risk outcomes, such as providing additional capacity and resources (7.2.1, 7.4.1.1) or strengthening NGO participation (7.4.2.1), appears to be easy wins for co-coordinating NGOs, achieving more strategic outcomes is a challenge. Interviews have strongly highlighted the imbalanced power relationship and the

capacity of the CLA to exclude the co-coordinator from strategic tasks (7.5). This results in an unequal and moderate impact of co-coordinators on more strategic outcomes, such as enhancing the inclusiveness of cluster priorities and approches or strengthening transparency in cluster governance (7.5.2.2, 8.1.2.2). In most instances, having an impact on highly sensitive and political outcomes, such as accountability in cluster governance (7.5.3) and collective advocacy on sensitive matters (7.4.2.1.5), are out of the direct reach of the co-coordinator. Having a positive impact in these areas requires highly skilled co-coordinators, with a deep understanding of their role, who are able to strategise and navigate the humanitarian system in order to raise awareness and gather political support (8.1.2.3). On a more positive note, the simple fact of holding the co-coordination position seems to have beneficial repercussions for the co-coordinating NGO in terms of strengthened profile and political stance.

8.1.1 Collective outcomes: strengthening the functioning of the cluster for a more protective environment

As has been shown in sections 7.2.1 and 7.4, co-coordination is contributing to strengthen the functioning of the cluster by providing, in particular, additional capacity, expertise and resources to the cluster, strengthening the participation of the NGO community, and enhancing the robustness of protection monitoring systems. While assessing the impact of the protection cluster is beyond of the scope of this research, we can nonetheless argue that co-coordination is likely to contribute to a more protective environment.

8.1.1.1 Additional capacity, expertise and resources

NGOs significantly contribute to enhance the capacity of protection clusters (7.2.1), with this outcome reaching the highest success rate (100%). NGOs have made clear progress in their capacity to support protection clusters with 91% of cluster co-coordinators being now fully dedicated to this role (7.2.1.1). In addition, co-coordinators are also strong advocates for the recruitment of additional human resources to strengthen specific cluster functions, such a protection monitoring analysis, information management, AoR co-coordinator and sub-cluster co-coordinator (7.4.1.1). While short-term funding and gaps are still an impediment, the investment of NGOs in cluster co-coordination contributes to better equip clusters in terms of human resources to fulfil their role.

NGOs contribute a modest amount of additional financial resources to the cluster. Co-coordinators have indicated having limited budget to conduct cluster activities (7.4.1.2).

8.1.1.2 Strengthened NGO participation and buy-in

The participation of NGOs is strongly strengthened through co-coordination. Engaging other protection actors is regarded by co-coordinators as a core aspect of their role (7.4.2.1). Co-coordinating NGOs benefit from an inherent trust between NGOs, and co-coordinators report a clear perception that their work contributes to enhancing their participation (7.4.2.1.1), with an 88% achievement rate. As NGOs are better included in cluster processes and decisions, 47% of the co-coordinators reported that the legitimacy of the mechanism is in turn strengthened (6.3.3). As demonstrated by Knox-Clarke, one of the key strengths of shared-leadership is indeed to increase ownership over a vision and a plan (2013). Nonetheless, the presence of a co-coordinator does not automatically guarantee the buy-in of the NGO community as, regardless of the presence of a co-coordinator, NGOs will disengage if the cluster becomes dysfunctional (7.4.2.1.4).

While they are particularly effective at engaging like-minded organisations, the role played by co-coordinators in strengthening L/Nas participation remains weak (7.4.2.1.3). Nevertheless, in the few instances where this was an area of focus (28%), encouraging results were achieved, indicating the potential for greater outcomes in this area.

Through a broader participation of protection actors, co-coordinators allow the protection cluster to cover a wider geographical area.[12] This is particularly useful in areas where the CLA is lacking access due to security constraints. This is correlated with a diversification of access to local authorities, leaders and other stakeholders.

8.1.1.3 Strengthened linkages with sub-national clusters

Although strengthening links with sub-national clusters is not necessarily their primary focus, 53% of the co-coordinators nonetheless mentioned having a positive impact in this area (7.4.2.2). Co-coordinators have proved successful at systematising information channels – both for sub-national clusters to report to the cluster and not only to UNHCR,

[12] This outcome is a direct consequence of the participation of NGOs in the cluster. As these two outcomes, “strengthening NGO participation” and “access to a wider geographical area”, are inextricably linked, they are considered as one outcome in table 8.

but also for information from the national cluster to reach the whole cluster. They can promote upstream advocacy, enhance data collection and ensure the work of the cluster is informed by field priorities and programmatic experience. Co-coordinators can build on the presence of NGO sub-cluster co-coordinators as an entry point to create connections. However, sub-national clusters remain mainly led by the CLA and, when their role is not clearly explained, co-coordinators can face significant challenges to be included in information flows.

8.1.1.4 Strengthened protection monitoring system and analysis

59% of the co-coordinators have reported a successful focus on strengthening the protection monitoring system through the development of harmonised tools and data sharing protocols. “We managed to get 30 agencies to finally agree to use one tool to collect the data.” A more robust protection monitoring system is indeed critical to the functioning to the cluster as it enables the identification of risks and needs, thereby facilitating the attraction of funding and its targeted allocation to the most pressing areas. Co-coordinators can also contribute to a more inclusive protection data analysis: “We then did a collective analysis and protection monitoring update through a workshop where we divided tasks.” This is an important area of work, as clusters are often criticised for extracting data without feeding it back to their members.

If co-coordinators can have a real impact on improving protection monitoring systems where this is an area of focus, the question of the sustainability of this work remains. Co-coordinators who worked in the same contexts at different times have indicated that they have had to rebuild protection monitoring systems. Hence, the institutionalisation of these tools appears to remain a challenge.

8.1.1.5 Examples of enhanced cluster functioning through co-coordination

Concrete examples of the impact of their role on the functioning of the cluster were shared by co-coordinators. When the collaboration is functioning well, co-coordinators have been able to ensure higher levels of dissemination of protection information and advocacy, to improve internal dialogue and coordination with protection actors, especially NGOs, both at national and sub-national level. They also ensure the representation of NGOs in relevant fora. Co-coordinators can also play a central role in

terms of defining strategic priorities and directions of protection work within the cluster, the ICCG and the HCT (e.g. protection of civilians, protection of education, strengthened protection monitoring, etc.). They substantially contribute to the provision of technical support for the development of planning and strategic documents (HNO/HRP) and the CBPF allocation strategies. They provide technical advice and orientation to cluster partners, especially regarding funding applications. They contribute to the submission of protection situation reports and assessment reports, advocacy briefings, monitoring reports and other products requested by OCHA. Often, co-coordinators support the organisation of training and the creation of technical tools.

Finaly, some co-coordinators have highlighted the strategic role they play to bring resources to the sector, in particular through regular meetings with donors: “Even though there is a funding decline, we always received more funds. That is because on a monthly basis I reach out to donors and I keep them briefed of the needs.” In other instances, co-coordinators are restricted in their interactions with donors, which do not allow them to play this role consistently (7.5.2.2).

8.1.2 Outcomes for the NGO community

The cluster co-coordinator position is strongly seen as an interagency role with an important focus placed on the need for this role to benefit the wider NGO community (7.3.2). If co-coordination is successfully contributing to strengthen the participation of NGOs, it has been shown in sections 7.4.2.1 and 7.5.2 that mixed results were achieved in terms of more strategic outcomes benefiting the NGO community.

8.1.2.1 A more collaborative and inclusive cluster: counterbalancing the dominance of the CLA

The co-coordinator role aims at a better inclusion of NGO priorities and approaches (3.7, 6.6). Nearly all co-coordinators place an important emphasis on including NGOs in cluster activities (7.4.2.1.1), seeking inputs and trying to develop cluster products that are representative of a plurality of perspectives (7.4.2.1.2). By contributing to create a more inclusive cluster, co-coordination is a means to mitigate the dominance of the CLA over decision-making and priority setting. However, the results have been mixed with a success rate of 45%. This is due to the fact that the extent to which this outcome is

achieved depends on the readiness of NGOs to engage and the space left by the CLA to the co-coordinators to play the role of a counterbalance (7.5). Clusters where co-coordinators have been able to gather the support of key protection actors, in particular through a functioning SAG, have been more successful in counterbalancing the CLA's perspective in the governance of the cluster (7.4.2.1.2). In contexts where the co-coordinator is isolated and the CLA has a limited will to collaborate, this role has been confined to the margin but still appeared as necessary and worthwhile. As one interviewee put it: "if we keep fighting, we could obtain little changes and make a little difference in every guidance, every meeting, every document where we input. For now, it is worth it."

8.1.2.2 Strengthening transparency in cluster governance

Enhancing NGO participation, including them in processes, sharing more systematically information on the decisions made and the progress of cluster processes bring transparency to cluster governance. This gives partners the possibility to keep an oversight on the functioning of the cluster, and to influence it. However, co-coordinators are also often themselves excluded from cluster communications. Indeed, 45% of the current co-coordinators have been deliberately excluded from communications in certain instances, as was mentioned in section 7.5.2.2. When they are sidelined, not copied in emails, or when decisions are made without them being consulted, they bear witness to a lack of transparency in cluster governance. In some instances, which appear to remain relatively rare (34%), they are in a position to challenge it, in others the power imbalance may be too important to ask for accountability.

Throughout the interviews, funding allocations were repeatedly pointed out as a contentious area of the functioning of the cluster, where co-coordinators have an important role to play to enhance transparency and legitimacy (7.3.2.4). Their presence contributes to the perception that the mechanism is collective, and not only UN-led, and the presence of two people helps to maintain checks and balances. In particular, they can enhance openness on the criteria for the allocations of funds or the prioritisation of areas. Nevertheless, despite their efforts, co-coordinators are sometimes confronted with bad faith behaviours. They can be excluded from strategic conversations, and the prioritisation of areas or the scoring of proposals can still be skewed in favour of the CLA

(7.3.1). Hence, if they contribute to enhanced transparency of funding allocations, they cannot be considered a guarantor of a fully transparent process.

8.1.2.3 Strengthening accountability in cluster governance

Strengthening accountability is the area with the lowest achievement rate (22%). When the CLA is underperforming in its cluster role, co-coordinating NGOs are not in a strong position to hold the CLA accountable. Sections 7.1.2 and 7.5.3 revealed that dispute resolution mechanisms are dysfunctional and, to mitigate risks, co-coordinating NGOs never formally make use of them. Instead, co-coordinating NGOs often continue to engage at all costs, even when the co-coordinator is placed in a challenging work environment. In best case scenarios, they attempt to gather the support of the NGO community and donors, and have, on occasion, succeeded in obtaining gradual changes.

Holding the CLA accountable for its performance is in fact the responsibility of the HC and ERC (IASC, 2015a). However, in practice, the HCT does not play an active role in seeking solutions regarding recurrent problems faced by the CLAs in their cluster role, nor does it hold them accountable for their performance (Kemp, 2012; UNICEF, 2022b). In 2022, for instance, only 57% of all clusters across sectors had completed their annual performance monitoring exercise (IASC, 2023). Hence, while the CLA strongly uses its accountability to the HCT as a justification to dominate the cluster's positions and decisions (7.5.2.1), it appears that this accountability mechanism is, in practice, largely dysfunctional. As a result, the mere fact of contributing to hold the CLA accountable for its governance of the cluster is highly challenging for cluster co-coordinators.

Co-coordinators can nonetheless be successful whistle-blowers. They have reported that they have pushed back and flagged to the NGO community and donors unprincipled operational positions supported by UNHCR through the cluster, such as providing cash to people to return to dangerous areas as part of their durable strategy (7.3.1.1). One co-coordinator stated: "I felt like, actually, I spent 30% of my time in the cluster just trying to rein UNHCR back from crazy stuff." In practice, co-coordinators are left with little options to hold the CLA accountable, as one interviewee mentioned: "I don't think there's much that we can do. Unless [...] we go public advocacy, against the agencies or against the HCT." In such instances, it requires the co-coordinator to muster the support

not only of the NGO community, but also of donors to keep the UN accountable: “when you have that combination of NGOs and donors pushing back, it might succeed. [...] If you don't have both, [...] when it reaches that level of sensitivity and strategy, it's going to be very, very rare that they're able to keep anyone accountable.”

Hence, while co-coordinators can be a trigger for more accountability and have succeeded, in certain instances, to challenge unethical operational positions, gathering the necessary support remains a challenging endeavour. This requires experience in cluster coordination and leadership skills, aligned with a strong and creative personality to find workarounds.

8.1.2.4 Strengthened collective advocacy

Co-coordinators achieve mixed results in terms of strengthening collective advocacy through their role (42% success rate). Section 7.4.2.1.5 has demonstrated that co-coordinators can strengthen collective advocacy, in particular due to the increased trust and participation of the NGO community in the cluster. However, the support of cluster partners is not easy to gather as they can be reluctant “to pursue an advocacy agenda that is critical towards, or goes against, the interests of the Lead Agency, which is often also a donor” (NRC, 2013a, p. 8). In addition, the CLA ultimately controls the more visible cluster advocacy function, as “the cluster cannot defend a position that is not supported by the CLA“ (GPC, 2022, p. 10). This results in weaker outcomes on sensitive topics. The CLA is commonly trying to preserve its interests and the relationship with the host government (7.3.1.1). Beyond highlighting bad faith behaviours when the CLA defends a position on behalf of the cluster that is not endorsed by the members, co-coordinators have little leverage to play the role of a counterbalance as the CLA is granted the right of veto over cluster positions (7.1.3).

8.1.3 Outcomes for the co-coordinating NGO

Co-coordinating NGOs are either emphasising the neutrality of the co-coordinator’s role (7.3.2.5) or not using the position in an intentional manner (7.2.2.2), resulting in mixed outcomes for co-coordinating NGOs.

As outlined in section 7.3.2.4, even when co-coordinating NGOs are not actively pursuing their own interest, the position nonetheless brings certain benefits to their

organisation. In particular, the position strengthens their profile and reputation (68% success rate) which, in turn, has the potential to increase opportunities to attract funding (50% success rate). As the main interlocutors of the co-coordinator are external actors, co-coordinators are well-known within the humanitarian community: “oftentimes a co-coordinator is going to be better known by donors [...], than your Head of Programmes, sometimes even than the CD” said a former co-coordinator. Interviewees provided several examples of instances where the co-coordinating NGO was approached by donors due to this visibility, which resulted in concrete funding opportunities. In addition, co-coordination roles significantly contribute to strengthen the relation with the CLA (NRC, 2013a). For instance, a CD said: “I'm not sure that we would have the respect of UNHCR [...] in relation to the many issues around return if we were not also co-coordinator of the production cluster.”

The co-coordinator position can also contribute to increase the political stance of the NGO (67% success rate), in particular when they hold a seat at the HCT. An NGO Director stated: “I am known as the representative of the organisation that is co-leading, for example, the protection cluster, access working group, the HLP task force [...]. When I speak at the HCT, there's an additional weight, which I have, because we are committed to the humanitarian coordination system.” However, NGOs do not always hold a seat at the HCT, and strategic investment in multiple coordination positions is rare, which limits the scope of the results.

Although co-coordinating NGOs are in position to gain privileged access to information, co-coordinators have reported that their parent organisation does not always make the most of this potential (7.3.2.5). Indeed, the achievement rate is only 32%. In the same way, while the co-coordinating NGOs could leverage their role to influence cluster priorities, the significant disconnect between co-coordinators and their parent NGOs often limits this impact (7.3.2.3), resulting in a low success rate (31%).

8.2 Have co-coordinating NGOs made progress in achieving outcomes?

While co-coordinating NGOs have identified since the early 2010s what was the potential of this role, the section 8.1 shows that they haven’t capitalised on the

experiences accumulated over time to better leverage these positions and achieve greater outcomes.

Since 2013, the most significant change has been a shift towards fully dedicated positions (7.2.1.1). This has resulted in better working conditions for co-coordinators and strengthened the neutrality of the role. However, this was not necessarily accompanied by a more strategic investment on the part of co-coordinating NGOs. The value of the role remains somewhat poorly understood, objectives are rarely defined, and progress is often not tracked (7.2.3).

Despite the existence of new global guidance (GPC, 2022) and reiterated commitments to cluster co-coordination from the CLA,[13] the collaborative environment has not evolved accordingly. The adoption of MoUs remains low (7.1.1). The lack of transparency and accountability in cluster governance, as well as instances of bad faith behaviours and power abuses, are still noted as significant obstacles to the achievement of outcomes in cluster co-coordination (7.5, 8.1.2).

Given the inherent challenges associated with co-coordination and the lack of political (7.5.3) and technical support in place (7.2.2), it is unsurprising that the level of staff turnover for co-coordinators has remained high – three quarters of the current co-coordinators are new to this role in the sample. The current cohort of co-coordinators appears to be, as in the past, confronted with the challenge of identifying what is expected of them, defining effective means of fulfilling their role, while learning how to navigate a highly political and, at times, hostile environment.

Overall, the lack of access to past learning and the absence of an improved collaborative environment are preventing NGOs from performing better in these roles.

8.3 How to achieve better outcomes through protection cluster co-coordination?

Co-coordination is significantly contributing to enhance the functioning of the cluster (8.1.1) and, even with minimal investment, has proved beneficial for the co-coordinating NGO (8.1.3). Nevertheless, there is a significant scope for improvement with regards to the achievement of strategic outcomes.

[13] See section 2, p.10 - UNHCR opening remarks at 2022 GPC Meeting on Co-Coordination

The analysis of the five dimensions of the collaboration process throughout the chapter 7 enabled the identification of a number of factors that can contribute to a more successful co-coordination of the protection cluster. Summarising these factors (see Annex 1) reveals that three key interrelated elements influence its success:

1. The relationship with the CLA and the capacity of the co-coordinating NGO to position the co-coordinator as a useful, credible and powerful counterpart.
2. The capacity of the co-coordinating NGO to invest strategically in this role.
3. The level of support and the relationship between the co-coordinators and their parent organisation.

The following sections explain in detail why these three elements are of key importance to create an enabling environment for a successful collaboration.

8.3.1 Relationship with the CLA: positioning the co-coordinator as a useful, credible and powerful counterpart

The willingness of the CLA to collaborate, or lack thereof, has a cascading effect on the ability of the co-coordinator to achieve any outcome. Consequently, the primary and most significant obstacle to co-coordination is often a lack of collaboration space. Systemic parameters, such as power imbalance or a lack of transparency and accountability, limit or block the access of the co-coordinator to this space. While direct action on these systemic parameters will remain a challenge, co-coordinating NGOs can nonetheless influence them and enlarge their access to the collaboration space by positioning the co-coordinator as a useful, credible and powerful counterpart in the collaboration (see fig. 6).

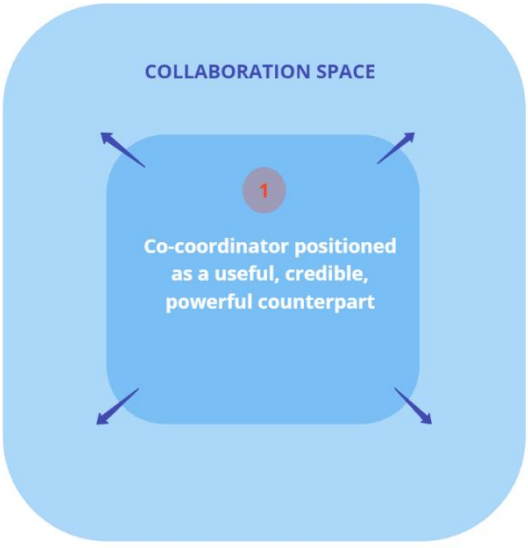

Figure 6 - Expanding the co-coordinator's access to the collaboration space (step 1)

A strategy commonly described as an entry point to enter the collaboration space, is for co-coordinators to position themselves as a support – they are a useful counterpart (7.5.1). Achieving strategic outcomes requires to expand this support role, to establish themselves as credible and powerful counterparts. To do so, different enablers are at the disposal of the co-coordinating NGO. The table 9 below summarises the recommendations for the co-coordinating NGOs to better position the co-coordinator in the relationship with the CLA.

Officialising the collaboration through the negotiation of an MoU and introducing the incoming co-coordinator to relevant coordination bodies will set the tone and help the co-coordinator to create a collaborative space where they are seen as an official and credible counterpart (7.1.1). Setting ground rules around a shared power arrangement, including a joint decision-making mechanism (7.1.3), defining a hosting arrangement (7.1.4) and agreeing on the division of tasks (7.2.3.2), are the necessary basis of a healthy collaboration.

As shown in sections 7.4.2.2, 7.5.2.2 and 8.1.3, NGOs which hold the cluster co-coordinator position in a context for a long time or hold other coordination positions in the same cluster – either as AoR co-coordinator, sub-cluster co-coordinator or co-coordinator of other clusters – are more likely to be considered as a trusted partner. Ensuring that progress review meetings are regularly taking place between the CLA and NGO coordinators' managers are a signal to the CLA that consideration is given to the role (7.2.2.1). Finally, the ability to bring concrete programmatic expertise and first-hand information from areas where the CLA does not have access, is critical to give weight to the co-coordinator in the collaboration (7.4.1.2, 7.3.2.5).

In order to be respected as an equal, it is necessary that the position is not funded by the CLA and that the co-coordinating NGO is not one of its implementing partners (7.2.1.2). While the power relationship will remain unbalanced even if these conditions are fulfilled, the countervailing power of the NGO co-coordinator lies in their ability to connect with and mobilise other NGOs (7.4.2.1). Being able to position themselves as the representative of the NGO community gives them a much-needed weight to counterbalance the political power of the CLA. The strategic set up of a SAG, to oversee the functioning of the cluster, adds transparency and accountability to the cluster

governance (7.4.2.1.2). The positioning of the co-coordinator as a credible and powerful counterpart is a prerequisite for achieving greater strategic outcomes.

Recommendation 1: Position the cluster co-coordinator as a useful, credible and powerful counterpart

The co-coordinating NGO should position the co-coordinator as a useful counterpart by:
- Establishing clear ways of working as a healthy base for the collaboration:
  - Agree on a joint decision-making mechanism
  - Agree on a clear division of tasks
  - Agree on a flexible hosting arrangement, working from both UNHCR and NGO offices

The co-coordinating NGO should position the co-coordinator as a credible counterpart by: - Officialising the position through the negotiation and signing of an MoU agreement - Introducing the co-coordinator to relevant coordination bodies (UNHCR, OCHA) - Requesting the scheduling of regular progress meetings with the manager of the CLA's coordinator - Ensuring the role is explained to the coordination team at national and sub-national levels - Explaining the role to the parent NGO's Team and ensuring access is granted to relevant information and programmatic expertise
The co-coordinating NGO should position the co-coordinator as a powerful counterpart by: - Ensuring the position is not funded by the CLA and the co-coordinating NGO is not an implementing partner of the CLA - Ensuring the co-coordinator has the capacity to mobilise support of other actors by maintaining the right level of neutrality - Encouraging the co-coordinator to set up a SAG composed of key protection actors, local actors and donors - Investing strategically in other coordination positions (AoRs or sub-national clusters, coordination of other clusters) and/or pursuing a seat at the HCT as NGO representative

Table 9 - Recommendation 1: Position the cluster co-coordinator as a useful, credible and powerful counterpart

Furthermore, as illustrated below (fig. 7) and explained in further details in the two following sections, both a strategic investment in the role and a balanced support from the parent NGO will contribute to further strengthen the perception of the co-coordinator as a trustworthy partner.

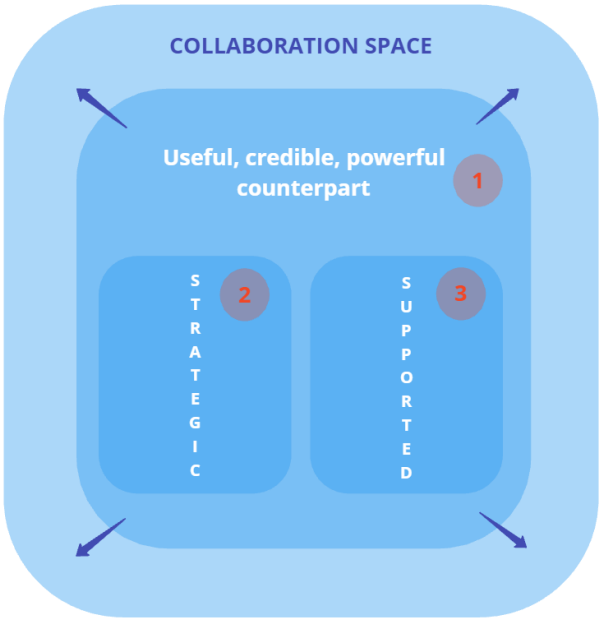

Figure 7 - Expanding the co-coordinator's access to the collaboration space (step 2 & 3)

8.3.2 Investing strategically to achieve specific outcomes

The achievement of specific and strategic outcomes requires to have, in the first place, a vision for the role. Too often, a clear understanding of the value of the role is lacking and NGOs take on the position with minimal expectations (7.2.2.2). Alternatively, the role is perceived as contributing to a wider, undefined, systemic outcome resulting in delegating a staff to the cluster with the assumption that it will be beneficial for the system in any case (7.3.2.2).

Knowing which outcomes can be achieved (see table 8), strategically selecting them and including them in a workplan together with clear deliverables, will ensure greater and more targeted success (7.2.3.2). Currently, the majority of the co-coordinators (81%) do not have clear objectives and their performance is not tracked. Given the heavy workload and unpredictable nature of coordination roles, if deliverables are not defined and tracked, it is unlikely that they will be actively pursued and met. Because their time is limited, co-coordinators should strategically invest in specific areas where they have

a comparative advantage, or a space can be filled. For instance, investing in strengthening NGO participation is almost seen as a systematic priority, while strengthening linkages with sub-national clusters (7.4.2.2) or engaging L/Nas (7.4.2.1.3) depends on whether this role is already taken by the coordinator, whether their project includes a specific deliverable in this regard, or whether the presence of their NGO at sub-national level can give them a comparative advantage.

High turnover (6.2), unfilled positions due to lengthy recruitment processes (7.2.1.3) and under qualified staff undermine the credibility of the co-coordinating NGO (7.5.1). Hence, the timely and strategic recruitment of a staff with the suitable profile is key to maintain the collaboration space and build on the legitimacy acquired by predecessors. Because co-coordination is an exercise of power in a shared and contested space, it requires versatile communication and leadership skills, together with a strong understanding of the coordination system (7.2.1.3). In order for co-coordinators to be effective from the outset, it is essential that they receive systematic onboarding and a handover note. This will ensure that they are fully aware of the value and challenges associated with their role (7.2.2.2).

The table 10 below captures the main recommendations for co-coordinating NGOs to invest strategically in co-coordination.

Recommendation 2: Invest strategically in cluster co-coordination to achieve specific outcomes

The co-coordinating NGO should conduct a strategic recruitment by:

- Ensuring the selected candidate has:
  - Previous experience in interagency role and a strong understanding of the cluster system
  - Strong networking and interpersonal skills
  - Leadership skills
- Ensuring the position is filled consistently

The co-coordinating NGO should have a vision for the role and:

- Provide systematic onboarding explaining the value and the challenges associated with the role
- Ensure the co-coordinator's line manager has a strong understanding of the value of the role
- Define clear objectives and deliverables, which should be included in a workplan and tracked
- Capitalise on learnings from past experiences, ensure a handover is systematically shared with the line manager at the end of the assignment

Table 10 - Recommendation 2: Invest strategically in cluster co-coordination to achieve specific outcomes

8.3.3 A balanced and supportive relationship with the parent NGO

To be able to convene and represent other NGOs, co-coordinators need the adequate level of neutrality vis-à-vis their parent NGO (see fig. 8 and section 7.3.2.1). Building this neutrality through a dedicated position (7.2.1.1), a reporting line to the NGO director (7.2.2.1) and minimising involvement in programmatic work (7.3.2.1) is key for the co-coordinator to receive the collective back up of other NGOs. While this neutrality is foundational, an excess of neutrality resulting in a complete segregation with the parent NGO, can also be detrimental to the achievement of outcomes (7.3.2.5).

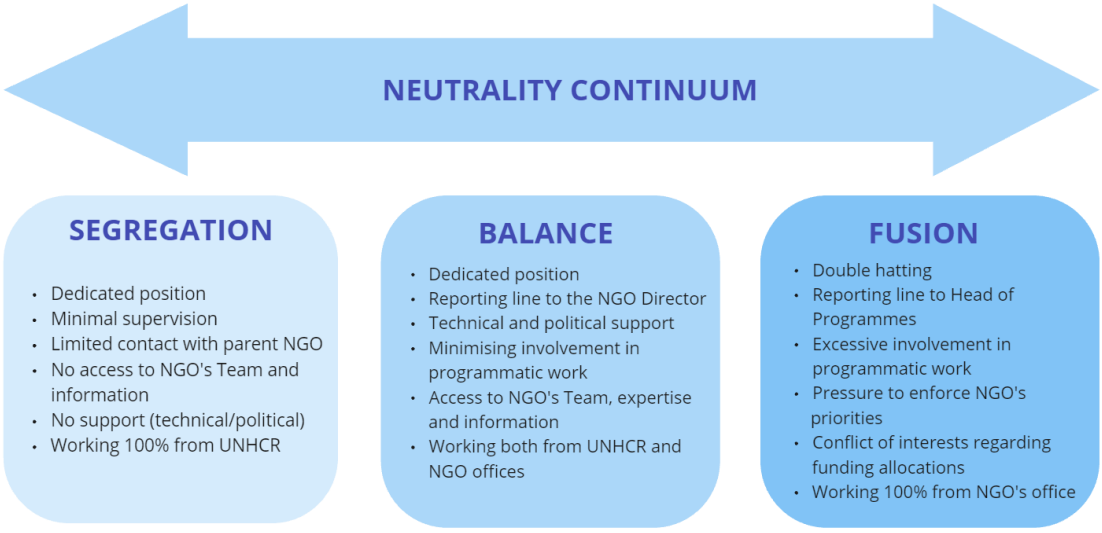

Figure 8 - Neutrality continuum of cluster co-coordination

When the value of the role is unclear or the neutrality of the role is over emphasised, co-coordinators appear to receive little support from their organisation and are cut from resources they need to play their role. Indeed, having the political back up and a

privileged access to the programmatic expertise of a respected NGO contributes to build the credibility of the co-coordinator in the collaboration (7.3.2.5). In addition, being supported to achieve clearly defined outcomes, while having access to a technical line able to advise on coordination matters is seen as important enablers by co-coordinators (7.2.2.2).

Consequently, both a strategic investment and a balanced support from the parent NGO contribute to the strengthening of the co-coordinator's position as a trustworthy partner. Furthermore, these two key elements have the potential to create a virtuous circle which will further enlarge the collaboration space (see fig. 9).

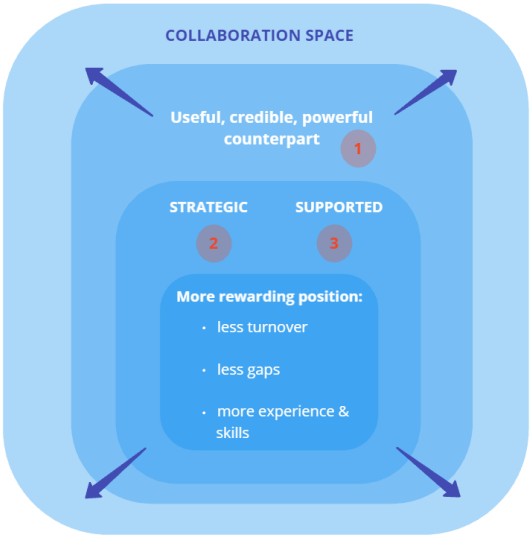

Figure 9 - Expanding the co-coordinator's access to the collaboration space (step 4)

Indeed, defining objectives will allow the co-coordinator to leverage their expertise and evaluate the impact of their work, which will result in more rewarding positions. As the position becomes more rewarding, co-coordinators will remain in the role for longer, reducing turnover and gaps, and increasing as a result the credibility of the co-coordinating NGO. Co-coordinators will gain more experience and skills, enabling them to navigate this complex environment more effectively and with greater credibility, power and impact. The recommendations to establish a balanced and supportive relationship with the co-coordinator are consolidated in the table 11 below.

Recommendation 3: Establish a balanced and supportive relationship with the co-coordinator
The co-coordinating NGO should properly balance the neutrality of the role by: - Ensuring the co-coordinator is fully dedicated to their cluster position and reporting to the NGO Director - Ensuring sufficient separation with programmatic work to enhance the capacity of the co-coordinator to play an honest broker role - Ensuring the NGO's Team understands the neutrality of the role and has access to information useful to their organisation
The co-coordinating NGO should provide adequate technical and political support by: - Ensuring regular progress meetings are taken place with the line manager and adequate strategic and/or political support is provided when required - Ensuring the co-coordinator has access to a technical line with coordination expertise

Table 11 - Recommendation 3: Establish a balanced and supportive relationship with the co-coordinator

In conclusion, as demonstrated above, intentionally leveraging the way co-coordinators are positioned in the relationship with the CLA, while supporting them and investing strategically in their role, will enable co-coordinators to expand their access to the collaboration space. This, in turn, will allow NGOs to deliver better outcomes through their investment in protection cluster co-coordination.

The study has demonstrated that, despite being a difficult endeavour, cluster co-coordination achieves a number of positive outcomes: it strengthens the capacity of the cluster, enhances the participation of NGOs, positions co-coordinating NGOs as strong protection actors and increases their opportunities to attract funding. However, achieving strategic outcomes remains a challenge, and the research has observed limited progress over time. The absence of the ability to learn from experience, the lack of improvement in the collaborative environment, coupled with the high turnover rates of co-coordinators, has not allowed NGOs to perform better in these roles. In order to achieve greater outcomes in the future, it will be necessary for co-coordinating NGOs to engage in a more strategic manner. In particular, the research has shown that it is of utmost importance that the co-coordinators are positioned as useful, credible and

powerful counterparts to create an enabling collaborative environment where better outcomes can be achieved.

9. Conclusion

The co-coordination of the protection cluster by NGOs comes with great potential and great challenges. It places NGOs at the heart of a mechanism which can heavily impact the orientation and capacity of the protection response. Through their position in the cluster, NGO co-coordinators are placed in a position of leadership, and as such, in a position of power.

Co-coordinators are a second pair of hands for the cluster, they strengthen its capacity to meet multiple and ever-growing expectations. They draft strategic documents and have access to high-level decision fora and donors, where they can advocate for protection and shape a discourse where a plurality of priorities and voices are represented. Because they are naturally seen as an ally by the NGO community, they have the ability to strengthen NGO participation in the cluster, creating a virtuous circle where the cluster becomes in turn more effective, relevant and legitimate. Co-coordinators are seen and known in the humanitarian community. Co-coordinating NGOs are directly benefiting from this strategic positioning, they see their visibility and access to funding opportunities increasing. With minimal investment on the part of their organisations, co-coordinators appear to have achieved positive results in these areas.

Was this success intentional? In part, yes. However, a more nuanced understanding of the collaboration process reveals a somewhat darker picture. Over the past decade, while the same co-coordinating NGOs have consistently assumed co-coordination roles, they haven't fully capitalised on their experiences to better perform in this role. Co-coordinators commence and leave their positions within short timeframes, are often left with little guidance to understand what is expected of them, and are given even less support to achieve self-determined goals on which their organisations have little oversight.

At the global level, NGOs have been successful in negotiating a more equal partnership through the endorsement of an official MoU for co-coordination arrangements. However, this success did not translate to the field level, where this shared power agreement for a more equal and transparent collaboration, has been mostly kept in the drawers. Meanwhile, the testimonies of the co-coordinators have shed light on some worrying practices. The CLA seems to have not only continued to dismiss the Principles

of Partnership it had committed to, but to have also repeatedly engaged in bad faith to preserve its financial and political interests. The UN are a powerful counterpart. By being accountable to the HC for the functioning of the cluster and through their status as provider of last resort, they have carved a space to ultimately retain control over the functioning of the cluster, that co-coordinating NGOs are trying to influence. Because the power relationship between the coordinators is inherently imbalanced, accountability mechanisms are dysfunctional and both underperformance in cluster governance and power abuses are left unaddressed. Caught up in the arcane of power, very few cluster co-coordinators seem to have received from their parent organisation the technical and political support they needed to better navigate this space.

Greater effectiveness, inclusivity, transparency and accountability in cluster governance are the tenets of cluster co-coordination. However, co-coordinators continue to be nimbly sidelined and left at the margin of what should be a collaborative space. Too often, the capacity of the co-coordinators to perform their role is simply conditioned by the readiness of their counterpart to collaborate. Achieving meaningful results in strategic areas, such as courageous advocacy on sensitive protection issues, requires NGOs to approach co-coordination much more strategically.

While co-coordination should always be approached with humility and diplomacy, co-coordinators are not inevitably powerless subordinates. This thorough analysis of the process of collaboration shows that co-coordinating NGOs have an important role to play to equip co-coordinators with a countervailing power. Defining achievable objectives, ensuring they are backed by their organisation and have the capacity to mobilise the NGO community, will position them as useful, credible and powerful counterparts. These elements are key for co-coordinators to deliver on strategic outcomes which are, for now and in most instances, out of their reach.

Opening the black box of cluster co-coordination showed that co-coordination indeed comes with great potential and great challenges. Challenges, because it brings to the decision table a diversity of perspectives, and therefore, increases the chances of disagreement and conflict. Potential, because it is this very diversity of mandates and skill sets that is likely to bring an effective response to the complex protection risks faced by affected populations.

Whether better coordination results in better protection for communities is not a simple equation and requires further investigation. However, even when placed in challenging collaborative environments, co-coordinators have repeatedly stated that co-coordination was both beneficial and necessary for the response. Unleashing its full potential will require NGOs to approach their role differently. By intentionally and strategically positioning, supporting and empowering their co-coordinators, NGOs will be able to optimise the potential of a position which is, in many respects, a delicate exercise of power in a contested space.

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Annex 1 – Enablers and blockers to protection cluster co-coordination

Enablers	Blockers
Relationship with CLA: co-coordinator perceived as a useful, credible and powerful counterpart	
Officialisation of the role: - MoU agreement signed - Co-coordinator introduced to relevant coordination bodies (UNHCR, OCHA)	Lack of formal structures for the role: - No MoU or ToR - No introduction of the co-coordinator to relevant coordination bodies (UNHCR, OCHA)
Understanding of the role: - In the cluster at national and sub-national levels	Lack of understanding of the role: - From the CLA (coordinator, coordinator's manager, UNHCR protection staff) - From the coordination team (Information Management Officer) - From sub-national cluster coordinators
Clear ways of working: - Joint decision-making mechanism in place - Clarity on CLA sign off procedure for cluster products - Agreement on division of tasks - Flexible hosting arrangement: working from both UNHCR and NGO offices	Lack of clarity on ways of working: - Unilateral decisions, exclusion from communications - Cumbersome sign off procedures for cluster products leading to delays or inaction - Unclarity on roles and responsibilities or work in silo - Strict working arrangement: working exclusively from UNHCR or NGO office

Credible counterpart:
- NGO has experience in cluster co-coordination or other coordination roles
- Regular progress meetings between CLA and NGO coordinators' managers
- Access to information and programmatic expertise from parent NGO
	Fragile credibility:
	- Lack of experience from parent NGO in coordination
	- Isolation from parent NGO:
	  - No meetings between CLA and NGO coordinator's managers
	  - No access to information and programmatic expertise

Powerful counterpart: - Position not funded by the CLA - Co-coordinating NGO is not an implementing partner of the CLA - Capacity to mobilise support of other actors - Functioning SAG - Ability to request transparency and accountability in cluster governance	Weak counterpart: - Position funded by the CLA - Co-coordinating NGO is an implementing partner of the CLA - Isolation from NGO cluster partners - SAG not in place or dysfunctional - Compliance when confronted with lack of transparency or accountability in cluster governance
Strategic investment from co-coordinating NGO	
Strategic recruitment: - Experience in interagency role, strong understanding of the cluster system - Networking/interpersonal skills - Leadership skills - Seniority - Technical skills - Co-coordinator position filled consistently	Non-strategic recruitment: - Lack of experience in coordination - Lack of communication and/or diplomatic skills - Compliant personality and/or self-censorship when confronted with lack of transparency or accountability in cluster governance - Lack of seniority - Lack of technical skills - Gaps and high turnover
Vision for the role: - Understanding of the value of the role by line management - Onboarding - Clear objectives included in workplan - Deliverables and indicators to assess progress	Lack of objectives for the role: - Lack of understanding of the value of the role by line management - No onboarding - No workplan/workplan not followed - Lack of benchmarks to assess co-coordinator's performance and progress
Balanced support from parent NGO	
Neutrality: - Fully dedicated position - Reporting line to NGO Director - Separation with progamme to enhance capacity to play an honest broker role	Lack of neutrality: - Part-time position (double-hatting) - Reporting to Head of Programmes or to protection programme staff - Involvement in programmes impacting the capacity to play an honest broker role

Support from parent NGO:	Lack of support from parent NGO:
- Regular progress meetings with manager - Access to technical line with coordination expertise - Understanding of the role within parent co-coordinating NGO Team	- Minimal supervision - Limited technical support, learning by doing - Lack of understanding of the role within parent co-coordinating NGO Team

Annex 2 – Questionnaire for interviews with protection cluster co-coordinators

1. **Setup of the co-coordination position:**
    - Are you in a dedicated position? (dedicated/double hatting)
    - How long did you stay/have you been in this position?
    - Onboarding: have you received a handover note from your predecessor? Have you received an induction? Were you introduced to PC/OCHA colleagues?
    - Hosting arrangement: are you working from your own organisation's office/from UNHCR/a combination of both?
    - Funding: is the position funded by UNHCR?
    - Is there an MoU in place?

2. **Line management and support:**
    - Who is your line-manager: Country Director/Head of Programmes/Other
    - Are you receiving any peer support? Or support from other part of your organisation other than your line manager? (GPC, global or regional protection adviser)
    - Is there any additional support your organisation could provide which, in your view, would be beneficial?

3. **Division of tasks:**
    - How are tasks divided between you and the cluster coordinator? (in an ad hoc manner, based on strength/skills/expertise, based on discussion/imposed, other)
    - Do you work jointly, or do you strictly divide tasks?
    - Do you have a workplan? Is it useful?
    - Is there a fair division of the workload/of the administrative tasks?

4. **Are you always included in decision-making processes?**
    - If yes, can you explain how?
    - If not, can you provide an example?

5. **Do you feel treated as an equal partner?**
    - Has the CLA vetoed any of your decision? Have you vetoed any of the CLA decision?
    - Can you request the Information Management Officer from the CLA to accomplish certain tasks?
    - Has the cluster coordinator made unilateral decisions? If yes, can you give an example?

6. **How would you describe your relationship with the cluster coordinator?**
    - What strategies are you putting in place to build trust? To find agreements?
    - What does it take to build trust in your experience?
7. **Have you experienced a breach of trust?**

- Has the cluster coordinator/a representant of the CLA at any point behaved in bad faith?
- Has the cluster coordinator/a representant of the CLA taken excessive advantage over you?

8. **Are there issues you cannot address up front with the cluster coordinator? Which strategies do you use to unlock these situations?**
   - Which interpersonal skills do you mainly use?
   - Have you ever used a formal complaint mechanism to address an issue?

9. **In your opinion, is the presence of a cluster co-coordinator contributing to more transparency and accountability in the cluster?**
   - Can you provide an example where co-coordination has strengthened transparency/accountability?

10. **Neutrality: Are there instances where the CLA's priorities are excessively pursued through the cluster? If yes, can you provide an example?**
    - Have you experienced restrictions regarding the information you can share? (with donors, cluster members, your organisation)

11. **Is your organisation using the co-coordinator role strategically?**
    - Are you briefing your Country Director before HCT meetings? (if your CD is an HCT member)
    - What is your perception regarding the neutrality of your role?
    - Are your organisation's priorities excessively pursued through the cluster?
    - Is the protection specialist of your organisation attending cluster meetings/is a member of the PC SAG?

12. **Strengthening NGO participation:** Are you actively trying to strengthen the participation of NGOs in the PC?
    - If yes, what is your strategy?
    - Is it something you see as a specific aspect of your cluster co-coordinator role?
    - Do you have an example of priorities from other NGOs that you brought to the attention of the cluster?
    - Have you conducted joined advocacy efforts with other NGOs?

13. **Are you trying to strengthen linkages with the sub-national clusters?** Is it an aspect of your work where, as co-coordinator, you are trying to make a special contribution?

14. **Do you think co-coordination gives a political weight to your organisation that it would not have otherwise?** (strengthened profile and reputation, access to decision-makers, etc.)

15. **Complementarity/Mutuality:** in which way do you complement the expertise, experience, competency and skills of the cluster coordinator?

- What is your background?
- Could you tell me what are the soft skills you use the most in this position?

16. **Do you think co-coordination helps your organisation to attract funding?**

Optional:

17. **What is/was your biggest success as cluster co-coordinator?**
18. **As cluster co-coordinator, on which aspect of the functioning of the cluster do you think you are having/had the greatest impact?**
19. **What motivates you to stay in this role? / Why have you transitioned to a different role?**

List of confidential annexes:

Annex 3 – Analysis grid (confidential)

Annex 4 – Interview transcripts (confidential)

To ensure their confidentiality, these annexes are not included in this research paper and have been shared separately with the thesis supervisors.