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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (July 2026), pp. 214-226

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/75799>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/y7ss-27fw>

REFERENCES:

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Affolter, Friedrich W., and Michelle Brown. 2026. "The Multifaceted Responsibilities of Education Clusters: Successes and Struggles." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 11 (1): 214-26. <https://doi.org/10.33682/y7ss-27fw>.

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THE MULTIFACETED RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDUCATION CLUSTERS: SUCCESSES AND STRUGGLES

FRIEDRICH W. AFFOLTER AND MICHELLE BROWN

ABSTRACT

Education clusters coordinate education in emergencies responses in crisis-prone and politically volatile settings. In the context of overlapping emergencies and shrinking aid budgets, Humanitarian Reset guidance calls for simpler and localized coordination arrangements. Drawing from education cluster documents across multiple crisis contexts worldwide, along with insights from the coordination literature, this field note examines the achievements and persistent challenges education clusters face in convening diverse actors, harmonizing responses, generating and using evidence, improving cost-effectiveness, and advocating for education needs with decisionmakers. We illustrate the extent to which education clusters are positioned to operationalize the Reset while safeguarding the right of crisis-affected children to protective, continuous, and safe education.

INTRODUCTION

“If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” – African proverb

This field note offers actionable insights to help reinforce the coordination of education across national and subnational clusters. The analysis is situated within the 2025 Humanitarian Reset priorities, which seek to enable humanitarian actors to navigate severe funding constraints, concurrent crises, and the imperative for more localized and resilient systems (Fletcher 2025).¹

¹ The Humanitarian Reset, launched in March 2025 by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, is a major reform effort by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to make aid faster, more localized, and accountable. It addresses funding shortfalls and record needs by shifting from top-down, “life-sustaining” aid to “hyperprioritized,” life-saving, locally led actions that focus on the immediate crisis response (IASC 2025).

Received August 5, 2025; revised December 9, 2025, and February 26, 2026; accepted March 18, 2026; electronically published July 2026.

Journal on Education in Emergencies, Vol. 11, No. 1.

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ISSN 2518-6833

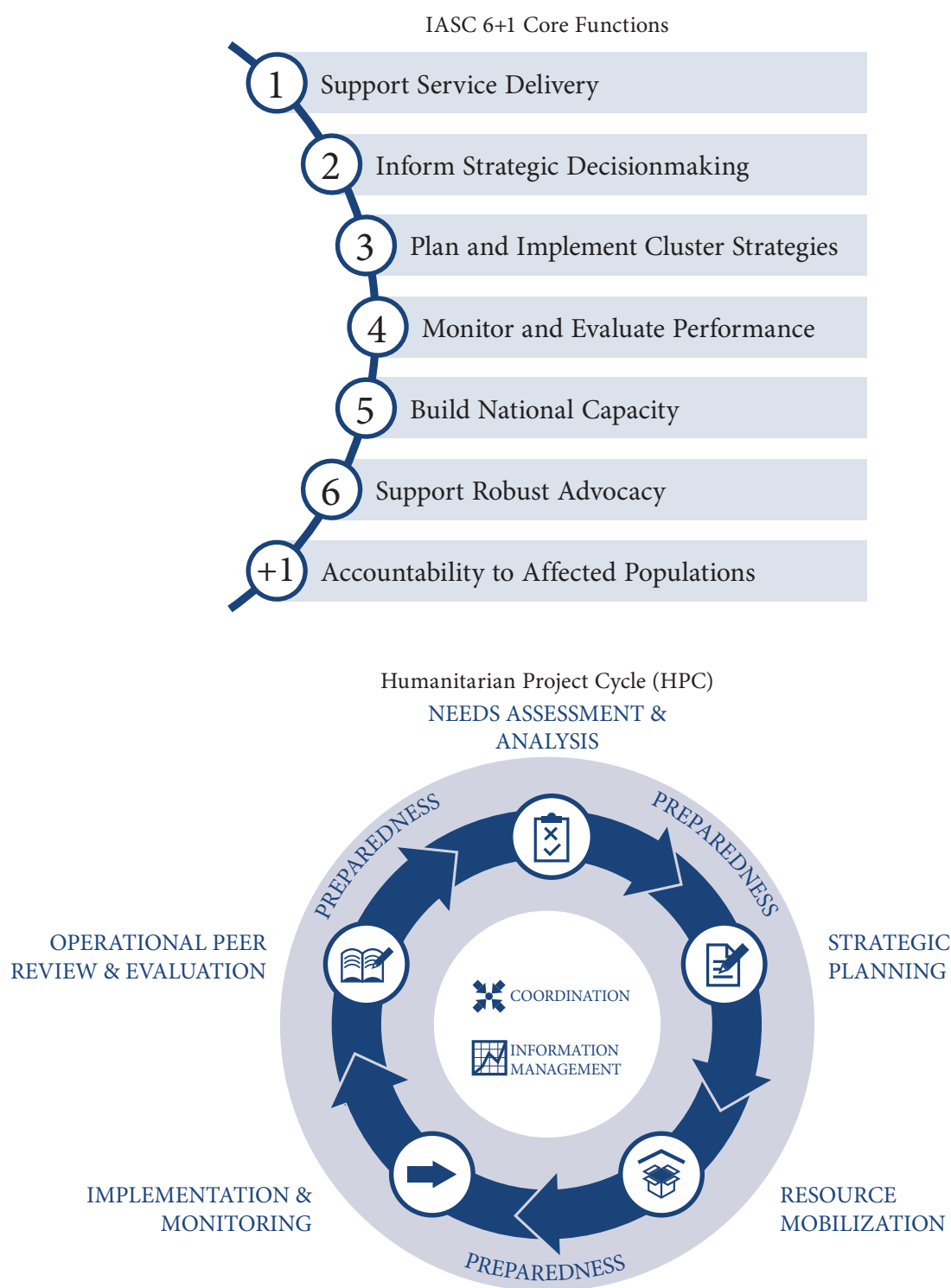
Education clusters form part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC 2006) Cluster Coordination System, which was established to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response in large-scale emergencies. The system emerged in response to critiques of the humanitarian response in Darfur (2003-2005), where agencies struggled to deliver an inclusive, nationwide response (Adinolfi et al. 2005; Jirouskova 2014; Kruke and Olsen 2012). Education was initially excluded from the first set of lifesaving clusters, which reflected a prevailing but weakly substantiated view that education was “less lifesaving” and peripheral to immediate humanitarian priorities (Anderson and Hodgkin 2010, 2). Consequently, education in emergencies (EiE) stakeholders undertook a sustained advocacy effort to demonstrate the lifesaving and life-sustaining contributions of education, including its role as a platform for delivering essential services (health, nutrition, and water, sanitation, and hygiene) from other sectors (Anderson and Hodgkin 2010, 3). These efforts culminated in the establishment of the Global Education Cluster (GEC) in 2007.

Today the GEC is the only cluster exclusively focused on children, and the only one co-led by a UN agency, UNICEF, and an international nongovernmental agency (I/NGO), Save the Children International (SCI). Education clusters coordinate across a wide range of humanitarian settings—including man-made and environmental disasters, rapid-onset shocks, and protracted crises—in the developing and least-developed countries. Their work is guided by the IASC “6+1 Cluster Core Functions” and operationalized through the Humanitarian Project Cycle (OCHA n.d., see Figure 1). Coordinators and information management officers recruited by UNICEF and SCI serve at the national level and, where funding permits, at subnational levels. They advocate for children's right to safe, inclusive education, and aim to strengthen coordination through joint needs assessments, harmonized response planning, and collective advocacy. By 2024, 26 national education clusters—comprising more than 850 partner organizations, 60 percent of them local—were active across 30 crisis contexts worldwide (GEC 2026).

Education clusters are activated by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator who, through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), oversees global humanitarian coordination. Activation follows a request from resident/humanitarian coordinators (HCs) and requires endorsement by the IASC principals. Once activated, education clusters are accountable to the HC and the humanitarian coordination team (HCT), which ensures that responses align with national capacities and that coordination remains inclusive, strategic, and contextually appropriate. HCTs may employ both directive and decentralized adaptive forms of coordination leadership to address complex and evolving realities in the field (Knox Clarke and Campbell 2018, 666).

Education clusters are supported by the GEC, which helps ensure that international education responses remain predictable, accountable, and effectively led (GEC 2026, 4). Through this support, the GEC enhances the coherence and operational impact of funding allocations for crisis-affected populations (Education Cannot Wait 2022, 37).

Figure 1: Cluster Functions and Processes



Source: OCHA (n.d.)

CLUSTER AGENCY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

Although IASC clusters have been credited with improving the coherence of humanitarian responses by reducing duplication, gaps, and overlaps, they also have been criticized for creating compartmentalized, sector-specific approaches that limit cross-sector coordination; for insufficiently including national and local actors; and for operationalizing responses in ways that are overly resource intensive (ALNAP 2022; Egelund and Msuya 2024; Sida et al. 2024b). Alternative area-based coordination (ABC) models have been proposed to enhance responsiveness by focusing on specific geographic areas, integrating multiple sectors, decentralizing decisionmaking, engaging communities, and leveraging local actors to implement context-driven solutions (Derzsi-Horváth 2025).

With respect to EiE coordination, performance evaluations have credited education clusters with preparing education partners for better crisis response (UNICEF 2022, 173; ALNAP 2022, 167) and with improving access to learning, continuity of learning, and protection for crisis-affected children (Nicolai et al. 2020). However, education clusters have not yet produced evidence demonstrating that coordination itself leads to improvements in education quality, equity, or gender equality, or evidence establishing a causal link between coordination mechanisms and education outcomes that depend on factors beyond coordination alone. Existing monitoring and evaluation systems do not capture these relationships adequately (Nicolai et al. 2020, 36).

Below we review the versatility of education clusters across four areas—inclusive response systems, coordinated planning and operationalization, collective and inclusive generation of evidence and knowledge-sharing, and resource mobilization. All are emphasized in the Humanitarian Reset guidance (Fletcher 2025). These areas were foreshadowed—and later articulated as critical coordination gaps—in the landmark evaluation of the 2003-2005 Darfur response (Adinolfi et al. 2005), which catalyzed the adoption of the original IASC cluster mandate that has governed cluster operations over the past two decades. These areas together provide a basis for assessing whether an education cluster is positioned to operationalize the Reset reforms effectively. The first concerns the humanitarian system’s capacity to build more inclusive response structures.

INCLUSIVE RESPONSE SYSTEMS

National education clusters have demonstrated real advances in promoting inclusive coordination, even as continued attention is needed to ensure that these gains translate into fully inclusive systems (GEC 2026, 5). Clusters have coordinated EiE responses in more than 45 crisis-affected contexts since 2007, which has ensured that education is integrated into OCHA-coordinated humanitarian response plans. Clusters have intensified efforts to make coordination platforms more inclusive, and to strengthen

national capacities by inviting local authorities and civil society organizations to colead or cochair strategic advisory groups and technical working groups. These efforts have taken different forms: a local NGO co-coordinating the South Sudan national education cluster with the lead agencies; district education authorities cochairing subnational coordination structures in Syria; and local women's groups cochairing task forces on school safety in Nigeria. In Myanmar, the cluster advocated for OCHA to earmark at least 30 percent of the annual humanitarian budgets for local civil society organizations (CSOs). In Ukraine, clusters brokered relationships between newly arriving INGOs and local authorities and CSOs. In Yemen and Ethiopia, education clusters negotiated response plans with rival political authorities competing for emergency resources.

A clear illustration of structured coordination between local CSOs and NGOs is provided by the Cox's Bazar Education Cluster, which oversees education services for Rohingya children within a refugee population of approximately 1.1 million. With the cooperation of the Bangladeshi authorities, it convenes international, national, and local implementing agencies.

In other contexts, however, progress on inclusivity and gender remains uneven (GEC 2026, 6; OCHA 2025a). Social norms, mobility and communication restrictions, and the absence of local-language translators frequently inhibit meaningful participation. Ministries of education may be reluctant to delegate authority to CSOs. Calls to increase pool-fund allocations to local service providers often falter when organizations cannot meet donor requirements for risk management, audits, or efficiency standards. These barriers hinder institutional and collective learning within civil society, and the aspired-to "emergence" of communities' capacity to deliver social services and participate in public discourse on local socioeconomic development to support accountable, effective local governance (Wheatley and Frieze 2006).

Some localization advocates argue for timebound ABC platforms to replace clusters in rapid onset emergencies. This position remains contested, however, with critics warning that ABCs may struggle to match the clusters' technical leadership, strategic oversight, or sectoral depth. Education clusters add value through advocacy for children's right to education, technical guidance, and the inclusion of national and local education authorities to reinforce local governance. As ABC approaches evolve—each shaped by distinct opportunities and constraints—the resulting heterogeneity hampers convergence on a shared understanding of the aspired-to impact of ABC models. HCs will need to determine whether they wish to retain clusters, phase them out, or leverage them as an institutional bridge between local and national coordination platforms to safeguard technical quality and ensure coherent, locally led responses. It remains unclear whether HCs and ABCs will avoid deprioritizing education within streamlined ABC models, despite its essential role in safeguarding child protection and community resilience.

The term “inclusivity” also extends to brokering relationships with other social service sectors. The Somalia Education Cluster conducted “principled aid prioritization” to determine minimum package allocations that would reinforce resilience and complement interventions delivered by other clusters (water, sanitation, and hygiene, nutrition, health, child protection). In Sudan, the education cluster collaborated with child protection and shelter clusters to develop guidance for negotiating the conflict-sensitive, dignified transfer of internally displaced people from occupied schools, ensuring that protection standards were upheld.

Coordinated planning and operationalization are imperative for advancing Humanitarian Reset reforms. They are, therefore, examined in education clusters from both achievement oriented and constraint focused perspectives.

COORDINATED PLANNING AND OPERATIONALIZATION

Although education clusters are not implementing agencies, they are mandated under the Humanitarian Project Cycle to assess needs, contribute to strategic planning, support advocacy, and monitor impact. These functions are operationalized by national coordinators and information management staff who serve as intermediaries between field actors, donors, authorities, intersectoral partners, and OCHA secretariats. Cluster teams provide guidance, training, and opportunities for knowledge exchange among education partners.

Preparedness capacities are intended to be strengthened by sharing the INEE Minimum Standards, examples of effective preparedness practices, toolkits on anticipatory action, risk analysis templates, and by supporting joint contingency plans (GEC 2026, 7). In Colombia, the cluster mapped schools at risk of being damaged by floods and storms, and also mobilized teachers and communities to protect infrastructure and supplies and help keep children safe (GEC 2026, 8).

Needs assessments and “people-in-need” statistics draw from the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) (OCHA 2024a), a globally recognized methodology for assessing cross-sectoral needs and protection risks. Over the past four years, education clusters have contributed to 75 humanitarian needs overviews and 91 response plans in 28 crisis-affected countries. They have also supported Education Cannot Wait’s first emergency response allocations and the drafting of multiyear resilience plans, which have directed more than US\$700 million to 23 countries since 2017. Cluster coordinators supported Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) education funding reviews, which allocated US\$48 million to education responses across 28 countries (2021-2024) (GEC 2026, 9). Cluster teams also support the drafting of calls for proposals and cochair proposal evaluations. In Somalia, the cluster “moved” US\$30 million in pooled funds from Education Cannot Wait to partner agencies for the operationalization of the 2024 Somalia multiyear resilience plans.

Clusters aim to monitor the effectiveness of learning platforms—schools as well as temporary and family-based learning spaces, such as those serving 305,000 children in the Cox’s Bazar refugee camp. In Somalia, nonformal education services delivered by cluster partner organizations reach 48 percent of the school age population.

Advocacy is another core function. In Mali, the education cluster supported risk-informed ministry of education policies and advocated for mobilizing volunteer teachers to staff temporary learning spaces after attacks on schools. In Syria and Sudan, it advocated for students’ safe access to national exam centers across control lines and coordinated logistical, academic, and psychosocial support. In Somalia, the education cluster introduced a “unit costing” methodology to inform cross-sectoral investment decisionmaking in anticipation of predictable hazards. In Cox’s Bazar, centralized procurement of textbooks for learning sites run by 46 partners enabled collective bargaining and significant cost savings for materials that benefited 305,000 children.

Clusters are designed to promote adherence to EiE quality standards, which enable ministries and donors to monitor effectiveness across organizations. In Gaza, the cluster advocated for harmonized curriculum and classroom management standards. In Mali, a guidance note on psychosocial support and social-emotional learning (SEL) was developed jointly, based on an analysis of existing modalities and consultations with authorities. The Sudan cluster initiated a harmonization exercise on accelerated education approaches while disseminating global guidance. In Nigeria, the cluster and local authorities developed localized school safety guidance. Clusters can assume these roles because they draw support from UNICEF and Save the Children country offices, as well as GEC help desk support to develop context appropriate tools and frameworks.

Building on this technical role, clusters also aim to contribute to systemwide efficiency. Through end-to-end facilitation of the Humanitarian Project Cycle phases, clusters help deliver the streamlined, needs-driven coordination envisioned by the Humanitarian Reset, even with severe funding constraints. By reducing duplication, clusters reinforce the Reset call for sharper focus. By developing context-specific education plans, they operationalize the Reset requirement for flexible, locally anchored responses in affected communities.

Despite these goals, clusters have fallen short of the expectation that they would deliver the level of effectiveness needed to enable “faster and more decisive humanitarian decision making while wasting fewer resources on bureaucratic processes” (Egelund and Msuya 2024, 5). In response to these systemwide concerns, OCHA’s (2023) boundary-setting initiative proposed further simplification and streamlining by limiting needs analyses to rapid-onset, shock-affected areas, or by constraining response ambitions according to severity rankings, available funding, or operational capacities. Critics argue that such measures risk undermining attention to longer-term rationales for resilience-building (Donnelly and Dhingra 2024). Child welfare agencies argue that these

prioritization frameworks ignore children’s long-term developmental needs. Further dilemmas arise when “severely affected” areas are prioritized and “less severely affected” areas are deprioritized: families relocating to host communities may strain education systems that are ineligible for humanitarian assistance, despite increased demand.

Navigating these prioritization dilemmas underscores the need for strong systems of evidence generation and information-sharing—an essential component highlighted in the Humanitarian Reset.

COLLECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE-SHARING AND GENERATION OF EVIDENCE

The Humanitarian Reset guidance highlights information-sharing and the generation of evidence; however, these functions are often insufficiently operationalized in crisis-affected contexts due to constrained human and financial resources. The JIAF, for example, requires an analytical capacity that smaller organizations rarely possess. Even where independent data collection is feasible, partners may refrain from sharing information in order to preserve a competitive position or to avoid releasing conflict-sensitive data that could have security or political repercussions. Cluster lead agencies could invest in artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies to accelerate cross-sectoral analysis and multilingual information-sharing, particularly in local languages, which could help alleviate unequal access to information and advance the localization priorities set out in the Humanitarian Reset. By improving their accessibility, timeliness, and linguistic reach, analytical tools can enable local actors to participate more substantively in decisionmaking processes and reduce reliance on external intermediaries. However, artificial intelligence platforms must rely on vetted data sources from recognized early warning providers to avoid incorporating unreliable information. A further challenge is that intersectoral trend analyses may be viewed unfavorably by government stakeholders, due to political sensitivities, while hazard-related warnings can generate anxiety in the community and potentially intensify existing social tensions. Education clusters could strengthen data management through harmonized rapid-assessment tools that enable the faster collection of “voices from the ground” via local partner networks.

JIAF’s cross-sectoral data collection includes “access to education” information for multisectoral rapid response planning. However, aside from the tangential rating of the learning conduciveness of learning spaces, this data contains no provisions to verify whether children actually learn once they are enrolled (GEC 2026, 10). This omission is problematic because children’s cognitive, problem-solving, and critical-thinking development requires continual and structured stimulation, but the impact of its absence is not part of the JIAF methodology.

Clusters are well positioned to advance data-management backstopping, cross-organizational learning, participatory decisionmaking, and information-sharing—priorities highlighted in the Humanitarian Reset (Fletcher 2025) and absent from siloed pre-Darfur information-management practices (Kruke and Olsen 2012). Newly generated evidence is shared at cluster meetings and workshops, and through circulated concept notes. Partners value opportunities to cross-check data and the visibility they gain when copublishing reports. The GEC provides data management backstopping support for national clusters in the retrieval of evidence and needs assessment.

Clusters relay evidence and action recommendations to the government counterparts, donors, and media outlets that value education clusters' sectorwide perspectives. The GEC website and global help desk further disseminate successful EiE practices that can be adapted to national contexts.

Despite advances in the generation of evidence and information-sharing, education remains chronically underfunded. This underscores the substantial challenge of mobilizing resources, as highlighted in the Humanitarian Reset.

MOBILIZATION OF RESOURCES

Despite evidence that education consistently ranks among the top priorities of crisis-affected populations (Sida et al. 2024a; Affolter and Allaf 2014) and the broad recognition that schools protect children from hazards, risky behaviors, and recruitment into armed groups (CERF 2020; United Nations Security Council 2024), HCTs frequently prioritize health, nutrition, or water, sanitation, and hygiene, due to their anticipated “instantly life-saving” impact (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies 2024; OCHA 2025b). Even before 2025, only 1 percent of total CERF funds were earmarked for EiE (OCHA 2024b)—a key factor behind the difficulties clusters encounter in advancing the localization commitments made in the Grand Bargain and retaining fully dedicated (rather than “double-hatting”) coordinators in keeping with neutrality principles.

The humanitarian funding cuts in 2025 triggered disproportionate reductions in EiE budgets (Obrecht and Pearson 2025; GEC 2026, 11). In an email to Save the Children and UNICEF, headed “Humanitarian Reset and Education in Emergencies” (July 22, 2025), Under-Secretary-General Tom Fletcher emphasized that the scale of the 2025 funding contraction demands rigorous, clear-eyed prioritization of the most lifesaving and protection-critical elements of the response, along with streamlined processes and multisectoral planning. He stressed that, at the same time, schools and learning spaces must remain integral, even within a hyperprioritized response architecture, given the contribution they make to protection, dignity, and community-anchored humanitarian action.

Mitigating the EiE funding crisis requires the sustained engagement of education clusters in evidence-based advocacy and strategic framing of education as lifesaving, life sustaining, life changing, and protective (GEC 2026, 12). Clusters can strengthen the case for investment by linking EiE to Reset priorities, including protection, gender equality, and resilience. They are uniquely positioned to champion funding for local partner initiatives by building trust with donors and authorities through regular, targeted engagement aligned with donor priorities. Sustained high-level advocacy directed at humanitarian coordinators and donors by the senior leadership of the two cluster lead agencies is also essential, given the sector's persistent struggle to be perceived as having a lifesaving impact on par with other humanitarian domains. At the global level, the GEC can support national actors by sharing relevant evidence, highlighting opportunities and constraints, and engaging with pooled fund mechanisms to enhance the visibility and resourcing of EiE.

CONCLUSION

Coordination remains a critical determinant of effective education responses. Over the past two decades, the global education cluster system has rolled out a standardized coordination framework across diverse crisis contexts. Unlike many global mechanisms that struggle to balance uniformity and flexibility, education clusters have consistently adapted to diverse cultural, political, and geographic variation while upholding core humanitarian principles. This dual capacity—global alignment and contextual relevance—is a notable operational achievement in humanitarian action and it positions the education cluster system as a model of scalable, context-relevant coordination.

The 2025 Humanitarian Reset marks a significant shift away from traditional, top-down approaches and toward a more locally led and globally supported paradigm. Localization and a streamlined humanitarian response will require sustained technical backstopping in areas such as the generation of evidence, capacity development, and representation before national authorities. In the education sector, it is difficult to imagine how this can be operationalized without a dedicated coordination mechanism. Clusters therefore need to evolve from coordination hubs into proactive enablers and communicators of locally driven education responses.

Calls to improve the agility and effectiveness of coordination, while essential, often overlook a structural dilemma that education coordinators continually face. During acute crises, humanitarian decisionmakers operating under severe resource and time constraints are frequently compelled to prioritize immediate survival needs over children's cognitive and psychosocial development. Although understandable, this pattern reflects deeper systemic shortcomings in how emergency responses are funded and structured, and it perpetuates a narrow conception of child wellbeing that sidelines long-term developmental outcomes.

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