Evaluation of the Global Shelter Cluster 2018-22 Strategy

Executive Summary

Background

The Global Shelter Cluster (GSC)[1] was established in 2005 as part of the global cluster system, driven by the United Nations humanitarian reform agenda and guided by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). The GSC co-lead agencies (CLAs) are:

- United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for conflict-driven displacement; and
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) for natural disasters.

The GSC Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) developed the first GSC 5-year strategy for 2013-2017, and following a comprehensive review of its achievements, initiated a consultation process to develop its current Strategy for the period 2018-2022.[2]

As the Strategy is nearing the end of its lifespan, the GSC commissioned an evaluation "to assess progress in its implementation, identify achievements and possible gap areas, make recommendations for the last year of implementation and inform the development of the next GSC Strategy."

The evaluation was conducted by a small team of independent consultants, focussing primarily on global-level performance and results, although implementation at country level was also considered to the extent possible. The process involved a review of nearly 300 documents and over 40 Key Informant Interviews over several months.

About this evaluation report

> ## Overview of the GSC Strategy 20218-2022
>
> **Vision:** A World Where Everyone Feels at Home.
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> **Mission:** The Global Shelter Cluster collectively supports crisis-affected people to live in safe, dignified and appropriate shelter and settlements.
>
> **Strategic Areas:**
> - Area 1: Coordination. Coordination contributes to a localised, predictable, effective and timely response.
>
> - Area 2: Advocacy. Increased recognition of shelter and settlements in humanitarian response and recovery.
>
> - Area 3: Evidence-based response. Shelter response informed by evidence, best practice and learning.
>
> - Area 4: Capacity. Shelter sector capacity to address ongoing and emerging challenges.

This evaluation report is structured around the main evaluation criteria from the Terms of Reference.

- **Part 1: Relevance and Efficiency.** This section considers the appropriateness of the Strategy for meeting its intended purpose, its usefulness to different stakeholders from local to global level, and their level of engagement with it. It also discusses the ways in which the Strategy was developed, how it was used to both attract and allocate resources, and the monitoring and reporting processes that were put in place to measure its overall success.

- **Part 2: Effectiveness and Impact.** This section considers the extent to which each of the 4 Strategic Areas achieved their intended purpose and targets. It addresses the extent of achievement, main challenges or barriers, as well as any major changes (positive or negative,

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[1] Note that in this executive summary and the body of the report, the GSC refers to the entity at the global level, rather than the broader cluster of shelter actors operating at country-level or the shelter sector.

[2] Hereafter referred to as "the Strategy" or the "GSC Strategy".

intended or unintended).

- **Part 3: Conclusion and Recommendations.** This section draws some overall conclusions about the achievements and challenges of delivery against the Strategic Areas and also considers the extent to which the GSC Strategy was fit-for purpose. It proposes a set of overarching recommendations for the GSC strategic development process in the short, medium and longer term, including a recommended approach for the next strategy.

In addition to the report itself, there is also a set of **Annexes to the report,** which includes:

- A set of detailed recommendations for each of the four GSC Strategic Areas;
- A review of the implementation of the recommendations from the previous strategy evaluation;
- Data and materials used in the preparation of the evaluation report; and
- Terms of Reference for this evaluation.

Select detailed recommendations from the annex mentioned above, and related to Part 2 of the report, are presented in the appropriate sections of the executive summary below.

Key findings

Relevance and efficiency

Strengths

The main strength of the GSC Strategy was its ability to coherently package and reflect the interests of a wide range of stakeholders, which ensured its ongoing relevance throughout its lifespan. This was in part due to the highly consultative process put in place for its development. At global level, the Strategy played a central role in guiding the work of the CLAs and GSC Support Team. At country level, it also provided an overall compass for the cluster's work in some contexts.

The GSC Strategy was found to have remained relevant to the changing humanitarian landscape, most significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic; in particular, there were opportunities to strengthen the linkages between shelter and health, and GSC partners were able to adapt their approaches and continue to provide effective shelter interventions. The GSC was also pro-active in providing COVID-19 guidance to support shelter and settlements work at country level, and in transferring activities online to continue capacity building efforts.

The GSC Strategy was found to be useful for attracting and aligning global funding. In 2021, the funding situation for the GSC significantly improved with contributions from USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). Although, the full impact of this was yet to be realised at the time of this evaluation. There were significant efforts to measure the relevance, implementation and resourcing of the strategy, including the consistent tracking of a number of key strategic indicators, supported by annual surveys and other feedback mechanisms.

Challenges

Despite its ongoing relevance, there were inconsistent views among stakeholders about the purpose and usefulness of the GSC Strategy. Several gaps were identified including: a lack of guidance to address the growing trend towards working group coordination away from formal activations of the cluster at country

level; and a lack of prioritisation within and between the Strategic Areas and pillars. In particular, there was felt to be a need to prioritise support for coordination at country level.

Lack of funding was the single greatest challenge for implementation. There were major financial shortfalls within the GSC and across the sector in 2019 and 2020, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The prioritisation of limited resources was also a challenge, with constraints on flexibility from donors and partner agencies, as well as a lack of strategic prioritisation within the strategy itself. Some of the Strategy outputs and indicators were overly ambitious against available resources and difficult to measure. Funding proved to be especially difficult to track, pointing to the need for greater consistency in monitoring and making better use of external monitoring tools.

Effectiveness and impact

Strategic Area 1 Coordination

Achievements
Country clusters generally felt well supported by the GSC Support Team and a wide range of tools and guidance were produced to support country-level coordination efforts and to promote an area-based approach (ABA). There were also some success stories for localisation of country shelter clusters where international surge support was not required. For example, for disasters in Indonesia and Vanuatu and evidence of strengthened collaboration between the CLAs.

Challenges
Overall, there was a drop-in support from the GSC to the country level, due to resource limitations and in part, to travel restrictions posed by COVID-19. There were some reports of gaps in coordination and a lack of timely deployments. Stakeholders were not always aware of the type of support available, though a brochure of services was recently created to improve this. Despite the volume of global tools and guidance, some were in need of updating and translation, and/or lacked consistent use. Despite some progress, efforts towards ABA and localisation were hindered by lack of common understanding (especially across clusters and agencies) and mixed views about its relevance in different contexts, with a need for further guidance on issues such as the co-chairing of clusters with local organisations or host governments. Additionally, the Strategy did not provide adequate guidance on some emerging coordination issues, such as the loss of the Early Recovery Cluster, and the increasing trend towards sector coordination rather than formal cluster activation.

Select Recommendations
Some of the key recommendations include:
- • Improving current systems for tracking and monitoring progress and resourcing across the cluster;
- • Updating key documents such as the Coordination Toolkit, the Companion, and the IMAS toolkit, including availability in other languages. Roll-out of updated tools is crucial also;
- • Developing further field-ready guidance on issues such as on localisation, sector coordination and transition to recovery, as well as developing a common inter-cluster understanding of ABA and other inter-sectoral issues; and
- • Prioritise ensuring effective, timely, and predictable coordination at the field level, including through enhanced localised capacity and surge support.

Strategic Area 2: Advocacy

Achievements
The GSC was found to have a positive reputation and high visibility on the global stage. The CLA's have contributed to this visibility. The Strategy has been used for the development of some country-level advocacy plans; and, the commencement of the Global Focal Point for Advocacy and Communications has given a significant boost to both global and country-level advocacy efforts. There has also been positive progress for engagement in key shelter approaches, most prominently in cash programming and, to a lesser extent, in settlement approaches in urban areas.

Challenges
One of the major intended outcomes of advocacy efforts was to improve engagement with donors and partners and to increase overall funding. This has proven especially challenging and despite significant efforts, there were ongoing frustrations with funding levels and a lack of donor flexibility and prioritisation of resources for shelter and settlements. Despite the increased focus on urban assistance, the impact of the GSC and shelter sector overall, has felt to be limited. Some stakeholders felt the number and complexity of advocacy messages promoted by the GSC, including in the strategy itself, diluted its impact.

Select Recommendations
Some of the key recommendations include:
- Recruiting a Global Focal Point for Grant Management, Donor Engagement and Resource Mobilisation. Develop a resource mobilisation plan with the emphasis on filling critical funding gaps and reinvigorating donor engagement, including through the Donor Consultation Group;
- Providing further guidance for country level on advocacy positions, the development of country-level strategies and capacity building; and
- Working collaboratively with other clusters to attract more funding for core coordination and other common issues; and, increasing engagement with other key humanitarian and development organisations.

Strategic Area 3: Evidence-based response

Achievements
The importance of evidence-based response was recognised by stakeholders, with recognition that the GSC has made significant efforts to support evidence-based decision-making through use of Information Management. This included the dissemination of the Information Management and Assessment (IMAS) toolkit, and guidance for the development of country-level IM strategies. There was also a proliferation of evidence-based guidance and other products such as IEC materials and case studies on a wide range of topics, including the highly-regarded Shelter Projects publication, supported by the organisations engaged through various Working Groups and the Global Focal Point for Research. The development of a research strategy was a welcome advancement towards a more strategic approach, and the annual 'Shelter Week', regional workshops and other events were felt to be important for knowledge sharing.

Challenges
Despite the impressive array of guidance and resources, there is still a need for improved systematisation of knowledge management to support ease of access to the most current and relevant information and tools. Key among these measures, is the need to improve the organisation and quality control of the GSC

website, which has good functionality but is not consistently maintained. Stakeholders highlighted a number of gaps in evidence-gathering on particular topics (such as recovery, greening and NFIs), as well as inconsistent capturing of lessons learned and application of evidence-based approaches during shelter responses. There were also felt to be gaps in demonstrating the linkages between shelter and other sectors, despite that being a priority, and delays in the development of a global shelter vulnerability classification system.

Select Recommendations

Some of the key recommendations include:
- Developing closer alignment between research and country-level needs and capacities, and ensuring good practices are integrated into key tools and guidance documents to improve implementation; and
- Improving the accessibility and relevance of information available through improved knowledge management, including streamlining and quality assurance of the GSC website.

Strategic Area 4: Capacity

Achievements

Efforts of the GSC Support Team to support local capacity building and skill development were highly regarded, including the work of Global Focal Points and the wide range of training, guidance and other materials to support different aspects of shelter and settlements work. In particular, there was felt to be good progress in developing capacities at country level on housing, land and property (HLP), cash and market-based approaches, which may have been partially driven by their prominent inclusion in the GSC Strategy. The flagship publication of the State of Humanitarian Shelter and Settlements "Beyond the Better Shed: Prioritising People" in 2018 was also recognised as an important step towards greater preparedness and awareness of future trends and challenges.

Challenges

There have been a number of barriers standing in the way of fully realising the commitment to local capacity-building. Among the most prominent include: inadequate funding to support the continuation of staff positions; persistent gender imbalance at country level (although notable improvements at global level); a lack of career progression opportunities and high staff turnover; and, challenges accessing key resources and training in languages other than English. Gaps in Information Management capacities were especially highlighted, with a number of challenges in identifying suitable profiles and up-skilling existing staff. Preparedness was also cited as a significant gap, with patchy progress towards readiness at country level and need for improved resourcing for contingency planning.

Select Recommendations

Some of the key recommendations include:
- Conducting a review of country-level staffing capacities to identify ways of improving staff retention, skills and diversity; supported by relevant training and talent pools particularly, to fill key gaps such as in information management;
- Conduct a State of Humanitarian Shelter and Settlements stock-take, to review the continued relevance of the previous research findings, identify future trends and inform the development of the next strategy; and
- Ensure that all key guidance documents and support are field-focused and supported with necessary country roll out plans and training.

Achievements

Across the areas of protection, gender, disability inclusion and environment there has been significant progress in a number of respects. At global level, the protection agenda has been integrated throughout other work on HLP, gender-based violence (GBV), inclusion and access to safe and dignified shelter. There have been significant resources developed on GBV, information exchange through the Community of Practice, as well as important global monitoring work undertaken by the Global Focal Point for GBV. The Working Group on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities has also made important progress in updating key guidance and conducting a baseline assessment to better understand the barriers to inclusion in the field. The environment agenda, and green response in particular, has clearly been a focus of attention by both the GSC and the CLAs, with significant support from partners through Environment Community of Practice. In 2021, this work received a significant boost with dedicated ECHO funding and the appointment of a Global Focal Point for Environment.

Challenges

From a strategic perspective, it is notable that cross-cutting issues do not feature particularly strongly in the GSC Strategy narrative and indicators, although at global level in particular, there has been significant progress. At country level, the picture is decidedly more mixed, with some stakeholders finding protection, gender and disability inclusion issues being addressed at only minimal levels in some contexts, with a slow uptake of available guidance and resources and a need to position shelter more centrally within the protection agenda. There were also challenges in taking forward the environment agenda at country level, despite the general awareness of its importance, with barriers including knowledge gaps, resource constraints and a lack of prioritisation at the local level.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall conclusions about the current GSC Strategy

The GSC 2018-2022 Strategy was the right one for the time and was an important step towards formalisation of GSC ambitions. Partners, donors, and other stakeholders were able to see themselves somewhere in the Strategy, yet in trying to be all things to all people, the lack of prioritisation and ambiguity of purpose reduced its utility. As such, it is too wide-ranging to be a powerful and focused advocacy tool, and not detailed or "field ready" enough as an operational tool to drive action on the ground. That said, overall, the Strategy has been a useful framework over the past 5 years, and it has remained remarkably relevant and salient against the needs of the GSC and shelter sector, even as the world has changed.

Recommendations going forward

The following recommendations are made in the light of ongoing resource constraints facing the GSC, as well as the continuing relevance of the existing strategy, and the future opportunities to provide leadership within the cluster system to refocus efforts on strengthening core coordination functions at country level.

Rather than a full re-development of the strategy for 2023 onward, this evaluation recommends:

A. **Undertaking a light-touch review around a few key areas in the very short term:** This involves extending the term of the current strategy and identifying the most critical implementation gaps for prioritisation, including through a review. Such gaps may include developing an interim knowledge management strategy to enable greater access to key tools and guidance, including translations into other languages, and developing further guidance for coordination in situations where the cluster is not formally activated;

B. **Fill the most crucial gaps over the next 1-3 years:** This includes the development of a longer-term knowledge management strategy, continuing key aspects of the policy and research agenda, and streamlining and strengthening the monitoring and reporting system using existing mechanisms for tracking key indicators and resources at country and global levels; and

C. **For the next strategy, lead transformation towards greater alignment of global cluster strategies, and adopt a "strategic framework" approach:** Prior to the development of the next strategy, work with other clusters to agree on a common timeframe and basis for all cluster strategies, using common definitions and placing country-level clusters at the centre. For the next strategy, adopt a Strategic Framework approach through an inclusive consultation process, which enables the development of different strategic tools tailored for the needs of specific stakeholder groups at global and country level, ensuring it is available in different languages and widely accessible.