



GLOBAL  
**FOOD SECURITY CLUSTER**  
*Strengthening Humanitarian Response*

# Lessons Learned in the Central African Republic Food Security Cluster

Exercise conducted by the global Food Security Cluster

Synthesis Report, 30 April 2014  
By: gFSC and FSC CAR Cluster



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Annex 1 - Glossary of Terms

# 1. Executive Summary

On 11 December 2013, following consultations with the IASC Principals, the Emergency Relief Coordinator formally activated a system-wide level 3 emergency response to the Central African Republic. This was due to the sudden deterioration of the crisis linked to the fighting between Seleka and anti-Balaka movements from 5 December and was following a year of serious instability in the country, started with the Seleka-led rebellion in December 2012. It was then followed by the coup d'état on 24 March 2013 that had triggered a dramatic humanitarian crisis in a country that was already one with the less advanced development indicators in the world. Despite the fact that the entire population of 4.6 million people has been affected, with high numbers of internally displaced people, such a crisis received rather limited international attention during 2013.

The fighting in December 2013 followed a sectarian connotation between Christian and Muslim communities and resulted in gross human rights violations, the displacement of about one-sixth of the population and the flee of few hundred thousands refugees to neighboring countries, hence gradually assuming a regional dimension.

Despite the L3 activation, resulting in a significant capacity and leadership reinforcement, the complexity of the crisis, the constantly evolving needs, the security situation and limited access to locations outside the capital Bangui, as well as limited funding compared to the magnitude of the needs, have made this one of the most challenging contexts for humanitarian response, which remains still insufficient in scale and speed. On 5 March 2014, the IASC Principals extended the L3 system-wide response for additional six months. Both FAO and WFP in December 2013 activated their corporate L3 emergency response mechanisms and then extended it in March 2014, in line with the IASC

To ensure efficient coordination of humanitarian action, the Humanitarian Country Team confirmed FAO and WFP as Cluster Co-Lead agencies of the Food Security Cluster. In fact, the cluster system had been operational in CAR for few years, although in 2013 all clusters were considered rather weak. A fact-finding mission was conducted by the global Food Security Cluster team in early October 2013 to review the capacity of the FSC in the country and had identified the lack of a dedicated team as one of the main weaknesses. Recommendations made by the mission included the review of the cluster management, including the setting up of specific working groups, the establishment of technical standards for the food security sector and an information management system; and ensure the mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues (gender, age, protection, accountability to affected populations, etc.). Following these recommendations, FAO and WFP deployed a Cluster Coordinator and an Information Manager in mid-November 2013.

This proved to be essential to enable immediate coordination capacity when the L3 was activated, as the coordination team was already in place and fully operational. However, the expected scale-up following the L3 didn't take place and this represented a limitation especially on essential information management services to be provided to partners as well as in ensuring visibility to the FSC activities and an appropriate level of communication and advocacy for the sector. An important lesson that emerged from this exercise is the need to ensure a pre-defined rapid and flexible funding mechanism to cover coordination costs when an L3 is activated.

The architecture of the FSC in CAR has been innovative in integrating the co-chair agency in the cluster management with positive impact on the coordination quality – which could be regarded as a best practice – and in the flexible use of working groups as a participatory and effective way to cover specific activities. Reliable and updated food security data remains a challenge in CAR and lots of efforts should be devoted to cover the provinces outside the capital city, Bangui.

Despite a number of shortcomings, the FSC in CAR has unanimously been considered an inclusive, dynamic and collaborative environment and the dedication of the coordination team has been recognized. The planning of the 2014 agricultural campaign as a joint cluster exercise, developing synergies among the co-lead agencies and a number of cluster partners, could be regarded as a best practice and should be given the right visibility.

One of the lessons that transpired from this exercise is the need for a lighter and more flexible application of the HPC and a more balanced role of OCHA vs the clusters. Finally, the lessons learnt exercise has been an opportunity to review the priorities of the FSC in CAR for the coming months and to build the basis for the cluster work plan. It has also allowed the gFSC to identify areas for improvement in the quality and type of support to be provided to the country level.



## 2. Methodology

The findings in this report are the result of a lessons learned exercise conducted in March-April 2014 through consultations with all major actors involved in the response including WFP, FAO and ACTED as respectively co-lead and co-chair agencies; national and international NGO partners; government representatives; a donor, other clusters and UN agencies.

The exercise was based on replies to a questionnaire shared with all stakeholders and the cluster team as well as on interviews conducted during a gFSC mission in Bangui in April 2014 with the cluster team, the co-lead and co-chair and a wide group of partners.

A lessons learned and best practices matrix was prepared outlining the achievements, the constraints and the opportunities and key recommendations for improving interventions. Preliminary findings and good practices were reviewed by the CAR Food Security Cluster and feedback incorporated into this report.

## 3. Preparedness & Rapid-Response Deployment

Adequate preparedness activities are crucial to ensure an efficient and timely response to an L3 emergency. Preparedness measures include trainings and availability of potential candidates for rapid deployments, identify teams at the global level that devote time to research, data collection, networking and advocacy initiatives as well as have appropriate funding mechanisms and CLA procedures to allow deployments and scaling up of capacities at the required level.

### Best Practices & Lessons Learned:

- 3.1 For countries in protracted crisis, even when attracting little international attention, the gFSC should appoint or maintain a focal point to gather information on the structure and composition of the food security coordination mechanism, keep regular contacts with the country teams, assess existing capacities and provide support to the coordination mechanism in order to be prepared if and when the crisis requires a scale-up to L3. In the case of CAR, the gFSC designation of a focal point for the country, the gFSC support mission in October 2013 and the following deployment of a dedicated cluster team proved to be crucial to enable the FSC to be operational and ready to respond when the L3 was activated, in December 2013. At that time, a dynamic and inclusive cluster collaboration had already been established.
- 3.2 Despite the commitment of the cluster co-lead agencies to support the costs of the cluster coordination team (Cluster Coordinator & Information Management Officer) prior to the L3 activation, the expected scale-up of capacities following the L3 didn't take place. This resulted in increased tasks and expectations on the skeleton coordination team without proportional increased capacity. One of the limiting factors was the lack of financial resources. It would therefore be advisable that, with an L3 activation, a pre-defined rapid and flexible funding mechanism is established in order to allow the surge or scale-up of capacities to the appropriate level, as cluster co-lead agencies do not equally have the availability of funds for allocations based on the no-regret approach. The timely approval of a WFP Special Operations for the FSC didn't prove to be sufficient as no contributions were received from donors. FAO mobilized funds for the cluster from OFDA proved to be crucial but insufficient for the necessary scaling-up that should have followed the L3 activation. A joint CLA donor strategy and advocacy should therefore be encouraged to secure more predictable and sustainable funding for food security coordination in large scale emergencies.
- 3.3 The challenging context of CAR would have called for a stronger joint cluster strategy and a more systematic engagement of co-lead agencies. More in-depth understanding of the role and functions of the co-lead agencies should be promoted through informative sessions. A systematic presence of CLA to cluster meetings at the appropriate level of representation, as well as regular meetings between the coordination team and the co-lead agencies for a clear

decision-making process, with duly recorded in minutes and follow-up actions, should be encouraged.

- 3.4 The availability of trained and experienced CC and IM officers for immediate deployment is essential to respond to an L3 crisis. The gFSC roster should be developed and enlarged with trained and experienced staff. Training for Stand-by Partners roster candidates should be planned in order to enable deployment of adequately prepared staff when SBP support is required. The further development of gFSC partnership modalities with global partners to enlarge the possibility of rapid deployments and have more profiles available should also be pursued and might have proved useful in CAR. Timely identification of the second wave deployments should take place in order to allow adequate rotation of staff and handover while ensuring continuity and coherence to the cluster activities.
- 3.5 Systematic briefings prior to departure and briefing packages for CC and IMO should be provided for an improved understanding of tasks and functions expected from the cluster in an L3 emergency and for a better understanding of the IASC protocols, hence facilitating the delivery of the required services. Remote guidance and support from the gFSC is well appreciated by the in-country coordination team and cluster partners.
- 3.6 While the excellent soft skills of the CC have been widely recognized as a very important asset for the FSC to enable an inclusive and dynamic partners' participation, a certain degree of technical competences in the coordination team is advisable for leading the FSC activities. These can also be effectively provided by the staff of the co-lead and/or co-chair agencies, however the initial briefing package for CC and IMO should include the basic food security concepts to ensure that the staff deployed has the essential level of knowledge.
- 3.7 The standard Terms of Reference of the Information Management Officer currently in use have proved to be too large and general to be covered by a single person. The gFSC should therefore revise them and make them more consistent with the realities at country level and define different profiles (i.e. reporting, GIS expert, database expert).
- 3.8 The GST proved flexible and efficient in providing immediate support to the coordination team. In addition to initial daily skype conferences for information exchange, consultation and coordination between global and country levels, the GST effectively supported the communication/IM efforts through the management of the CAR webpage in the gFSC website and of social media communications. Taking over the communication burden in the initial phase of the crisis from an overstretched coordination team was appreciated, while the webpage has become of reference for all cluster partners.

## 4. Cluster management and structure

The adaptation of the coordination structure to the country context and the flexibility to respond to evolving needs are crucial to enable the FSC to cover its core functions in an effective manner, ensuring inclusive participation, strategic planning and technical guidance. The experience of the FSC architecture in CAR has highlighted some interesting practices that could be considered useful for future reference.

### Best Practices & Lessons Learned:

- 4.1 The integration in the coordination team of an NGO (ACTED) as co-chair agency should be considered a best practice. In fact, ACTED systematic and dynamic involvement in the management of the FSC and in the decision-making process – far beyond the usual function of the co-chair agency in other clusters or countries - has resulted in improved participation and coordination. In addition to a remarkable contribution to technical issues, ACTED integration in the management team has allowed to overcome the usual divide between UN agencies being in a leading position and NGOs participating without a significant decision making power. It has created a shared feeling among NGO

partners of being on a more equal path with co-lead UN agencies and adequately represented in the decision-making processes. This has certainly contributed to create a stronger collaborative environment within the cluster and has received positive appreciation by a donor (ECHO), which has supported a longer term commitment of ACTED in the cluster with funding for a full-time position for 12 months.

- 4.2 In 2013, the large presence of national organizations to the cluster meetings, with different levels of operational and technical capacity, of understanding of cluster functions and of expectations, resulted in inefficient cluster meetings based on general information sharing but with no strategic planning nor service delivery objectives. Consequently, in October 2013, the cluster decided to create a specific group of national NGOs that met regularly and elected few representatives to participate in the core cluster meetings. This representation system worked relatively well for some months and allowed the FSC core group to progress rapidly in the strategic planning processes that were launched with the L3 activation and have a more efficient decision-making system. However, in the medium term, this mechanism has created a sense of segregation and exclusion of national partners, also linked to the lack of an effective representation system and of occasions for more direct communication and interaction between the two groups. It is therefore necessary to revise this mechanism and the suggestion to conduct a capacity assessment exercise of national organizations, accompanied by a plan for capacity reinforcement and promotion of partnership between national and international NGOs seems at this stage to be appreciated by all stakeholders.
- 4.3 The FSC in CAR has created thematic, ad hoc or permanent working groups to deal with specific technical and operational issues. This has proved to be an effective way to develop multiple activities, make rapid progress in the demanding L3 context and promote partners' participation. The working groups were created on demand and its participants were determined by partners' interest and capacity. Some of them have had limited duration and specific clear objectives (such as the WG for the preparation of the cluster Plan of Action or the planning of the agricultural campaign), others have a longer term character and evolving tasks (i.e. the Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation WG or the Cash & Vouchers WG). The activation of working groups in response to partners' need can be considered a best practice.
- 4.4 Partners have expressed interest for additional thematic working groups on food security in urban setting, livestock and transhumance, as well as resilience programming and the possibility to initiate them should be assessed, aiming at the right balance between interest and effectiveness and the multiplication of meetings in an environment with already a full calendar. The activity of the working groups could be enhanced by the input of additional technical competences through, for example, short-term consultancies. Interaction and support from the gFSC Working Groups at global level, specifically the Urban WG and the Programme Quality WG, should be promoted.
- 4.5 In the absence of sub-national clusters and with security constraints and limited access to some areas of the country, the efforts and capacity of the FSC during the initial L3 period have been concentrated in the capital, Bangui. Sub-national coverage in terms of food security information and response should therefore be reinforced: the establishment of partners as focal points for coordination in the provinces should be accelerated and a common tool for data collection by the focal points should be established. FSC IM capacity at central level requires to be increased for dedicated follow-up of focal points activities and compilation of data.
- 4.5 Representatives of various government ministries participated in the FSC activities already in 2013 and organised themselves by designating a cluster focal point. In an unstable political context with prevailing insecurity and extremely limited capacity at central and - even more - at decentralised level, the data and analysis provided by the FSC have represented an important source of information for the Ministry of Rural Development. A more active participation of concerned ministries representatives in cluster activities should be sought and promoted also through a capacity reinforcement plan, as part of the cluster core functions, in view of ensuring complementarity to government plans and of preparing the conditions for the transition – in due course - to government-led coordination efforts. Starting in this direction, thanks to a partnership with Bangui University, from July 2014 the FSC will host masters' students in Humanitarian Action for their internship, making the cluster a training body for future Central African humanitarian professionals.

4.6 OCHA-led inter-cluster coordination in CAR has been recognized by the Operational Peer Review as weak and rather disconnected from operational/field realities. In such a context, it is very important to establish cross-sectorial interactions on specific issues. The FSC in CAR established good collaboration with the CCCM and Protection clusters that resulted in coordinated planning of food security interventions in IDP sites and in the integration of protection issues in food security planning from the very initial L3 period. The FSC also started a dialogue with the Livelihoods and Community Stabilization (previously known as the Early Recovery cluster) and the Nutrition cluster that should be continued. Further clarification of the mandate and possible interactions with the Livelihoods cluster should be sought, a closer collaboration should be envisaged with the Nutrition cluster for potential integration of nutrition and food security interventions and dialogue should start with the Education cluster in relation to possible school-feeding programs.

4.7 Finally, after the initial period of L3 activation, cluster activities should now be more structured and systematized in a work plan, with detailed activities, systematic follow-up of actions, regular reports and additional communication tools to ensure wider circulation and improved visibility to the cluster work.

## 5. Coordination & Response Quality

The Level 3 Emergency Response in CAR followed a slow pace: despite the significant general scaling up of capacity and leadership, the humanitarian response is still insufficient in scale and speed compared to the magnitude of the needs. The OPR identified limited funding, lack of access and poor infrastructure as the main factors that have impeded the humanitarian effort. Clearly, these factors have equally affected the timely and quality response in the food security sector. Nevertheless, the coordination and the response have been enhanced by a combination of elements such as the high participation to cluster meetings, the elaboration of the FSC Plan of Action and the joint FSC plan for the agricultural campaign, which can be considered as best practice.

### Best Practices & Lessons Learned:

- 5.1 The general lack of updated, reliable and complete food security data for the whole country is recognized as an important constraint to the planning of appropriate response. The last EFSA dates back to September 2013, while the MIRA conducted in December 2013 covered only the western part of the country and low confidence of the IPC analysis in November are all elements of this picture. Partners have recognized the need for a common data collection tool that would allow a more harmonized needs assessment and collation of data, especially for the provinces. A higher degree of integration of NGOs in the IPC analysis is also being pursued in April 2014 to enable a better quality analysis.
- 5.2 While the FSC direct participation in the MIRA as well as the initialization of a database on response to IDP sites in Bangui in December 2013 (later taken over and developed by IOM and OCHA for all the clusters) have been appreciated, more effort would have been necessary on planning of coordinated, joint and rapid assessments, keeping an assessment calendar and registry and providing a mapping of the assessments carried out that would have facilitated the identification of gaps and the analysis of secondary data for the IPC cycle in April 2014. This was partially hindered by the lack of scale-up of the coordination team capacities.
- 5.3 The lack of an early warning system has created some concerns among partners. This remains a priority for the cluster and the reflection is progressing. ACF-led surveillance system, funded by ECHO and implemented in collaboration with cluster partners, includes the weekly monitoring of market prices and the monthly households vulnerability monitoring. From October 2013 this project has been heavily affected by the widespread insecurity and by reduced partners' presence in the country; it should now be reinforced and extended to the whole country. This activity will contribute – but will not be sufficient - to create an early warning capacity: a rainfall monitoring system, an agricultural

production follow-up as well as the monitoring of demographic movements are also necessary to be able to anticipate potential shocks.

- 5.4 The use of English for some important documents, such as the MIRA and the SRP, and for all OCHA communications in a French speaking country has been considered dysfunctional by many partners as restricting the access to international actors and limiting the inputs and benefits for national actors. The FSC should therefore ensure that all relevant cluster documents are circulated in French.
- 5.5 The HCT and OCHA-led humanitarian programme cycle in CAR following the L3 activation included the drafting of a situation analysis, the MIRA and preparing a Strategic Response Plan. This came immediately after the completion of the HNO/SRP annual process and was further complicated by the pre-L3 request by the Emergency Directors' – following their October 2013 mission - to develop a 100 Day Plan, which was still pending when the L3 was activated. As a result of this, clusters were obliged to a continuous needs analysis and planning processes from August 2013 to January 2014 that resulted in the publication of an SRP 1 in December 2013, followed by the 100 Day Plan later in the month and by a revised SRP 2 in January 2014. Furthermore, the costing methodology of the SRP was changed from the SRP 1 to the SRP 2 and moved from a project base to the activity costing. The three plans were not aligned in terms of objectives and indicators, requiring all of them to be monitored and reported separately. The entire process represented an excessive workload for clusters, including the FSC, and detracted energies and attention from the actual response. All FSC partners consulted considered the process confused and far too heavy and expressed the wish for a lighter strategic planning process. Furthermore, the use of English in all these documents was considered as an element of exclusion of national partners.
- 5.6 Nevertheless, the FSC definition of a joint strategy and priorities in the SRP, shared by all cluster partners, has been appreciated. The additional elaboration of the cluster Plan of Action that, building on the SRP general objectives, defined more detailed specific objectives, expected results, activities and related calendar for the food security sector should be considered a best practice. Additional thematic issues, such as livestock and transhumance, food security in urban settings and local procurement, should be integrated and developed also through working groups (ref. par. 4.4)
- 5.7 The FSC coordination in CAR has been considered effective in avoiding duplications and fill the gaps. However, partners recommended a more active role in the identification of gaps both for assessments and response and in providing information and guidance on existing standards.
- 5.8 One of the main achievements of the FSC in CAR is the coordination of the planning of the agricultural campaign. The cluster was instrumental in enabling synergies between the co-lead agencies and in promoting joint interventions by FAO, WFP and NGO partners, where FAO provides the agricultural inputs, WFP food protection rations and the same NGOs partners take care of distribution to the same households. Such a planning, with joint efforts enabling better targeting and optimization of resources while covering the entire country despite security and access constraints, could be considered a best practice.
- 5.9 Response monitoring has been considered effective in Bangui, with the preparation and regular update of the 'Bangui response table'. However, the lack of a common monitoring tool and framework should be addressed. In order to facilitate the regular reporting by FSC partners on their response and geographical coverage in relation to the SRP indicators, a standard template should be developed and equally adopted by co-lead and co-chair agencies and partners.
- 5.10 Finally, partners' view is that the FSC has not done enough to ensure adequate integration of affected population voices in food security interventions. AAP and all other quality programming aspects such as gender, age and disability should be mainstreamed throughout all the phases of the programme cycle. While some NGOs are very active and advanced on this, in general partners expect increased guidance on this, the provision of practical tools and the definition of common minimum standards for the FSC partners. Although quite late in the process, efforts are currently on-going to fill this gap with the support of the OCHA Senior Advisor for AAP and of an FAO-funded consultant.



## 6. Information Management, Communications & Advocacy

Information Management plays a crucial role in the cluster's ability to effectively coordinate food security response as it helps the partners to identify possible gaps and overlaps. In an emergency situation, where data can change in a very rapid way, it is necessary to ensure structured IM mechanisms and tools for regular and appropriate information flows. Effective communication between the cluster team and the partners (both at the global and the country levels) is needed to ensure a coordinated response. Visibility of the cluster work in the humanitarian community as well as advocacy for the food security sector is crucial to gather support and donors attention and consequently enable the appropriate scale of response. It is therefore essential for the FSC to have appropriate IM capacity to play this role.

### Best Practices & Lessons Learned:

- 6.1 In the CAR context, the availability of reliable, complete and updated food security data has been a major challenge. While partners have appreciated the efforts made by the FSC to regularly collect and share good quality data and information, which have been considered useful for partners' decision-making processes, the information gap from the provinces and the concentration on the capital city has been a concern for many. Despite security and access constraints, the FSC should therefore prioritize data collection and analysis from the provinces, where needs are pressing, through the partners focal points established at decentralized level (ref. par. 4.5)
- 6.2 The completion and regular update of the 3W/4W and a detailed mapping of planned and implemented interventions has been another challenge in information management, linked to the difficulties to obtain timely and accurate information from partners as well as from co-lead agencies. The latter should actually give the example in sharing information in a transparent manner and encourage partners to follow. This has been recognized as a weakness and it is currently being addressed.
- 6.3 OCHA plays an important role in IM: following the L3 activation in December 2013, many staff have been deployed to support coordination and information management in OCHA. However, the disparity of capacity in IM between OCHA and the FSC has created a situation of excessive pressure on the cluster with too many uncoordinated ad hoc requests with very tight deadlines. This has created an imbalance in the IM activities, with the feeling that the FSC was rather serving OCHA IM needs more than its partners'.
- 6.4 Outside the circle of cluster partners, the activities of the FSC have had very little visibility. Achievements and constraints have not sufficiently been communicated to the wider humanitarian community and even the co-lead agencies have been at times not entirely aware of the detailed cluster activities. The FSC should be perceived as providing added value to all parties, including co-leads; this should be given attention and clearly demonstrated. Equally, it was noted that more could have been done to mobilize resources for the food security sector. While a more harmonized advocacy for the sector by the co-leads, beyond the needs and priorities of their individual agency, could have been helpful, the FSC should reinforce its visibility and communication strategy through the circulation of regular bulletins or activity reports and with specific presentations to the donor community.
- 6.5 Following the L3 activation, the FSC has constantly been understaffed in terms of IM capacity to be able to deliver the amount and quality of information required and ensure appropriate communication and advocacy for the sector. While the support provided by the GST in terms of IM and communication has been appreciated, this could not fill the capacity gap at country level. In addition to the points mentioned under par. 3.2, it has been noted that - in the consolidated appeal, which is a fund raising tool - OCHA seems to have the exclusivity for coordination funding. In fact, while in the past cluster coordination costs could be presented in the form of a project sheet and included in the cluster appeal, with the new project-less approach, there is no more visibility for cluster coordination needs in the SRP. Possible implications, including OCHA overstaffing vs. clusters' understaffing, should be

carefully considered and more equitable mechanisms should be found to ensure adequate funding for cluster coordination.

## ANNEX 1 – Glossary of Terms

AAP – Accountability to Affected Populations  
CAP – Consolidated Appeal Process  
CAR – Central African Republic  
CC – Cluster Coordinator  
CCCM – Camp Coordination and Camp Management  
CLA – Cluster Lead Agencies  
EFSA – Emergency Food Security Assessment  
ERC – Emergency Relief Coordinator  
FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization  
FSC – Food Security Cluster  
gFSC – Global Food Security Cluster  
GST – Global Support Team  
HCT – Humanitarian Country Team  
HNO – Humanitarian Needs Overview  
HPC – Humanitarian Program Cycle  
IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee  
IMO – Information Management Officer  
IPC – Integrated Phase Classification  
MIRA - Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment  
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization  
OCHA – Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs  
OFDA – Office of the U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance  
OPR – Operational Peer Review  
SRP - Strategic Response Plan  
TORs – Terms of Reference  
WFP – World Food Programme