

The 5W Matrix Is Broken

Here's What Replaces It

The humanitarian sector's most-used coordination tool was never actually a standard. It's time to build one.

By Mark Bonyo · Founder, 5W-AI · 18 years in humanitarian reporting & monitoring systems · July 2026

Executive Summary

Every cluster coordinator, information management officer, and NGO reporting focal point in the humanitarian sector knows the 5W matrix. It is the single tool that carries the most weight in operational coordination: who is doing what, where, when, and for whom. It is what donors ask for, what the Humanitarian Response Plan is monitored against, and what the sector points to when it says it knows what is happening on the ground.

And yet, as UNHCR's own Emergency Handbook admits: "**there is no standard 3/4/5W template that operations must use.**"¹ There is no shared schema. There is no interoperable reporting format. There is no inter-agency agreed guidance for how response monitoring should work at all.² What the sector calls "the 5W" is in reality dozens of parallel spreadsheets, each cluster running its own template, each country office adapting them locally, and each partner asked to submit the same activity in three different formats to three different coordinators. It is a **coordination framework without coordinated data**.

The problem. The 5W matrix is not a standard — it is a habit.

Every cluster, every country, and every organisation reports 5W activity data in a template it built for itself. There is no common schema, no persistent identifier for an activity across time, and no interoperable format between clusters or with the tools that consume the data. Information Management Officers spend the bulk of their week reconciling formats, cleaning data and chasing missing fields, not producing the insight the matrix was meant to surface. Without a structural upgrade to the standard itself, the 5W will continue to be a compliance ritual rather than a decision-making tool — and in a sector that has lost significant IM capacity, the challenge becomes more visible as time progresses.

1. Every cluster has its own 5W

A single activity — the distribution of household hygiene kits in a county in a remote village — will be reported into the WASH cluster with one schema, into the Nutrition cluster (if it doubles as an IYCF touchpoint) with another, and into the partner's own donor report in a third. Each cluster's IMO builds a template that reflects their own analytical needs and their own history. The Global Shelter Cluster's own toolkit puts it plainly: activity reporting is "one of the key main tasks of the IMO," but "the way partners report and/or the cluster chooses to collect activity reporting data may differ."³

¹UNHCR Emergency Handbook, *Emergency Information Management Coordination*. "There is no standard 3/4/5W template that operations must use. Any solution which meets the objectives above will work..." emergency.unhcr.org

²OCHA Knowledge Base, *Response Monitoring — HPC Collective Learning*. "At present, there is no inter-agency agreed guidance encompassing situation, needs and response monitoring." knowledge.base.unocha.org

³Global Shelter Cluster, *Information Management & Assessment Toolkit — 1D. Activity Reporting*. Activity reporting is described as "one of the key main tasks of the IMO", with the caveat that the way partners report and the way clusters collect "may differ." sheltercluster.org

The same field activity, reported into five clusters, produces five different records

'Distribution of household hygiene kits,

WASH cluster	Shelter cluster	Nutrition cluster	Protection cluster	FSL cluster
Who Partner name	Who Partner + implementer	Who Partner code	Who Partner + type	Who Partner
What Activity type	What Assistance modality	What CMAM component	What PSS activity	What CVA modality
Where Admin 2 (county)	Where Admin 3 (payam)	Where Facility	Where Site name	Where Admin 2
When Month	When Reporting period	When Week	When Session date	When Distribution round
For whom Households	For whom Individuals	For whom SAM/MAM cases	For whom Age/sex breakdown	For whom Households
Extra + hygiene kit type	Extra + shelter type	Extra + IYCF flag	Extra + referral flag	Extra + transfer value

→ Same activity. Five schemas. Five reporting cycles. Zero interoperability.

Figure 1. The same field activity, reported into five clusters, produces five different records. There is no shared schema for who, what, where, when, or for whom (construct scenario).

The consequence is a well-known one for anyone who has ever tried to consolidate a national 5W. Activities are sometimes counted twice, or missed entirely. Beneficiary numbers double-count because the disaggregation categories differ. Locations do not join because one cluster uses Admin 2 and another uses a facility code. Even OCHA's own Centre for Humanitarian Data reports that consolidated 3W / 4W / 5W datasets on HDX "often lack project start/end dates," "usually lack persistent identifiers for comparing activities across time," and "rarely include funding or beneficiary information."⁴

2. Where the IM Officer's week actually goes

Behind the abstract fragmentation is a very concrete workload. The typical cluster IM Officer, national IM lead, or reporting focal point spends most of their week doing work the standard should have made unnecessary: taking a partner submission and matching its columns to the cluster's template, chasing the partners who submitted incomplete or misformatted rows, deduplicating overlaps, cleaning geographic references, and only then producing the actual matrix. The analysis — the reason the 5W exists — is what fits into whatever time is left at the end.

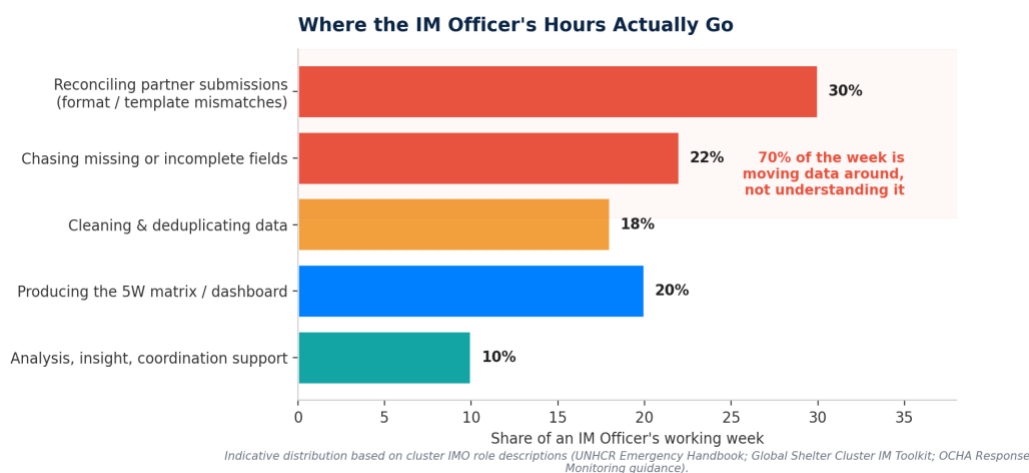


Figure 2. The bulk of an IM Officer's week is spent moving data between formats, not understanding it. This is not an efficiency problem — it is a standards problem.

⁴The Centre for Humanitarian Data (OCHA), *The State of Open Humanitarian Data 2026*; and *The rough guide to aid-activity data on HDX*, which notes that consolidated 3W / 4W / 5W reports "often lack project start/end dates; usually lack persistent identifiers for comparing activities across time; rarely include funding or beneficiary information." [centre.humdata.org](https://www.humdata.org)

This was already unsustainable in 2024, when clusters and country offices were fully staffed. In 2026, with IM and M&E capacity halved across the sector, it is not simply inefficient — it is a systemic failure mode. A cluster IMO now covering three sectors, or a national NGO now expected to submit directly without an INGO intermediary, cannot absorb the reconciliation work that the current 5W standard silently offloads onto them.

3. What the next-generation 5W standard needs to be

The good news is that the sector already knows what a real data standard looks like. HXL — the Humanitarian Exchange Language — gives us an interoperable tagging convention. IATI gives us a funding transparency standard. Common Operational Datasets give us shared geography.⁵ What has been missing is a single activity-reporting standard that pulls these together — and a platform that operationalizes it at the point of data entry, not after the fact. A next-generation 5W standard needs, at minimum:

- **A single harmonized activity schema.** A shared field structure across clusters — with room for cluster-specific extensions — so that the same activity always looks the same, regardless of who reports it.
- **Persistent, unique activity identifiers.** An activity that runs from January to June is the same activity in June as it was in January, and can be tracked across quarters, partners, and donor reports.
- **HXL-compliant tagging and COD-based geography by default.** Interoperable with HDX, HAPI, and every downstream analytical tool the sector already uses. No new format wars.
- **Machine-readable, human-editable at the point of entry.** Partners submit once, in a form that validates against the standard as they type. Reconciliation happens at point of submission, not three weeks later.
- **Financial and beneficiary linkage built in.** Every activity connects to its funding source and its beneficiary count — the two things HDX itself flags as consistently missing from current 5W data.

4. This is what 5W-AI is built to be

5W-AI is the operational intelligence platform that makes this standard usable. It ingests activity data from partner submissions in any format, maps them onto a single harmonized 5W schema, validates them against the standard as they arrive, and produces cluster-ready and donor-ready outputs without a separate reconciliation cycle. Coverage gaps become visible in real time instead of at the mid-year review. Duplicate submissions are caught before they enter the matrix. Achievement rates are calculated from data, not typed in by hand.

The point is not to replace the 5W framework — it is the right framework, and it has been for two decades. The point is to give the framework the data layer it never had. 5W-AI is what “the 5W” was always supposed to be: a single, coordinated, interoperable, real-time view of who is doing what, where, when, and for whom. Not a spreadsheet you receive at the end of the month, but a live coordination surface any cluster coordinator or country director can act on today.

If you coordinate a cluster, run a national IM working group, or lead reporting for an NGO now doing three roles with one person, 5W-AI is currently onboarding pilot organisations for the V1.0 launch. Live at 5wai.live. Direct contact: mark@5wai.live.

Further reading

UNHCR Emergency Handbook, [Emergency Information Management Coordination](#) · OCHA, [Response Monitoring — HPC Collective Learning](#) · Centre for Humanitarian Data, [The rough guide to aid-activity data on HDX](#) · Global Shelter Cluster, [IM & Assessment Toolkit — Activity Reporting](#) · [HXL Standard](#) · [IATI Standard](#).

⁵Humanitarian Exchange Language (HXL) is an open data standard endorsed by OCHA and published on HDX; International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) provides an interoperable standard for aid activity funding. Both remain under-adopted at cluster reporting level. hxlstandard.org | iatistandard.org