



Introduction

The CERF secretariat has taken continuous steps towards improving the quality of narrative reports submitted by Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HC) on the use of CERF funds and in August 2013, CERF launched a revised reporting framework, which introduced the following key changes:

Reporting schedule: RC/HCs now report to the CERF secretariat within three months after expiration of an allocation, rather than on an annual basis. This rolling schedule simplifies the reporting task by allowing RC/HCs to receive more timely and relevant inputs from recipient agencies. It also improves the availability and use of information for lesson learning, accountability and advocacy purposes.

Reporting template: The format of the reporting template has been improved and tailored templates with pre-populated grant information have been introduced for easier and more accurate reporting.

In-country reporting process: The CERF secretariat has proposed a 'best-practice' in-country reporting process, which includes an After-Action Review by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) shortly after the completion of the grants. AAR's are an opportunity for humanitarian partners to conduct a joint analysis of results, lessons learned and CERF's added value.

Review methodology: An assessment methodology and tool has been developed to evaluate the quality of reports received from RC/HCs. This has been a big step forward for CERF in ensuring a more consistent review process and for enabling an improved analysis of the quality of reports.

A preliminary paper, analysing of the quality of narrative reports submitted under the new reporting framework, was presented at the last Advisory Group meeting in November 2014. The analysis covered all reports related to 2013 CERF grants, submitted by the cut-off date of 15 September 2014 and included a total of 45 reports. This updated version of the paper is based on the analysis covering all 83 reports for 2013 CERF grants, and reflects on lessons learned and benefits of the new reporting framework.

Quality assessment methodology and tool

As part of the new reporting framework, the CERF secretariat has developed an improved assessment methodology and a tool to evaluate the quality of reports received from RC/HCs. The tool enables the CERF secretariat to score reports according to standardized parameters based on an established scale.

The methodology and the tool contain two parts. The first part provides a basis for evaluating the quality of the report based on seven aspects, including structure, content, strategic analysis, sub-grants, project sheet content, language and grammar. Given that the in-country reporting process is meant to foster joint learning in relation to CERF allocations and can be a major factor in influencing the quality of the reports, process-related information is also evaluated to provide an indication on how well an HCT has carried out the reporting process, and how inclusive it has been. An overall rating is given on both the process and quality aspects.

The second part provides a basis for assessing the substantive aspects of the report and determines how well the CERF grant has been implemented according to its objectives and expected outcomes. This is not a quality rating of programme implementation, but rather a method to help CERF systematically analyse and compare reported achievements against approved proposals, and identify areas or issues for follow-up and possible improvements. The assessment is undertaken at the level of the overall consolidated grants package (from now on referred to as submission level) and at the level of each individual project (the project level). At the submission level, the response is evaluated for its overall achievements, number of people reached, timeliness and CERF added value. The assessment looks at how well the response has been carried out in fulfilling the objectives set out in the CERF application and whether beneficiary targets have been reached as planned. It also considers the timeliness of the interventions according to grant window timeframes (6 months for rapid response and 9 months for underfunded emergencies). Lastly, CERF's added value to the humanitarian response is assessed based on the RC/HC's answers to 4 related questions on whether CERF has: (i) led to a fast delivery of assistance to beneficiaries; (ii)

met time critical needs; (iii) helped to improve resource mobilization from other sources; and (iv) improved coordination among the humanitarian community.

For the purpose of this analysis, CERF analysed the quality assessment results from all the 83 reports both for rapid response (58) and underfunded (25) allocations approved in 2013. These reports were received and reviewed in 2014 and early 2015 and are available on the CERF website.

Key findings

Part 1: Report quality

First and final submissions

A comparison was made between the quality of the initial report submitted by the RC/HC and the final version accepted by the CERF secretariat for posting on the CERF website.

Reports are considered “very good” when they adhere fully to CERF’s reporting guidance and templates and clearly explain the use of CERF funds. They contain complete and appropriate content, make use of clear language and need little or no revision. Reports are rated as “good” when they have minimal structural and language issues and require limited content clarification. The “reasonable” rating is used when the report does not completely adhere to the CERF reporting template and is missing relevant information. A “weak” score is assigned when a report scores low across most parameters, meaning that its structure has been substantially altered and it contains major content and language issues. A report would be “unacceptable” when it would have to be substantially revised before CERF could even review it.

Based on the overall quality rating, it was found that 79 per cent of the reports were rated “very good” (29 per cent) or “good” (50 per cent) upon initial submission. For example, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Ethiopia, Laos and the Philippines were among the champions for high-quality reports. The remaining 22 per cent were rated as reasonable (17 per cent) or weak (4 per cent equivalent to three reports). No reports were rated “unacceptable” upon first submission. See charts 1a and 1b below.



Chart 1a. Quality of initial reports submissions



Chart 1b. Quality of final cleared reports

The quality of first submission can be influenced by a number of factors. These include: the priority given to the exercise by the RC/HC, HCT and partners; quality and timeliness of inputs provided by recipient agencies and implementing partners; capacity and experience of OCHA and/or RC offices (RCO) in handling CERF reporting; knowledge of OCHA/RCO staff, and UN agency and IOM staff in CERF reporting requirements and procedures, among others.

The introduction of a tailored reporting package with pre-populated data may have contributed to ensuring that a relatively high proportion of first submissions scored “very good” or “good.”

At the final submission, the vast majority of reports either scored “very good” or “good”, with only two reports classified as reasonable. This was expected given the rigorous review process carried out between CERF secretariat and the reporting focal points in the field.

Process elements

Process aspects are evaluated at the time of final submission as field communications with CERF during the report review process is part of the process assessment. About 78 per cent of the reports were rated as having followed a “very good” or “good” in-country reporting process (see charts 2a and 2b). This suggests that over three-quarters of the reports were largely produced according to CERF’s recommended in-country reporting process which encourages an inclusive and transparent procedure and involvement of all key stakeholders in the preparation of the report¹. A report is rated “very good” when process information is complete and demonstrates that the major steps proposed were followed and that key partners were involved. A “good” in-country process would have followed the key steps but lacked some elements of inclusiveness or consultation.

The overall process rating considers process elements such as the timeliness of submission to the CERF secretariat, responsiveness in communications related to the report and inclusiveness of relevant partners in the country-level reporting process. Based on the information reported, some 81 per cent of reports were rated as having a “very good” or “good” reporting process, 17 per cent were scored “reasonable” and only one report was found to have had a “weak” process. In no case was the process found to be “unacceptable”. This suggests that the majority of recipients followed CERF’s proposed reporting process and met parameters related to timeliness, inclusiveness and communication. Reports rated as “reasonable” and “weak” generally lacked information or scored poorly in terms of process elements. Reasons for such ratings could include failure to conduct an After-Action Review with no explanation, repeatedly missed deadlines or apparent lack of consultation with country partners during the reporting process.

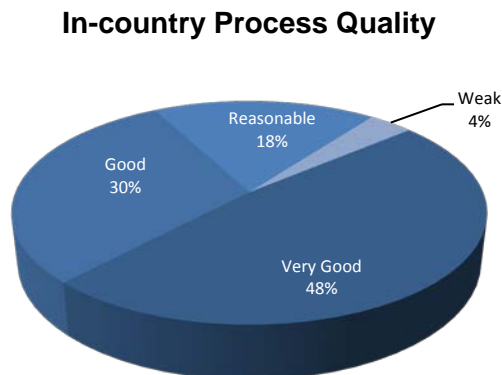


Chart 2a. Quality of in-country processes



Chart 2b. Quality of overall process

Part 2: Substantive assessment

The substantive evaluation assesses the reported results of CERF-funded activities against approved proposals. As highlighted earlier, this assessment is not a quality assessment of programme implementation, but merely a way for CERF to analyse and compare reported achievements against funded proposals with the aim of identifying possible issues for follow-up and areas for improvement.

Overall achievements

Based on an overall assessment of reported achievements it was found that 88 per cent of the CERF-funded responses “fully” or “mostly” met the objectives described in project proposals. The remaining 12 per cent only “partly” achieved their planned objectives. No response received a “limited” or “not at all” score. These results suggest that, according to reported information, CERF funds have largely achieved the set objectives. Key factors

¹ Amongst other things, the reporting template asks RC/HCs to explain if an After-Action Review has been conducted as part of the reporting process, whether the report has been discussed with the UN/HCT and with cluster/sector coordinators and whether the report has been shared with relevant in-country stakeholders.

influencing overall achievements include operational and contextual uncertainties during the submission and implementation phase, security constraints, limited capacity of implementing partners and procurement delays, among others.

Beneficiary achievements

In terms of reported beneficiary achievements at the submission level, about 78 per cent were rated as having either “fully” or “mostly” met planned targets. Those that exceeded beneficiary targets were considered in the “fully” category. Some 22 per cent were assessed as having only partly reached the intended number of beneficiaries. It must be noted that beneficiary counting is a challenging task as CERF typically contributes to a broader emergency response and it is not always possible for agencies to isolate CERF beneficiary numbers from those reached within a broader programme. In addition, the time-critical aspect of rapid response submissions means that accurate data may not always be available at the time of submission which can result in discrepancies between target beneficiary figures presented in proposals and the actual beneficiary numbers provided at time of reporting. Beneficiary numbers in CERF proposals therefore often represent a best estimate. This problem can never be completely eliminated. However, a report should provide a clear explanation of why a potential discrepancy may have occurred from planning to implementation.

Timeliness

Timeliness of the response is a major concern for CERF. Timeliness relates to how well activities are aligned with the set implementation timeframe, as well as how quickly funds are disbursed to recipient agencies and on to implementing partners². According to the analysis, 83 per cent of submissions reported activities were “fully” or “mostly” carried out in line with the CERF project timeframe. This meant no or only slight delays in the execution of activities, based on reported information. The remaining 17 per cent received a “partial” timely rating which may have been due to no-cost extensions (of grant completion date) or implementation delays in certain activities.

CERF added value

In the reports, RC/HCs and country teams assess CERF’s added value to the overall humanitarian response at a strategic level. This is important because CERF is more than just a source of funding. CERF grants have the potential to add value to the overall humanitarian response in additional ways, as elaborated below. In this respect the RC/HCs and country teams answer four standard questions in the reporting template, complemented with a short rationale for the answers given. The questions and answers provided in the 83 reports reviewed are summarized in Table 1 below.

CERF added value questions	Response	No. of reports	Proportion in %
Did CERF funds lead to a fast delivery of assistance to beneficiaries?	Yes	74	89
	Partially	8	10
	No	1	1
Did CERF funds help respond to time critical needs?	Yes	80	96
	Partially	3	4
	No	0	0
Did CERF funds help improve resource mobilization from other sources?	Yes	47	57
	Partially	29	35
	No	7	8
Did CERF improve coordination amongst the humanitarian community?	Yes	71	86
	Partially	12	14
	No	0	0

Table 1: Responses to CERF’s added value questions in narrative reports.

On the first question on fast delivery of assistance to beneficiaries, the majority of country teams (89 per cent) answered “yes,” 10 per cent answered “partially,” and 1 per cent (one submission) answered “no.” Many of those

² An analysis of reported sub-grants to implementing partners is available in a separate report prepared by the CERF secretariat.

that responded positively mentioned the speedy CERF approval and fund disbursement as a key factor in helping them deliver assistance to beneficiaries quickly. The report from the Philippines noted that “CERF was critical in enabling procurement of additional relief items in the early phase of the emergency.” The oPt report indicated that the CERF application process encouraged coordinated action to prioritize and act coherently from needs assessments to implementation and helped deliver assistance to beneficiaries quickly. In general, CERF rapid response grants were valued by country teams facing sudden influxes of displaced populations, such as in the case of Uganda. According to the report from Uganda, the *“CERF allocation was very timely as Uganda saw an unexpected influx from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) following an attack by Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) on a town close to the Ugandan border.”* The report noted that CERF funding allowed humanitarian partners to relieve pressure on a transit centre by assisting refugee movements to the refugee settlement.

On the second question of CERF helping to meet time critical needs, all of the reports responded “yes” except for three that reported “partially.” Many rapid response grant recipients highlighted that CERF grants allowed them to put in place essential supplies for the response. In the case of the response to conflict-related displacement in Rakhine State in Myanmar, the report highlighted that CERF funding for the health sector allowed *“most of the essential drugs to be provided in a timely manner.”* It added: *“This proactive distribution enabled partner organizations to expediently deliver services and supplies to camps to ensure the provision of quality life-saving healthcare to the affected population.”* The role of CERF in time-critical responses was particularly highlighted in reports from disease-affected countries, such as Ethiopia (yellow fever), Kenya (polio) and Lao People’s Democratic Republic (dengue), where timely interventions in high-risk areas and provision of technical expertise helped contain the outbreaks and save lives. Similarly in Senegal, the timing of CERF funding to respond to drought-induced food insecurity through *“the distribution of seeds, animal feed, pesticide, food and vouchers helped beneficiary households to recover more quickly ... timely intervention not only improved the diet of beneficiaries and reduced to some extent the movement of families, but also prevented the sale of livelihood assets.”*

In regard to the third question on whether CERF helps to improve resource mobilization, 57 per cent of the reports indicated that CERF has helped them mobilize additional funding. The report from Ethiopia mentioned that CERF acted *“as a catalyst to advocate for more funds to support the Yellow Fever outbreak response.”* In Madagascar, CERF funding was leveraged to raise substantial additional international funding to fight a major crop pest infestation that threatened food security. In the case of the Somalia polio response, the HCT found CERF to be crucial early funding that led to additional resources. The Somalia report noted that *“since CERF was one of the first contributions to the outbreak response, funding enabled recruitment and deployment of critical staff among others. This complemented the activities funded by other donors such as vaccine procurement, supply chain management, etc.”* Another 35 per cent of reports answered “partially”, as in the cases of Sudan, Djibouti and Myanmar, among others. Four reports indicated that CERF had not played a role in mobilizing additional resources. A common reasoning in these cases was that it is difficult to identify clear reasons for the confirmation of additional resources. Others mentioned that the timing of CERF grants may have served primarily as a crucial complementary resource to funding already available from donors in response to yearly appeals and that CERF was necessary to ensure the success of vital programmes.

Lastly, on CERF’s added value in helping to improve coordination amongst the humanitarian community, 86 per cent of the reports answered “yes” and 14 per cent “partially.” The majority of reports suggested that CERF encouraged coordination and development of a joint strategy for response and that the integrated nature of CERF is such that all recipient agencies have to act in a concerted manner. In the response to the expulsion of people from Tanzania to Burundi, for example, the report indicated that *“through proper coordination between stakeholders throughout the process, the humanitarian country team has been able to develop a strategy for joint action in areas of high concentration of deportees. The submission of projects to the CERF secretariat under one umbrella was preceded by a joint assessment mission to have a common understanding of the situation and a joint priority setting. The various meetings for information exchange were a good sign of improving coordination within the humanitarian community.”*

The added value questions of the CERF reports provide valuable feedback from all recipient RC/HCs and country teams on how CERF has added value beyond just being a funding source. The explanatory notes complementing the responses provide particularly useful information for the CERF secretariat in understanding how CERF grants have contributed in different emergencies.

Conclusion and next steps

Experience so far has shown that the revised reporting framework has improved the way in which the CERF secretariat is able to review and assess the quality of grant reports. It has also enabled systematic follow-up on achievements and gaps in the grant cycle and allowed more proactive actions in ensuring quality reporting.

The transition to the new reporting process has been relatively smooth. However, it should be acknowledged that the new reporting cycle and the improved review process have increased the workload of the CERF secretariat and has shifted reporting support from an annual peak requirement to an ongoing activity that has to be maintained and resourced throughout the year.

It can be broadly concluded that the 2013 grant reports meet CERF reporting requirements and adheres to the recommended in-country process. The CERF secretariat found that reports were generally of a higher quality than in previous years, although direct comparison is not possible due to the change of review methodology. In particular, the high quality of the final reports is encouraging and can in large part be attributed to the efforts of RC/HCs, OCHA offices and country teams, as well as to the new reporting and review process through which the CERF secretariat provides real-time feedback.

Many factors beyond the CERF secretariat's direct control affect the reporting process, such as RC/HC leadership, agency capacity and the evolution of a country's humanitarian situation which may shift attention away from reporting. CERF will continue to monitor and address quality issues, including through CERF trainings, and will reach out to RC/HCs and reporting focal points for feedback on reporting requirements and processes. Ultimately, the aim is to improve the quality of initial report submissions to reduce the work required by country teams and the CERF secretariat in finalizing reports.

While the results of this review have been encouraging, the CERF secretariat recognizes that a considerable amount of work lies ahead in maintaining and improving reports quality, which is a key priority. This analysis has provided useful observations and will also serve as a baseline for future analysis to monitor and compare quality on a year-to-year basis.

Continuous efforts will be made to expand the analysis of the new reporting framework to other relevant components, including systematic follow-up to lessons learned and good practices identified by country level partners in the submitted reports.