



Efforts to Improve the Quality of Narrative Reporting and Monitoring On the Use of CERF Funds

CERF secretariat, September 2012

1. BACKGROUND

The annual narrative reporting from the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) is one of the CERF secretariat's critical tools for ensuring that CERF is accountable and transparent to donors, beneficiaries and other stakeholders. This report covers all CERF activities in a given country during a calendar year, and is due to be submitted by 15 March the following year. Following concerns raised by the Five-year Evaluation of CERF¹ and recommendations made by the CERF Advisory Group in October 2011, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Ms. Valerie Amos, made it one of her priorities to improve CERF narrative reporting. In her communications with RC/HCs and heads of CERF-recipient agencies in November 2011, Ms. Amos expressed concern about the quality of reporting and the speed of disbursing CERF funds from recipient agencies to implementing partners. She asked for their support in improving the quality of the 2012 narrative reports. The CERF secretariat also took a number of steps to improve the quality and timeliness of the narrative reports.

2. GOALS

This paper highlights actions taken to improve the quality and timeliness of the 2012 RC/HC narrative reports, and makes recommendations on how to further improve this process.

3. PROCESS

In the fall of 2011, the CERF secretariat undertook steps to improve the process of submitting, reviewing, and editing final narrative reports:

- **In-house Strategy:** The CERF secretariat developed an internal strategy for revising the narrative template and guidelines, and for streamlining the reporting process. Regular discussions were held with different units of the Secretariat to help improve the template and process.
- **Revised Reporting Process:** In addition to creating an internal timeline, focal points were identified at headquarters, regional, and field levels within OCHA offices and UN agencies. CERF's Reporting and Information Unit was the main intermediary. It regularly contacted regional and field counterparts, providing guidance and feedback on enquiries. Similarly, the CERF secretariat developed a rigorous

¹ The Five-year Evaluation was mandated by the General Assembly in resolution A/RES/63/139 (2008)

evaluation system to assess the quality and timeliness of final reports, including their substantive programmatic and editorial content.

- **Updated Narrative Report Template:** The Secretariat revised and condensed the narrative reporting template, and developed more-detailed guidelines to explain the reporting process and issues to be discussed in the narrative report. Recipient countries that had received multiple allocations or experienced several emergencies were requested to report on each allocation/emergency separately within their consolidated report. This allowed for clearer reports that better demonstrated CERF's added value.
- **Proposed Changes Shared with the IASC:** The draft template and guidelines were shared with the IASC Sub-Working Group on Humanitarian Financing and CERF-recipient agencies for comments. The Chief of the CERF secretariat also met with recipient agencies to solicit the support of their headquarters on the revised template, and to ensure that their respective country offices submitted improved inputs.
- **Correspondence with RC/HCs and other Members in the Field:** Once the final guidelines and template were approved, the ERC sent a follow-up e-mail in January 2012 to RC/HCs and other CERF focal points in the field, highlighting the importance of improving the quality and timeliness of their reporting. This was followed by e-mails from the Chief of the Secretariat, who explained the process and shared the revised narrative template and supporting guidelines for the 2012 RC/HC narrative reports.
- **Regular Contact:** The Secretariat was in regular contact with RC/HCs and field focal points to provide technical, editorial, and substantive guidance.
- **Evaluation of Incoming Reports:** The CERF secretariat's Reporting and Information Unit and Programme Unit used rigorous criteria to review all incoming narrative reports from the field, measuring their overall quality and timeliness.
- **Scoring Methodology:** To facilitate a swift and thorough assessment of the timeliness and quality of final narrative reports, the Reporting and Information Unit created a flexible scoring system that established criteria to measure reports as "good", "reasonable", or "weak".

4. TIMELINESS OF SUBMISSIONS

A total of 45 RC/HC reports were due on 15 March. The following analysis, however, is based on 44 reports as the Cambodia projects were ending at this time and were not included. (An exceptional extension of six weeks was given to the RC/HC in Cambodia so that a more complete report could be submitted.)

In 2012, 45 per cent of the final narrative reports (20) were received by the 15 March deadline and all of the reports within 30 days of the deadline. In 2011, only 33 per cent of reports were received by the deadline, another 52 per cent within 30 days of the deadline, and a further 15 per cent trickled in up until the end of June.

The Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) generally responded quickly to the CERF secretariat's requests for clarifications after their respective reports were reviewed against the project proposals. For those countries which required more time, the offices of the RC/HCs or OCHA often noted that they could not meet CERF's deadline because they were waiting for agencies to give them adequate new or updated inputs. In other cases, country offices were also short staffed or had to deal with new emergencies.

In 2012, 68 per cent of final narrative reports (30) were posted on the CERF website by 25 May and the last was posted at the end of June. In 2011, by comparison, by 4 June, 23 per cent of final narrative reports (11) had been posted on the CERF website, a further 75 per cent (35) were posted by 4 August, and the last report by 3 September.

Improving Timeliness

The processes of reviewing, revising, editing, and posting the final narrative reports online could have been improved by screening initial submissions to determine the weakest reports. Efforts will continue to be taken to further reduce the time it takes the field to respond to comments and requests for clarifications.

5. QUALITY OF REPORTING

In order to measure quality, in 2011 the CERF secretariat began grading the reports on programme content, editorial quality, and adherence to the reporting format. Reports were graded as good, reasonable, or weak. The rating reflected the quality of the initial submission, the amount of work required by the CERF secretariat to revise the submission, and the overall quality of the final report posted on the CERF website. In 2012, the quality and timeliness of final narrative reports improved remarkably compared with 2011.

a. Programmatic

Over the past six years, the quality of CERF narrative reporting has improved steadily: out of the 47 reports submitted in 2011, 36 per cent were classified as good, 36 per cent as reasonable, and 28 per cent as weak.

For the most part, good reports demonstrated a high quality of substantive and editorial content, requiring very few changes on emergencies and agency inputs, such as beneficiary numbers and figures.

The reasonable and weak narrative reports illustrated relatively more substantive and editorial gaps and errors, with weaker countries typically not reporting on the correct number of emergencies that received CERF funding, providing less agency inputs, and submitting poorly drafted reports.

b. Content

From a programmatic *content* perspective, upon submission a little more than 77 per cent of reports (34) were good, some 18 per cent (8) were reasonable, and approximately 5 per cent (2) were weak. What set good reports apart from reasonable and weak reports was that they demonstrated a more robust and consistent ability to report the correct number of emergencies and projects in line with the new template and guidelines. Typically, what separated weak reports from reasonable reports was that they had largely failed to follow the new template and guidelines, which in turn made it hard to follow the content of their reporting.

c. Reporting and Editorial

In terms of language, upon submission 70 per cent of reports (31) were found to be generally very well written, with few grammatical and spelling mistakes, while 14 per cent (6) were reasonable, and approximately 16 per cent (7) were weak. Most narrative reports, whether written in English or French, were well written and well structured. The others had substantial grammatical and spelling mistakes that required a lot of editing.

d. Adherence to the Reporting Template and Guidelines

Approximately 64 per cent of reports (28) had responded entirely or nearly entirely to all the questions in the template; and 23 per cent of the reports (10) had answered half or more than half of the questions, with some 13 per cent (6) having only answered half or less. Of the full set of 44 countries, 11 countries (25 per cent) required a significant amount of review and clarification (typically over 20 requests for clarification) on how to report on their emergencies correctly, or how to receive missing inputs from agencies.

e. Reporting at the Agency Level

The overall quality of project reporting by the UN agencies was reasonable, and there is considerable room for improvement. Only 16 per cent of countries (7) were rated as “good” upon submission, i.e. they completed most segments of the annex 1 sheet in line with the template and guidelines; 77 per cent (34) were rated as reasonable; and 7 per cent (3) were rated as weak. The vast majority of agency inputs remained incomplete, mainly because information on target and actual beneficiaries and figures was incomplete, incorrect, or both. Following the revisions requested by the CERF secretariat, there was improvement in the reporting at the agency level.

f. Summary

The Secretariat’s efforts to improve the programmatic content of RC/HC reports resulted in clear and significant improvement as compared to 2011 reports. Cambodia, Guinea, Liberia, and South Sudan were good examples of countries that scored well across the board, both substantively and editorially. On the other hand, Chad, Niger, Tunisia, and Yemen were classified as weak reports based on the weaknesses of their initial submissions and how, despite repeated clarifications on agency inputs, sufficient improvements were not made in a timely manner.

6. FINDINGS ON SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF CERF NARRATIVE REPORTS

a. Beneficiaries

In 2012, at least half of the 45 countries did not report sufficiently on beneficiary figures aggregated by gender and age group and per emergency. Some of these countries did not specify the number of beneficiaries reached compared with the number of target beneficiaries.

b. Gender Equality

Despite the previous finding, in 2012, 93 per cent of countries (41) reported using CERF funding for gender-specific projects, or they at least considered gender in designing and implementing their projects. This was up significantly from 2011, when 82 per cent of countries reported having done so.

c. Added Value of CERF to the Humanitarian Response

In terms of reporting on CERF's added value, virtually all (98 per cent) said that CERF support led to the fast delivery of assistance to beneficiaries, helped them respond to time-critical needs (96 per cent), or had improved coordination in the humanitarian community (96 per cent). Furthermore, 89 per cent of countries reported that CERF funds had resulted in other funds being mobilized.

d. Process and Consultation

Of the 44 reports, 35 (80 per cent) specified that their final narrative reports had been shared with in-country stakeholders. This was a new element in the reporting template, which aimed to ensure more transparency within the HCTs. However, recent CERF Performance and Accountability Framework country reviews show there is still more to do in this area.

e. Disbursement of Funds to Implementing Partners

It was encouraging to note that in 2012, far more agencies reported on the disbursement of funds to their implementing partners: 820 projects as opposed to 120 in 2011. This has significantly improved our ability to analyse this key data set.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The CERF secretariat should continue to communicate frequently and proactively with the RC/HCs and UN agencies on reporting requirements, engaging the ERC as required.
- The CERF secretariat should provide RC/HCs with the reporting template and guidelines as soon as the respective recipient country has received a CERF allocation. This would help ensure that HCTs and recipient agencies fully understand CERF's reporting requirements.

- Agencies at the headquarter level should be encouraged to get more involved in supporting HCTs throughout the narrative reporting process. The reporting template should continue to be further refined through consultations with recipient agencies, feedback from the field, and inputs from the CERF secretariat.
- The reporting template should better define the parameters of target and actual beneficiaries, namely by disaggregating information by age and gender.