

Introduction

Ten months after WHO declared COVID-19 a global health emergency, the coronavirus now has a foothold in nearly all countries in the world, including some of those hardest-hit by conflict and natural disasters. The Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) for COVID-19 asks for \$10.2 billion in other funding to respond to the pandemic, in addition to the \$29.7 billion in global humanitarian requirements.

In these unprecedented circumstances, CERF has responded in a timely, flexible, and record-setting manner. To date, three CERF allocations and reprogrammed funds totalling more than \$135 million have been made to help address the primary and secondary humanitarian impacts of COVID-19 in 46 countries. In addition, CERF has extended maximum flexibility to recipient organizations, allowing them to adjust ongoing CERF projects to the changing needs and operational constraints. At the heart of CERF's COVID-19 response is innovation, with the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) adopting new and tailored allocation approaches to better meet the unique challenges of the pandemic.

CERF has piloted four innovations to support the global response during the pandemic:

- (1) Global UN block-grants for maximum speed and flexibility
- (2) Funding for NGOs to support frontline responders and localization
- (3) Funding to support gender-based violence programming
- (4) Flexibility in adjusting CERF projects so that UN agencies can adapt to constraints

Flexible Global Block Grants - \$95 million

In February 2020, as an immediate first response to the humanitarian impact of the pandemic, CERF made the first-ever global block-grant allocations, totalling some \$95 million. Providing resources directly to UN agencies at the global level rather than through traditional country-specific grants provided agencies with maximum flexibility to prioritize funding for the most critical country programmes, within the parameters of the global response plan.¹ Resources were allocated to nine UN agencies between February and May 2020, privileging speed and flexibility at a time of great uncertainty. Of the \$95 million allocated, \$40 million was earmarked for critical logistics and humanitarian supply-chains services, in support of the global COVID-19 response. For instance, WFP used the CERF funds to support its passenger and cargo air operations, to fund two dedicated medevac air ambulances, to establish three strategic logistics hubs, and to set up two field hospitals.

These first CERF COVID-19 allocations supported the scale-up of time-critical lifesaving efforts across 36 countries. They helped to contain the spread of COVID-19, to ensure the continuity of critical health and humanitarian supply chains, to transport humanitarian workers and supplies, and to provide lifesaving humanitarian assistance and protection to the most vulnerable people affected by the pandemic, including women and girls, disabled and elderly people, refugees and internally displaced people. The funds are supporting 64 million people through the direct provision of assistance, and indirectly through awareness-raising campaigns.

¹ An exception to this was the WFP allocation, which focused exclusively on securing the continuity of supply chains for essential commodities. Also, the initial grant to WHO and UNICEF (\$15 million) did not specify GHRP countries, as the allocation was made prior to the GHRP launch.

To disburse funds quickly, CERF relied on a fast-tracked approval process. Light project proposals were submitted to initially justify allocation decisions, and were followed by post-allocation project documents containing detailed information on the projects. This enabled CERF to approve most project proposals in one or two days from original submission, while also maintaining transparency and accountability. Fund disbursement was accelerated accordingly, with most agencies receiving funds within three to five days of original project submission -- considerably faster than regular Rapid Response disbursements. In addition, some agencies took advantage of “early start dates”, expensing CERF-funded activities ahead of the disbursement. UN agencies have highlighted their appreciation for CERF’s global block-grant approach, particularly the flexibility and speed of disbursement. Activities initiated as early as 3 February were funded well ahead of the declaration of the pandemic on 11 March.

First-Ever CERF NGO Allocation - \$25 million

In June 2020, CERF made its first ever NGO allocation, channelling \$25 million in funding via IOM to 24 frontline NGOs for COVID-19 response. As the ERC has noted, “NGOs are at the heart of our global effort to contain the pandemic” and this unprecedented allocation was a way to pilot an approach to providing NGOs with more direct access to CERF funding. The allocation was successful in supporting localization, with one third of the recipient NGOs being national NGOs. Building on IOM’s flexible and tailored approach, the CERF was able to also pass on to NGOs light contractual arrangements and conditions for funding similar to those typically offered to UN agencies.

The funds supported NGO COVID-19 programming in six countries: Bangladesh, the Central African Republic, Haiti, Libya, South Sudan and Sudan. The allocation focused on the water, sanitation and hygiene and health sectors, including mental health, sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence response and protection. In each country, the best placed frontline responders were identified by an expert committee under the leadership of the RC/HC. The allocation prioritized a limited number of interventions at scale, to ensure the greatest impact for those in need. The average project sizes were \$1 million for international NGOs and \$600,000 for national NGOs. The projects targeted 1.38 million beneficiaries across the six countries, including 388,000 women, 332,000 girls, 348,000 men, and 313,000 boys.

Given the uniqueness of the NGO allocation, a dedicated learning process has been implemented. CERF is collating lessons from various stakeholders, and has conducted a survey among all recipient NGOs and other stakeholders involved in the process (cluster coordinators, representatives of NGO consortia, and protection and gender specialists who participated in committees to select the NGO projects). In the survey, NGOs expressed high levels of satisfaction with the process. In general, 85 per cent of NGOs and 76 per cent of other stakeholders were satisfied or very satisfied with the allocation.

Targeting Gender-Based Violence in the Context of COVID-19 - \$22 million

The pandemic has further exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, in particular for women and girls, and other vulnerable groups. The Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 highlights the impact of COVID-19 on the risk of gender-based violence (GBV). A spike in GBV has been reported during the pandemic, including intimate partner violence, with survivors of GBV often isolated and quarantined with their abusers.

For the first time, CERF earmarked a portion of the envelope from the Underfunded Emergencies Window specifically for GBV activities. The Emergency Relief Coordinator set aside at least \$5.5 million from the overall envelope of \$100 million exclusively for the protection of and response to gender-based violence. The purpose of this earmarked funding was to incentivize additional gender-based violence programming that has a

catalytic effect on the humanitarian response. To maximize the impact of the funding, CERF mobilized GBV experts to support countries with technical advice and guidance during development of project submissions.

The earmarking had a catalytic effect and some countries increased the proportion of funds dedicated to GBV activities. Across the ten countries, almost \$22 million – four times more than the ERC’s initial earmarking of \$5.5 million – has been dedicated to GBV projects and to health projects that contribute to GBV outcomes. Indeed, some countries such as Uganda selected GBV as a cornerstone of their overall CERF allocation.

Maximum Flexibility in the Implementation of CERF Funding - \$15.6 million

Recognizing the impact of the pandemic on humanitarian operations, CERF has granted UN agencies the flexibility to adapt their projects to new operating environments and to deal with uncertainty. Since the start of the pandemic, CERF has offered a streamlined process for UN agencies to request project extensions and to reprogramme funds if needed. As of late October, CERF had approved \$15.6 million in requests for reprogramming of projects in 30 countries for COVID-19-related activities, and a total of 122 ongoing CERF projects have been reprogrammed or extended since the start of the pandemic.

Through reprogramming requests, the CERF has supported the:

- Procurement of basic personal protective equipment, such as gloves and masks, and hygiene items such as hand sanitizer, soap and handwashing stations,
- Adaptation of ongoing CERF projects to adhere to social distancing guidelines, for instance by increasing the frequency of distributions to reduce mass gatherings, and
- Awareness raising among both implementing partners and beneficiary communities about infection prevention and control measures.

Key Results

While the planned results from these allocations continue to be consolidated, it is estimated that with the first two allocations (\$95 million in block grants and \$25 million to NGOs) the CERF will have enabled assistance to over 65 million people. This includes the direct provision of assistance, and awareness raising campaigns to sensitize communities and vulnerable people about COVID-19. These CERF funds will support three key sectors: health (\$50 million), common logistics (\$40 million), and water, sanitation and hygiene (\$13 million), which together account for over 86% of the money spent. Agencies are also using CERF funding to support other key sectors (protection, food security, camp management, education, shelter and essential household items). A breakdown of expected results from the first two allocations is summarized below.

Global block-grants: Results to Date

CERF collects information on CERF-funded projects through interim and final reports. As of October, UN agencies reported:

- Over 18 million people reached through health awareness sessions, hygiene promotion activities and handwashing campaigns
- Over 5 million children supported with distance or home-based learning
- Over 3.5 million pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE), health kits and supplies delivered
- 2.5 million people reached with critical water and hygiene supplies
- 460,000 people received sexual and reproductive health services
- 50,000 people received sexual- and gender-based violence services
- 75,500 people received cash assistance to buy essentials like food, water, utilities and rent in order to ease the impact of COVID-19
- 31,800 people received agricultural and livestock inputs
- Three passenger flights and 264 cargo flights operations were supported with CERF and other donor funding
- Three humanitarian response hubs were established with CERF and other donor funding to facilitate cargo movements

CERF NGO-allocation: Planned Results

Implementation of the CERF-funded NGO projects is in full swing and interim results will only be available by December. However, based on approved projects the selected NGOs intend to target 1.38 million beneficiaries across the six countries, and plan to achieve the following targets:

- 467,000 people will be reached with critical WASH services and supplies
- 271,000 people will receive essential healthcare services
- 18,000 women and girls will be able to access sexual and reproductive health services
- 15,500 people will be provided with mental health and psychosocial support services
- 9,900 people will benefit from cash assistance
- 3,000 healthcare workers will be provided with PPE
- 2,650 people will access protection services

For more information

OCHA provides information about the CERF and Country-based Pooled Fund COVID-19 allocations through various products. This includes a real-time dashboard (pfb.unocha.org/COVID19), a regularly updated infographic, articles and press releases (available on the CERF website, cerf.un.org). CERF also amplifies stories by OCHA and UN agencies about CERF-funded COVID-19 activities on social media ([@UNCERF](https://twitter.com/UNCERF)).