

Introduction

For each CERF grant, the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator submits a narrative report to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, via the CERF secretariat. The reports provide information on the results and added value of the overall CERF grant, as well as on the results of individual projects. All reports are available on the CERF website, at <http://www.unocha.org/cerf/reportsevaluations/residenthumanitarian-coordinators-reports>.

The new CERF reporting framework launched in 2013 includes a dedicated section in the “chapeau” of the reporting template (Section V) to capture the Humanitarian Country Teams’ reflections as lessons learned in the CERF process. Lessons are presented separately as observations for the CERF secretariat and for the country partners. CERF recipient countries are encouraged to provide lessons learned but this is not mandatory.

This note summarizes the lessons learned listed in the CERF narrative reports submitted by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HCs) on the use of CERF funds in 2014. Only those lessons that are explicitly noted in the relevant tables of the reporting template are considered for this summary, i.e., only those which the Humanitarian Country Team (or equivalent) decided were important enough to pass on to the CERF secretariat. The note focuses on observations made for the CERF secretariat and describes the CERF secretariat’s response and possible actions to address them where relevant. In total, the CERF secretariat received 76 reports from 45 countries for rapid response and under-funded allocations in 2014, of which 58 reports included lessons for the CERF secretariat. This analysis is therefore based on 140 lessons drawn from these 58 reports across 35 countries.

Lessons Learned

For analysis purposes, the lessons are grouped into three phases of the CERF process: (1) application, (2) implementation, and (3) reporting. They are further mapped by topics relevant to each of these phases to identify common themes shared by different countries. A lesson can apply to one or more of the CERF stages, depending on the complexity of the issue expressed. This note captures the key themes and experiences of the country partners in the CERF process, both positive and critical, and does not describe all details.

Phase 1: Application

As a general observation, a large proportion of the lessons referred to the application stage. The three top areas, in terms of the number of lessons, were funding policies and criteria, application approval process, and application guidance and templates.

Funding policies and criteria

The highest number of lessons in the application phase related to the CERF funding criteria. Many elaborated on the need to allow more flexibility and to better adapt CERF’s funding policies and life-saving criteria to different type of crisis (slow-onset emergencies, transboundary threats, disease outbreaks), context-specific factors (cultural norms, access limitations), and to sector-specific needs and constraints (seasonality, technical complexity, sustainability among others). Several countries, including Ethiopia, Gambia, Haiti, Iraq, Kenya, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Serbia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Sudan believed that sustainability and durability elements require further consideration in CERF’s criteria to allow more impact and more effective use of resources. Some of these raised the need to consider more systematically livelihood protection interventions as life saving. Other recommended that also preparedness, prevention and risk reduction interventions, disease prevention, capacity development and

infrastructure construction and/or rehabilitation, should be considered eligible for CERF funding, when justified by the context.

Others, like Bolivia, observed that current CERF rapid response policies do not work well in slow-onset emergency situations, as it is often very difficult to identify the specific trigger for a CERF request.

Finally, a few countries, including Burkina Faso, Iraq and Ukraine, found that the level of CERF funding is often too low to allow for a significant impact in responding to the huge needs and/or to significantly contribute to filling the growing humanitarian funding gaps in protracted crisis context.

CERF Response

CERF has a narrow focus to ensure comparative advantage and increase its added value. CERF only funds life-saving humanitarian assistance to people in need. A clearly prioritized and coherent allocation of funds focused on the most urgent life-saving needs and underfunded crises keeps this sharp focus on the needs of affected people. The CERF life-saving criteria define which activities are and are not eligible in each sector, while maintaining a degree of context specific flexibility.

2015 studies¹ on the added value of a reformed CERF confirmed that the vast majority of its partners (UN agencies, donors, NGOs, and others) want CERF to keep this narrow focus and not to expand its funding criteria. Other funding mechanisms, such as bilateral donor contributions, country-based pooled funds or the Peacebuilding Fund, are available to support activities beyond life-saving humanitarian aid.

Within the life-saving focus, CERF does support elements of early action² to mitigate the risks of deepening crises, and early interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of shocks on the lives and livelihoods of crisis-affected populations. While the life-saving criteria allow the programming of early action elements into emergency response actions that strengthen the local actors' capacities to react faster in the face of crises, CERF cannot fund outright prevention and preparedness programmes.

The CERF secretariat does not foresee the existing criteria to be broadened under CERF's current configuration. However, the plan to double the volume of CERF to US\$ 1 billion per year by 2018 may provide opportunities to reorient approaches to better meet emerging threats and challenges, addressing some of the concerns expressed by recipient countries. A US\$ 1 billion CERF will also be able to respond to growing needs by scaling up allocations to provide more robust funding for humanitarian response to new humanitarian emergencies and ongoing and protracted crises and increase effectiveness and efficiency by providing larger grants to individual humanitarian crises and programmes, thereby increasing CERF's strategic impact and added value, while reducing transaction costs.

Application approval process

The second-highest number of lessons commented on the application approval process. Broadly considered, there seemed to be polarized views about the CERF approval process. On the one hand, CERF was appreciated for its fast turnaround in approvals, leading to quick disbursement of funds to enable immediate response by field actors, as highlighted by DPRK, Iraq, Kenya, Liberia, Niger, Sierra Leone and South Sudan. There was a strong emphasis on the quick disbursement of CERF funding and the possibility to use CERF funds to cover implementation costs before the disbursement date (advancing from agencies' own resources), that enabled humanitarian actors to act immediately and to support advocacy given the attention created by CERF as a start-up fund. On the other hand, CERF was criticized for its perceived increasingly demanding and complex approval requirements. Guinea, Senegal, Sudan, Iraq,

¹ Two studies on the added value of a reformed CERF; [Study on the Added value of a Reformed Central Emergency Response Fund](#) (Barnaby Willitts-King, March 2015) and [Review of the Potential for Assessed Funding for the Central Emergency Response Fund](#) (Edward Tsui, February 2015)

² In the context of humanitarian response, early action should be distinguished from the prevention and preparedness programmes that would require multi-year development commitments, often at the institutional and policy levels, to achieve full impact.

Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Niger, and Pakistan, among others, mentioned the problem of providing certain information, such as implementing partners in rapid response situations, detailed budget breakdown and other detailed information not yet available at approval stage due to challenges in the field. This was perceived as creating unnecessary back-and-forth potentially delaying the humanitarian actions on the ground.

CERF Response

One of CERF's key indicators is the time taken to review and approve applications, and disburse funding to projects. The CERF secretariat closely tracks the timeliness of the review and approval process and continuously works to shorten it. The CERF secretariat usually comments on draft applications and project proposals within one working day and its objective is not to take longer than two. For rapid response projects, UN agencies can request that CERF funds are used to cover implementation costs up to six weeks before the disbursement date of the CERF grant (early start date) which further increases CERF's timeliness.³

The CERF secretariat works to ensure that grants have common focus and are strategic, and support a clear joint prioritization process involving the HCT, government, clusters and other relevant stakeholders. A clearly prioritized strategy is required as the basis for each CERF application. When a grant has not been clearly prioritized, the secretariat, on behalf of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, may ask that such a strategy be developed and communicated. In some cases, the CERF secretariat will advise RC/HCs not to include certain activities in an application if these would fall outside of the life-saving criteria. In other cases, further information is required to ensure that this is the case. The above actions may add some extra but necessary time to the approval process

The CERF secretariat does not ask for information that is not available at the application stage. For instance, if implementing partners are not known at this stage, agencies may simply note this in the project proposal. The CERF application template is reviewed and improved on a regular basis to clarify which information is required and should therefore help to shorten the review process (see below). CERF will also seek to clarify budget requirements for submissions to help avoid unnecessary back-and-forth during the application process (see below).

While CERF tracks internal decision process, it has no access to the information related to the time it takes for HCT/UNCT to discuss and reach consensus in determining if and when to approach the CERF.

In 2016, the CERF secretariat established an internal Efficiency Task Team with the main objective to identify efficiency gains to decrease transaction costs while maintaining CERF's overall effectiveness. In particular, it will look at ways to streamline processes to reduce time and resources spent by the CERF secretariat and by external stakeholders involved in CERF processes, while ensuring that necessary checks and balances are met, quality is maintained and minimum requirements for information and documentation are adhered to.

Application guidance and templates

A few countries also provided lessons learned on the application guidance and templates (narrative and budget). Mali recommended that the same level of information on beneficiaries, with breakdown by gender, age and sector, be requested at planning (application) and reporting stage, so that agencies are aware of the level of detail demanded and collect all necessary information.

Bolivia found the application drafting process very complex and time consuming and suggested that an online application platform may somehow simplify it by ensuring consistency between the chapeau and project sections. Solomon Islands also found the application template rather complex and suggested that a simpler, ad-hoc template be developed for countries with limited humanitarian and CERF experience and meagre human resources.

On the budget portion of the application, many countries observed challenges due to the level of details required in the cost breakdowns and a general lack of understanding of the agencies in how the CERF budget works. This was the

³ Implementation can, of course, not begin before the start of the emergency and only if internal UN agency rules allow it.

part that consumed valuable turnaround time in the application submission process. It was suggested that CERF provide more support and training to agencies to avoid unnecessary back and forth. Another key concern was the appropriateness of staffing cost provisions in the budget to enable adequate coverage for the CERF response. It was recommended that CERF takes into consideration the specific nature of a crisis in approving the level of staffing cost in a project, possibly by developing more detailed staffing guidance by sector of response.

Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, oPt, Nigeria, Sudan, and Colombia flagged the need for regular training on CERF processes, and in particular with all aspects related to the CERF application process. Solomon Islands, in addition, recommended that the CERF secretariat provide closer and more targeted support to countries with limited CERF experience and scarce human resources.

Finally, Guinea and Liberia found both the application templates and guidance clear, easy, concise and user-friendly.

CERF Response

The CERF secretariat introduced a new application template, which was piloted in 2014 and officially introduced in January 2015. The lessons learned analysed in this paper are related to 2014 grants, a large number of which were approved still using the old application template.

The new template helps to further clarify linkages between CERF proposals and needs assessments and broader response strategies under the Humanitarian Programme Cycle. The template introduced a simple logical framework with clear outputs, indicators and activities, replacing the text-based format of the old template, which makes it easier to track achievements against plans.

The aim of the new template is to encourage strategic use of CERF funding by putting emphasis on the prioritization of needs and the parts of the response to which CERF can add most value. The template clarifies what information the Emergency Relief Coordinator requires in order to determine an emergency's eligibility for CERF funding and a project's adherence to the CERF's life-saving criteria. It should also shorten the review process by minimizing the need for several rounds of revisions during the application phase.

The new application template requires more structured information on issues related to gender and gender-based violence and accountability to affected people. The template asks for sex- and age-disaggregated data and gender is mainstreamed throughout the document.

The CERF secretariat Efficiency Task Team is reviewing all CERF related processes, including budget requirements and guidelines. The review will help clarify the minimum requirements for budget details in CERF proposals and will establish what additional guidance is required to avoid unnecessary budget-related delays during the application and approval phase.

After two years of use of the new application template, the CERF secretariat has identified a number of improvements, including some drawn from field comments and lessons learned, and is now in the process of releasing a revised version of the template. This revised version will for example address the issue of beneficiaries' breakdown by sex, age and sector and align beneficiary related information with the reporting template.

The CERF secretariat has considered the option of an online system for applications and concluded that, under the present conditions, it would not add value but would most likely result in additional workload to field-based partners. It is worth noting that there are many advantages to the current way of submitting applications by email, including its speed, simplicity and flexibility.

The CERF secretariat redesigned and improved its training in 2014 using a participatory inter-active methodology targeting RC/HCs, country team members, cluster- and sector-leads, and OCHA staff who facilitate the CERF process. The training anchors the CERF application process in country-level structures and provides an opportunity for participants to dissect what it means to prioritize strategically while ensuring evidence-based programming focusing on the most urgent humanitarian needs. In person trainings, at country and regional level, and webinars under this new framework are being rolled out since 2015 and should improve understanding of what is required and eligible in CERF submissions, thereby help to reduce unnecessary back-and-forth during the application phase. Ad-hoc webinars

are currently offered to recipient countries at the start of the Underfunded Emergencies application process. Similar targeted webinars might be offered to countries applying for rapid response grants upon request.

Phase 2: Implementation

For the implementation phase, not many lessons were drawn for the CERF secretariat as implementation was at country-level and observations for country partners were handled separately. Still, certain observations were relevant and important for the CERF secretariat in ensuring the effective use of CERF funds. The need for more flexibility in terms of budget revisions, geographical focus, project duration including no-cost extension and reprogramming to adapt to fast evolving conditions and/or needs and priorities was highlighted by several countries. Other lessons learned regarded monitoring and evaluation.

A number of countries, including Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Ukraine, recommended more flexibility in the geographical focus of interventions to better adapt to rapidly changing conditions on the ground, and provide uninterrupted assistance to populations escaping from conflict. Central African Republic suggested that a higher level of flexibility on budget and duration may be of great help in contexts where humanitarian partners are limited and access is a constraint. Several countries, including oPt, Pakistan, Nigeria, South Sudan, Iraq, and Ukraine stressed the need for more flexibility in terms of project duration and no-cost extensions in countries where access is severely constrained due to conflict. Others, like Gambia and Uganda, commented that activities in sectors like food security and agriculture, and WASH are affected by climate and seasonality and this should be taken into account when considering no-cost extensions and reprogramming.

A few countries made observations on monitoring and evaluation in relation to the CERF implementation. Bolivia recommended the introduction of an official CERF monitoring methodology and related tools. Mali proposed the allocation of CERF funds for a joint evaluation at the end of the implementation period. Finally, Niger suggested adding a monitoring and evaluation section in the reporting template to help assess the impact of the CERF grant.

CERF Response

As noted above, CERF focuses on life-saving humanitarian action and, under its rapid response window, on kick-starting a quick response to new or deteriorating crises. The implementation period for CERF rapid response grants has been increased, in consultation with UN agencies, from three to six months. Grants from the window for underfunded emergencies have to be implemented within about nine months.

As humanitarian contexts often change rapidly, CERF-funded projects might need to be adjusted. UN agencies can request three types of project revisions: no-cost extensions, changes in programmatic activities, and changes to the budgets. The CERF secretariat reviews these requests individually and the Emergency Relief Coordinator approves only those that are well justified due to circumstances outside the agency's control. Those that could have been avoided by better planning are rejected.

For smaller changes, UN agencies agreed in the 'Umbrella Letters of Understanding' with OCHA to have a flexibility of up to 15% for each budget category, such as supplies, equipment or transfers to implementing partners.

If, due to unforeseen circumstances, more time is needed, the RC/HC can request a no-cost extension. The Emergency Relief Coordinator will approve project extensions only in exceptional circumstances, if the reasons for the inability to implement are clearly documented to be outside of the control of the recipient agency. Compelling reasons for project extensions include, but are not limited to, unforeseen and increased access restrictions, unforeseen changes in government policy, or a fundamental change in the socio-political climate underpinning the application for CERF funds.

Activities that take longer to implement should not be prioritized for and funded by CERF but rather be covered by other funding sources. CERF typically only funds part of a programme in complement with other funding, and the overall programme may not end with the expiration of the CERF grant and conclusion of CERF-funded activities.

UN agencies are responsible for monitoring, evaluation and reporting with regard to CERF-funded action. While monitoring should be an ongoing activity during implementation, an evaluation could take place after the project implementation. As CERF usually funds only a part of an agency project or programme, monitoring and evaluation by agencies will usually cover activities beyond what was funded by CERF, and will often continue beyond the implementation period of a CERF project.

In late 2015 the CERF secretariat developed the CERF Monitoring Guidance, to provide guidance on the monitoring of CERF-funded projects at field level. This document is shared systematically with RC/HCs upon approval of each CERF grant. The note seeks to clarify roles and responsibilities in monitoring the implementation of CERF grants and outlines activities that shall take place to ensure availability of necessary information during and after the implementation phase.

According to the guidance, agencies are accountable for their CERF funded projects, and therefore responsible for monitoring project implementation. As CERF projects have been collectively prioritized under the leadership of the RC/HC, agencies shall provide information on implementation of CERF projects to the RC/HC through OCHA, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), and cluster coordinators. The objective of CERF monitoring is to give the RC/HC and the HCT assurance that CERF funded activities are implemented as intended and to enable corrective actions to be taken if necessary. It is also important in fostering joint learning in support of improved response. Monitoring arrangements should be agreed by the HCT at the beginning of the CERF process, communicated by the RC/HC to relevant stakeholders and documented in the CERF application submitted to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC).

To facilitate the collection of information by the RC/HC, an Interim Update template has been developed and field tested in 2015. A copy of this template, pre-populated with key project data, is also shared systematically with RC/HCs upon approval of each CERF grant. The RC/HC may opt to use the Interim Update provided by CERF or any other suitable monitoring tool she/he might consider appropriate.

Both the CERF Monitoring Guidance and the Interim Update template are available on the CERF website at

<http://www.unocha.org/cerf/resources/guidance-and-templates>

CERF also encourages humanitarian country teams to conduct inclusive after action reviews (AAR) to assess the results achieved with CERF funds and to reflect on lessons learned from CERF processes. AARs can serve as a cornerstone for the preparation of CERF narrative reports.

From central level, CERF seeks to monitor the Fund's performance at strategic level. In line with its Performance and Accountability Framework (PAF), the CERF secretariat commissions three to five reviews annually to assess the value added by CERF to humanitarian response in selected countries. These reviews are conducted by independent evaluation experts and are available on the CERF website at

<http://www.unocha.org/cerf/reportsevaluations/evaluations/country-reviews/performance-and-accountability-framework>

Phase 3: Reporting

A number of countries also reflected upon the reporting process. Most made observations on the reporting guidance and template, while some focused on the process and timing, and just one on the content specifically the beneficiary counting. Compared to the 2013 RC/HC reports, there have been substantially fewer lessons learned on reporting in 2014. This may be related to the increased familiarity and experience with the new reporting framework, process, and templates as well as the constant guidance and follow up provided by the CERF secretariat. This trend is also confirmed by the progressively higher quality of RC/HC reports.

DPRK, Guinea and Yemen expressed appreciation for the provision of the reporting template already pre-populated with key information and data from the application. Cameroon, Gambia, Iraq, Mali, Uganda and Yemen suggested some specific changes and improvements to the template, based on their experience as users. Liberia asked for a lighter reporting process, while Cameroon requested flexibility of deadlines. South Sudan suggested distributing reporting templated and guidance soon after grant approval. Finally, Bosnia and Herzegovina recommended informing agencies upon grant approval about the need to collect detailed beneficiary data disaggregated by age, sex and sector.

CERF Response

The narrative reports are the main accountability tools for CERF grants and these are important for the CERF secretariat and for CERF's donors. The reports are published on CERF's website and are meant to provide donors and other stakeholders with a comprehensive overview of the CERF grant, including the emergency to which CERF has helped respond, CERF's role in the response, what has been achieved with CERF funding and what the added value of the CERF funding has been.

In line with the Grand Bargain commitment to harmonise and simplify reporting requirements, CERF will continue its efforts to minimize transaction costs related to reporting as much as possible while maintaining the necessary levels of accountability and quality of processes and operations.

The reporting template was updated in early 2015 to be aligned with the new CERF application template. The CERF secretariat is continuously reviewing its reporting template, to make it user-friendly, informative to the CERF secretariat and to donors and other users of the reports and to support better collection of data and information. Review of the reporting framework is also a specific objective of the CERF Efficiency Task Team. To this end, CERF will take the feedback and suggestions received into consideration and incorporate them in the template and apply them to processes when deemed appropriate. The CERF secretariat is currently developing an online survey/questionnaire about the reporting process, targeting reporting focal points at country level, with the aim to receive more detailed and real-time feedback on the reporting process. The plan is to pilot the questionnaire over the coming months and rolled it out for all RC/HC reports as from 2017. A similar tool is also being developed for the application process.

As far as timing is concerned, the RC/HC is now informed about the upcoming end of the implementation period three months before the expiry date of a CERF grant and is at the same time reminded of the timeline for the required reporting (three months after grant expiration). Reporting guidance and templates are shared by the CERF secretariat four weeks before the grant expiration. RC/HCs are thus notified of CERF reporting five months before the deadline of the report, giving Humanitarian Country Teams ample time to conduct an after-action review and compile a report. A final reminder is sent one month before the report submission due date and reasonable time flexibility is granted upon request, as the main objective is promoting good quality.

CERF fully recognises that beneficiary estimation is challenging when preparing CERF applications and that planned figures may not always correspond to the number of people reached and eventually reported. CERF therefore accepts discrepancies but seeks to understand the background when significant differences are encountered. As mentioned earlier, CERF will soon fully align the application and reporting templates for what concerns information on beneficiaries. The guidance in the application template will also inform agencies about the need to collect sex-, age- and sector-disaggregated beneficiaries' data for the RC/HC report.

Conclusion

This analysis of lessons learned from CERF reports submitted by RC/HC for 2014 allocations showed a converging of themes across the various phases of the CERF cycle. The largest number of lessons learned is related to the application phase, and particularly to the CERF funding policies and criteria and the review and approval process. On the other end, substantially fewer lessons regarding the implementation and the reporting phase were received in 2014, as compared to the 2013 analysis. It is positive to note that – in line with previous year trend - about 76 per

cent of the total 76 reports included lessons learned for the CERF secretariat, which suggests that many of the countries dedicated time towards reflecting upon the CERF process.

The feedback received through the lessons learned are important for the immediate work of the CERF Efficiency Task Team and some emerging themes will help feed into longer term processes around an expansion of CERF to \$1 billion and help inform CERF's commitments to the Grand Bargain on efficiency as proposed by the Secretary-Generals' High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing⁴.

The information and suggestions received through the lessons learned submissions offers CERF a unique direct feedback channel with CERF partners at field level. And while some suggestions may yield direct changes or actions while others won't, they will all help inform initiatives by the CERF secretariat to make CERF more effective and efficient. CERF will continue to systematically analyse and follow-up to lessons learned from the field.

CERF secretariat, 10 October 2016

⁴ For more information about CERF's support to the Grand Bargains priorities and commitments please see the briefing note CERF and the Grand Bargain at [https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CERF/20160519%20Briefing%20Note%20on%20CERF%20and%20the%20Grand%20Bargain%20\(final\).pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CERF/20160519%20Briefing%20Note%20on%20CERF%20and%20the%20Grand%20Bargain%20(final).pdf)