



United Nations

**CENTRAL
EMERGENCY
RESPONSE FUND**



A SOUND HUMANITARIAN INVESTMENT

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

CERF secretariat, 6 May 2013

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. These reports cover all CERF activities in a given country during a calendar year, and are 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, 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. She asked for their support in improving the quality of the narrative reports on 2011 grants due in March 2012. The CERF secretariat also took a number of steps to improve the quality and timeliness of the reports. As a result of these efforts, the quality of the 2011 reports submitted in early 2012 improved significantly, but the reporting exercise also revealed the remaining challenges:

- **Report Quality:** In 2012, two-thirds of all reports were upon submission to the CERF secretariat either evaluated by the CERF secretariat as being “reasonable” or “weak” and only two-thirds were upon finalization categorized as “good”, leaving one-third of all reports posted on the website categorized as either “reasonable” or “weak”.
- **Submission Timeliness:** In 2012, 51 per cent of the narrative reports (23) were submitted after the 15 March deadline.

2. GOALS

This preliminary paper highlights actions taken to ensure improvements to the quality and timeliness of the 2012 RC/HC narrative reports due in March 2013, describes achievements as of 5 May 2013 where the review process remains ongoing and makes recommendations on how to further improve the process.

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

3. PROCESS

In response to the above challenges, in the fall of 2012, the CERF secretariat undertook steps to continue the improvement of the process of submitting, reviewing, and editing the reports. These steps included:

- **Redesigned Format:** The CERF secretariat redesigned the format of the report to ensure a more coherent and user friendly structure for the recipient agencies – especially with a focus on countries receiving more than one CERF allocation for different emergencies;
- **Detailed Guidelines:** In line with the redesigned format of the reports, the CERF secretariat prepared a thorough set of reporting guidelines detailing the requirements and proposing in-country reporting mechanisms;
- **Country-tailored Reporting Templates:** The CERF secretariat tailor-made a reporting template for each of the 48 countries receiving CERF funds in 2012 in line with the number of emergencies and CERF allocations in each country;
- **Pre-filling Data:** The CERF secretariat prefilled all 48 reports with data available such as planned beneficiaries and outcomes (as per funding proposals), total humanitarian funding (as per FTS) and received CERF, CHF and ERF funds;
- **Project Data:** In addition to prefiling the reports, the CERF secretariat also prepared data files on each CERF sponsored project containing basic project data as per funding proposals for use by the agencies when filling out project sheets;
- **Correspondence with RC/HCs and Reporting Focal Points:** Prior to circulating the guidelines, the ERC sent a ‘heads-up’ mail in November reminding recipient agencies about the upcoming reporting deadline and highlighting the importance of improving the quality and timeliness of the reports. A mail from the ERC in January launched the 2012 reporting process. This was followed by a mail from the Chief of the CERF secretariat, who explained the process and shared the templates, the guidelines and supporting project data. In February, the Chief also circulated a reminder about the upcoming deadline.
- **Teleconferences:** The CERF secretariat offered teleconferences for all in-country reporting focal points and all agencies’ CERF focal points. CERF’s Reporting and Information Unit as the main intermediary also ensured regular contact with the RC/HCs and focal points providing technical, editorial, and substantive guidance;
- **In-house Strategy:** The CERF secretariat developed a thorough plan for the internal review and clearance mechanisms. This included a) a reviewers’ checklist to guide all CERF units in their review process; b) 48 country tailor-made feedback sheets to ensure coherent feedback to the recipient agencies; c) a rigorous reporting evaluation sheet for evaluating the quality of each report upon submission and upon clearance; d) a response evaluation sheet for use for evaluation of the quality of the emergency response and tracking of programme related issues identified during the reporting process that required follow-up.

All the above described changes were discussed by all CERF Unit Heads, the CERF Chief and relevant staff as well as selected agency focal points.

4. TIMELINESS OF SUBMISSIONS

A total of 48 RC/HC reports were due on 15 March. Seventy-one per cent (34) were submitted by the 15 March deadline and two weeks later, 92 per cent (44) of all the reports were submitted. On 6 May, one report was still outstanding. In most cases of delays, country offices were short staffed due to new emergencies. As a comparison, in 2011 only 33 per cent (16) of the reports were received by the deadline and in 2012, 49 per cent (22) were received on time. At the point of preparing this document (6 May), 31 reports have been reviewed by the CERF secretariat and 18 have been cleared.

5. QUALITY OF REPORTING

The CERF secretariat's Reporting and Information Unit and Programme Unit is using rigorous criteria to review all the reports and measuring their overall quality. To facilitate a swift and thorough assessment of the quality of the reports, the Reporting and Information Unit used a scoring system that established criteria to measure reports as "good", "reasonable", or "weak". In order to allow for tracking of improvements from earlier years, these criteria are in line with those used in 2011 and 2012. The quality of the reports is reviewed by the Unit both upon submission and after final clearance.

Based on the 31 reports reviewed, the positive development from last year has continued as the quality of the reports has improved remarkably. Of the 31 reports reviewed, 28 were upon submission scored "good" and only three scored "reasonable". No reports have so far been scored "weak". Of the 18 reports that have been cleared, 16 have been scored "good" and two have been scored "reasonable".

6. REMAINING CHALLENGES

The CERF secretariat will continue to investigate means to strengthen the RC/HC reporting further. A focus in the continuous improvement of the reports could in the future be the submission time. The CERF secretariat finds that the quality of the reports potentially could be strengthened further if the submission date was aligned with the project cycle. This is due to the following challenges:

- Currently the CERF secretariat requests that agencies receiving CERF funds in November or thereafter provide intermediate reports on achievements by 15 March. The year after, the same recipients will be required to provide final reports adding to the reporting of recipients of CERF funds late in the year.
- With the current deadline there is a risk of a significant timespan between the end of a CERF sponsored project's implementation and submission of the final reports. Such time gaps can lead to loss of institutional memory at country level and reduce opportunities for joint reflection and learning. In addition, due to the often high rotation of staff in emergencies, this leaves a risk that the relevant staff has changed since the emergency response, which is expected to have a negative impact on the report quality.
- Finally, the CERF secretariat is strict about the 15 March deadline. The result is that CERF within a week can expect submission of up to 50 reports that require

review by two CERF units leading to possible bottlenecks and delays. Thereby, an RC/HC ensuring timely submission of a report can risk receiving feedback on the report eight weeks after submission.

7. THE WAY FORWARD

In response to the above listed challenges and in order to ensure faster and better reporting on the use of CERF funds, the CERF secretariat will discuss the current reporting structure extensively with recipient agencies, field focal points and country teams in order to investigate whether a rolling reporting structure aligned with the CERF allocation grant expiry date potentially could improve the reporting process and the quality of the reports and reduce the reporting burden of the recipient agencies. This could involve a deadline two to three months after the expiration of CERF funds and could potentially have the following advantages:

- Elimination of interim reports and thereby a reduction of the agency reporting burden;
- A greater chance for preparation of the reports by staff involved in the emergency responses;
- Preparation of reports will take place while events are still fresh in stakeholders minds leading to increased relevance and improved opportunities for joint learning; and the
- staggered submission of reports will allow the CERF secretariat to review the reports shortly after submission and ensure timely feedback.