



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 are required to report to the CERF secretariat within three months after expiration of a grant, 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 is regularly updated and 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. The process is reviewed and fine-tuned on a regular basis, based on feedback and lessons learned. The main objectives are to foster joint learning at country level leading to improved future CERF allocation and prioritisation processes and to maximize reports quality while minimizing the burden to OCHA field offices, RC/HCs and agencies. Therefore, sufficient flexibility is granted to allow for tailoring the process to specific country context, priorities, and time requirements.

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, for enabling an improved analysis of the quality of reports and for optimizing guidance and support to partners during the reporting process.

The new reporting framework along with the continuous efforts to improve CERF narrative reporting has led to a markedly better quality in overall reporting. It has also improved availability of information and data on CERF's results and added value leading to better reporting from CERF to its donors and other stakeholders.

This paper analyses the quality of the 74 RC/HC reports covering all 2014 CERF grants. Due to the implementation and reporting cycle of CERF grants the full set of reports for 2014 grants are only finalised in early 2016.

Quality assessment methodology and tool

As part of the new reporting framework, the CERF secretariat 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 (or UNCT) 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).

For the purpose of this analysis, CERF analysed the quality assessment results from 74 RC/HC reports both for rapid response (53) and underfunded (21) allocations approved in 2014. These reports were received and reviewed during 2015 and early 2016 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 82 per cent of the reports were rated “very good” (31 per cent) or “good” (51 per cent) upon initial submission. For example, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Republic of the Sudan, and the Solomon Islands were among the champions for high-quality reports. The remaining 18 per cent were rated as “reasonable”, while none was rated “weak” nor “unacceptable” upon first submission. See charts 1a and 1b below.

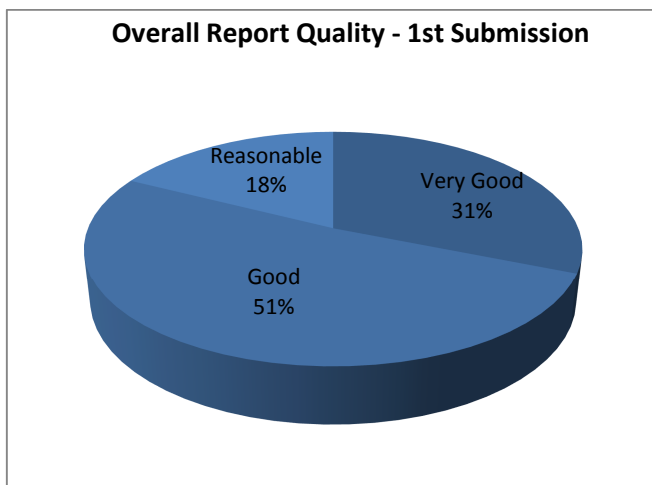


Chart 1a. Quality of initial reports submissions



Chart 1b. Quality of final cleared reports

The quality of first submission can be influenced by a number of factors. These include: competing humanitarian priorities facing partners; 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, combined with extensive guidance and support provided by the CERF secretariat, have likely contributed to ensuring that a relatively high proportion of first submissions scored “very good” or “good”. At the final submission, all reports either scored “very good” or “good”. 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 82 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 four fifths 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, 16 per cent were scored “reasonable” and only two reports were 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 nor alternative consultation process, 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.

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.

Overall achievements

Based on an overall assessment of reported achievements it was found that 97 per cent of the CERF-funded responses “fully” or “mostly” met the objectives described in project proposals. The remaining 3 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 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.

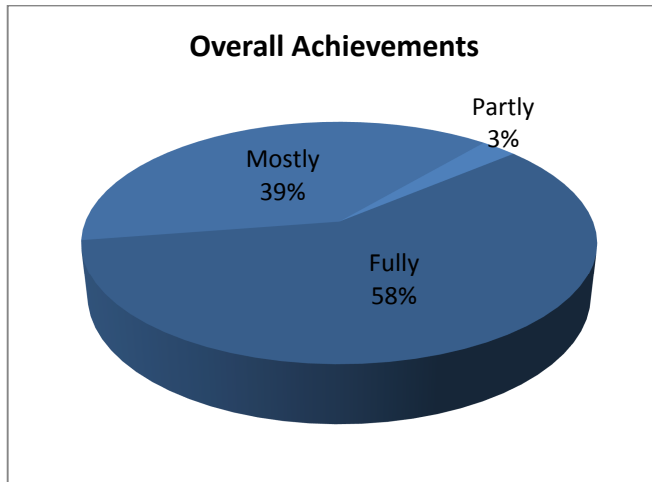


Chart 3a. Substantive assessment- Overall achievements

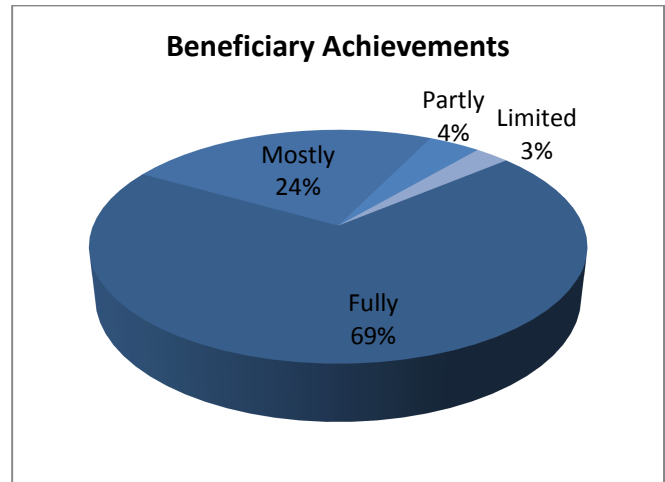


Chart 3b. Substantive assessment- Beneficiary achievements

Beneficiary achievements

In terms of reported beneficiary achievements at the submission level, about 93 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 4 per cent were assessed as having only partly reached the intended number of beneficiaries and 3 per cent were rated as having reached a limited number of beneficiaries as compared to the numbers planned in the submission. 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, 93 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

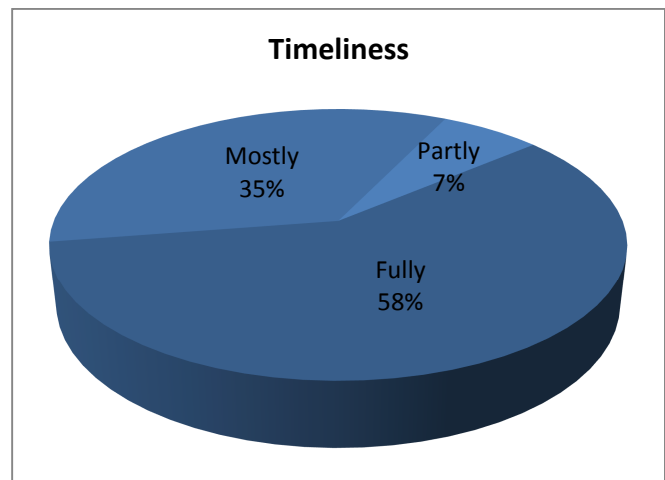


Chart 3c. Substantive assessment- Timeliness

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

delays in the execution of activities, based on reported information. The remaining 7 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.

Conclusion and next steps

Experience from two full reporting cycles, 2013 and 2014, confirms that the revised reporting framework introduced in 2013 has substantially improved the quality of grant reports, by enabling the CERF secretariat to more effectively review and assess the reports and follow-up systematically on achievements and gaps in the grant cycle. 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.

After the second full year under the new reporting cycle, a further improvement of the main quality indicators of RC/HC reports has been observed. It can be concluded that the 2014 grant reports meet CERF reporting requirements and adhere to the recommended in-country process. The comparison with the quality of 2013 RC/HC reports, the first using the same review methodology, shows an improvement in almost all quality indicators. This positive trend is encouraging and can in large part be attributed to the experience gained by many RC/HCs, OCHA offices and country teams, as well as to the continuous efforts of the CERF secretariat to provide guidance, closer monitoring of the progress and real-time feedback. A similar positive trend is currently being observed in the ongoing review of 2015 RC/HC reports. For example, some changes in the number and timing of CERF secretariat’s reporting-related communications to RC/HCs, introduced towards the end of 2015, are having a significant impact in improving the timeliness of report submissions.

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 continue to reach out to RC/HCs and reporting focal points for feedback on reporting requirements and processes. To this end the CERF secretariat plans to pilot a user questionnaire that will systematically be offered to CERF reporting focal points at field level immediately upon conclusion of each reporting process. The questionnaire is intended to provide the CERF secretariat with real time feedback from the field to help inform continued streamlining of the reporting process.

In addition, in order to further improve the efficiency of the CERF reporting process, the CERF secretariat will undertake a thorough review of the reporting template in second half of 2016. Reflecting on lessons learned in the field and within the CERF secretariat in using the reporting template the objective of the exercise is to simplify the reporting format as much as possible to ensure that only important and useful information is required to be reported on by field partners.

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, and to further refine the quality of data on people reached, added value, partnership and lessons learned.