

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS - CERF ADVISORY GROUP MEETING - 18 MAY 2021



1. The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) Advisory Group was established by the General Assembly resolution 60/124 to advise the Secretary-General, through the Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), on the use and impact of the Fund. The Advisory Group met on 18 May 2021, under the chairmanship of Ms. Mariët Schuurman (Netherlands), and with participation from the ERC, Mr. Mark Lowcock.

2. In the first session, the ERC provided an update on the broader humanitarian landscape and the humanitarian system's response capacity. The ERC noted that the humanitarian system in 2021 is facing unprecedented challenges, emphasizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded an already extraordinary humanitarian situation and has had a destabilizing effect on the world's poorest countries. It is all the more important that the humanitarian system, which is already over-stretched, identifies added efficiencies, including through the strategic use of available funding. The ERC flagged two concrete areas where the humanitarian system can continue to make advances to ensure the best possible help to people in crises. First, he highlighted that the humanitarian system needs to strengthen its Accountability to Affected Populations and identify ways to better engage affected people to determine what assistance they require to meet their humanitarian needs. Currently aid is too often driven by what can best be delivered by humanitarian partners and affected populations are not always consulted the way they should. The second area for improvement is in the speed of the humanitarian response and in finding ways to react faster on the ground when new needs emerge. The ERC noted that while efforts have been made to make the humanitarian system faster in responding to new crises, including to predictable crises through anticipatory action, the system is often still too slow to respond to new humanitarian shocks.

3. The ERC also shared his views on CERF's role in the humanitarian landscape, noting that the Fund has evolved in recent years to assume an increasingly important position in the financing architecture, employing its comparative advantages in a more strategic manner. He highlighted areas where CERF is making particularly important contributions. CERF's role in accelerating the agenda on Anticipatory Action, for example, is enabling humanitarian actors to act early to predictable humanitarian shocks. The ERC noted that the Fund expects to support additional country pilots in 2021 to further demonstrate proof of concept and generate learning. CERF has also consistently demonstrated its important role in enabling humanitarian partners to ensure fast responses to new and unforeseen crises, for example in response to the explosion in Cox's Bazar where CERF enabled partners to respond on the day of the fire. As a global pooled fund, CERF has also demonstrated that it is uniquely placed to ensure attention to critical aspects of humanitarian response that may otherwise not receive sufficient support. In doing so, CERF is helping promote positive system change – for example by supporting response for women and girls and people living with disabilities, and by supporting education in protracted crises and protection services more widely. By encouraging increased attention to these areas through both 'traditional' and 'innovative' CERF allocations, CERF has also demonstrated its ability to catalyse new ways of working and the level of prioritization that is given to these areas. Finally, the ERC recognized CERF's important role in raising awareness about emergencies that demand urgent attention. He referenced CERF's early response to the looming famine in countries in Africa and the Middle East in 2020 that drew attention – and early financial and political commitments – that played a pivotal role in avoiding a devastating famine.

4. In continuation hereof, the ERC emphasized the need for a larger CERF that can respond to the growing challenges and contribute to improving the humanitarian system's ability to address the needs of the most vulnerable. He referenced the continued strong donor support to CERF, but also warned that 2021 could see global ODA levels dropping sharply. He therefore called upon the Advisory Group to support fundraising for CERF. The ERC also reminded the Advisory Group about its important role in encouraging innovations in CERF that can contribute to broader change in the humanitarian system and continue increasing the efficiency and 'calibration' of the Fund with global humanitarian needs and trends.

5. The Advisory Group commended the ERC for his humanitarian leadership during his tenure and particularly for evolving CERF to assume an increasingly important strategic position in the humanitarian landscape. Acknowledging the challenges relating to the widening gap between humanitarian needs and funding, the Advisory Group reiterated the need for CERF to ensure prioritization of the most imminent and greatest lifesaving requirements across humanitarian crises globally, including the important role of CERF in supporting accountability to affected people. The Advisory Group expressed continued support for CERF in advancing the

work on anticipatory action and reiterated the importance of learning from the pilots. The Advisory Group also noted the opportunity that anticipatory action provides to strengthen accountability to affected people and to engage affected communities ahead of a specific shock materialising. The Group also applauded CERF for its speedy response to new crises, as well as its ability to ensure urgent attention to important crises.

6. In the second session, the Chief of OCHA's Pooled Fund Management Branch provided an overview of CERF's main 2020 achievements noting that the Fund disbursed a record \$848 million in 2020 to support humanitarian action worldwide, thereby enabling life-saving assistance to 69 million people – more than twice as many as in 2019. The Chief also highlighted new innovative approaches adopted by CERF in 2020 to better address the unprecedented set of humanitarian challenges and to support system change while saving lives. She noted that the CERF rose to the needs brought on by the COVID pandemic, through multi-country block grants, an innovative "NGO allocation" through IOM, and allocations to address rising food insecurity as well as gender-based violence. She also noted the advances made in the area of Anticipatory Action, and CERF's support in operationalizing three anticipatory action pilots in 2020 in advance of flooding in Bangladesh, and severe food insecurity Somalia and Ethiopia. Lastly, the Chief noted progress on efforts to reach the most vulnerable – with a record \$65 million going towards GBV-related programming; and with a notable, 50 percent increase (in absolute dollar terms, relative to 2019) in the proportion of the CERF funding going to support protection and education with more than 50 per cent in absolute dollar terms compared to 2019.

7. The Chief also briefed the Group on two recently finalized external CERF reviews, respectively on CERF's support to four underfunded priority areas, and CERF's role in smaller emergencies. The review of CERF's support to the four underfunded priority areas found that the initiative has been highly relevant for ensuring quality and inclusive humanitarian assistance, and that it has successfully increased attention to these core areas in CERF allocations at country level. The review of CERF's role in smaller emergencies confirmed CERF's vital role in supporting emergency responses in small-scale low-profile emergencies. The Chief informed that important recommendations from both reviews are currently being implemented.

8. The Chief also provided an update on allocations from CERF during 2021, informing that as of 18 May, the Fund had allocated \$206 million in Rapid Response grants to 25 countries, and that allocations totalling some \$135 million were underway through the UFE window. The Chief also noted three key priorities for CERF in 2021, including (i) the continued strengthening of core operations to ensure that CERF allocations are as efficient and effective as possible; that the strategic impact of CERF funding is more clearly articulated and that related field level processes are more inclusive and predictable, (ii) the promotion of system change, using CERF funding strategically as a tool for positive system change, including by advancing the use of anticipatory action and reinforcing efforts to support the four underfunded priority areas, and (iii) a continued effort to join life-saving support with innovation focusing not only on what emergency responses CERF supports but also how, as well as prioritizing learning to inform future approaches.

9. The Advisory Group praised CERF for the innovations introduced to ensure the most effective humanitarian responses and promote system change and flagged the importance of ensuring that learning from the innovations is shared with relevant humanitarian partners. Related hereto, the Group expressed appreciation for the update on the external reviews and agreed that CERF-related learning should be leveraged beyond just CERF itself, and help build the evidence base for improvements in the wider system. The Group also reiterated its support to the initiative on the four underfunded priority areas and flagged the importance of mainstreaming these considerations into all CERF allocations as well as pursuing stand-alone allocations. Finally, several Advisory Group members expressed concern about the limited size of the CERF Secretariat versus the growing workload stemming from the increased funding levels and the many innovations and noted the importance of ensuring that the Secretariat has the needed capacity.

10. In the final session of the meeting, the Chief of OCHA's Partnership and Resource Mobilization Branch briefed on CERF's 2021 funding status and outlook for the year, updated on progress against the resource mobilization plan for 2021-2022 and presented a roadmap for engagement with the Advisory Group to support fundraising for CERF. The Chief noted that despite continued donor generosity, current projections for 2021 fall below last year's funding level. The Chief noted that in view of the current economic environment, stemming also from the impact of COVID-19, resource mobilisation efforts need to redouble for CERF to be resourced to the level needed for effectively responding to humanitarian needs. Outlining the pillars of the roadmap, the Chief sought feedback from the Advisory Group on approaches to help deepen and diversify CERF's donor base. The Advisory Group welcomed the roadmap, discussed good practices adopted in the past and offered their support, including around communication and peer to peer outreach.