

I. Background

The CERF Secretariat commissions several studies every year under CERF's Performance and Accountability Framework (PAF). These are carried out by independent consultants and assess CERF's added value to humanitarian responses around the world. They also seek to provide an appropriate level of assurance that funds are managed properly and lead to meaningful results in line with CERF's mandate. In addition, studies may have a specific thematic focus to help answer some broader strategic questions that will help guide the operation of CERF.

In 2020, CERF concluded two such studies – one on CERF's support to the four underfunded priority areas identified by the ERC as requiring special consideration in CERF allocations, and the other on the role of CERF in smaller emergencies. Due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, the approach to both reviews had to be reoriented towards a remote modality, limiting direct in-depth engagement with country-level stakeholders. This note provides top-level findings only, for a complete coverage of findings and recommendations please refer to the full review reports available on CERF's website¹.

II. CERF Support for the Four Underfunded Priority Areas

In 2019, the ERC reached out to RC/HCs in countries with ongoing humanitarian operations to ensure more attention to four priority areas: support for women and girls, including GBV, reproductive health and empowerment; programmes for people with disabilities (PwD); education in protracted crises; and other aspects of protection. The ERC requested that RC/HCs give due consideration to these four areas when developing CERF applications, as well as during the preparation of allocation strategies for CBPFs. To take stock on progress in promoting the four areas in CERF allocations and to learn lessons and identify opportunities for strengthening the initiative, CERF commissioned a study to be conducted by external consultants.

Summary of Findings

The study² found that **the ERC's initiative on the under-funded priorities is highly relevant for delivering quality and inclusive humanitarian assistance and that it successfully has increased the attention on these core areas in CERF allocations.** The review noted that despite a system-wide challenge with tracking funding for assistance to PwD, and for mainstreamed activities in support of women and girls and protection, there was qualitative evidence that CERF's focus has led to greater attention to the priority areas during funding allocation discussions at country level. Specifically, the study observed that CERF funding for the education and protection sectors has increased following the introduction of the initiative and also concluded that it has in particular increased attention to the provision of assistance to PwD, typically the least developed of the four priorities in humanitarian response

The review also suggested several possible areas for further improvement. At a strategic level, the review findings indicated that discussions on the priority areas in HCTs and concerted efforts to link CERF funding to HCT protection strategies, could be considerably strengthened. From an operational perspective, the review noted that despite wide-ranging commitments, technical capacity within the humanitarian system

¹ <https://cerf.un.org/partner-resources/performance-and-accountability/country-reviews>

² The review covered three countries in-depth (Ukraine, Cameroon, and Sudan) and four via a desk review (Bangladesh, DRC, Somalia and Zimbabwe).

in these areas remains mixed, which also influences how the priority areas are integrated into CERF funded projects. However, the review also noted that CERF has an opportunity to help address technical weaknesses within the system by linking up CERF funding with regional and global level support. The review further found that information on the four areas could be strengthened at project level in CERF proposals in order to allow improved analysis of how the priorities are integrated into the assistance delivered to affected people.

Finally, the review reaffirmed that mainstreaming the crosscutting priorities into all humanitarian assistance is essential to ensure increased and systematic support for the areas but highlighted that it would remain important to fund standalone service delivery alongside this to ensure that specialized services can be applied when needed.

Recommendations

The authors put forward two sets of recommendations for consideration grouped according to the scope and objective of the proposed actions. One set relating to **'basic change'** specifically focused on CERF actions, and one set linked to **'intermediate change'** linked to behavior change among partners.

Proposed **basic changes** focus on strengthening CERF's current approach to promoting the priorities for "due consideration" with a view to prompting project-level change. The review made seven specific recommendations in this respect within the following areas: clarifying the information required from partners in CERF submissions, improving CERF templates and guidance, increase the use of technical expertise at HQ level, improve data tracking and analysis and exploring use of targeted allocations to the priority areas.

The recommended **intermediate changes** focus on promoting awareness and commitment among RC/HCs and in CERF-recipient agencies to integrating the four priority areas systematically into their work. The review made nine specific recommendations in this respect within the following areas: strengthening of strategic discussions at the field-level on prioritization and integration of the four areas, increase requirements for related information and documentation from the field, enhanced advocacy with partners on the 'underfunded priorities' initiative, improving the understanding of the initiative by field partners through communication and training, greater involvement of technical specialist in country-level processes and strengthen complementarity with CBPFs to also promote change amongst NGOs.

Please refer to the full report for the detailed conclusions and recommendations.

Key Takeaways

The review represents an important stock-taking exercise after the first year of the initiative and its findings have been useful for the CERF secretariat to strengthen CERF's support to the four underfunded priority areas. While some challenges identified by the review are outside CERF's sphere of influence, other aspects are directly linked to how CERF operates and these findings and recommendations have helped shape new actions for CERF, as well as reconfirming and informing several workstreams that were already ongoing when the review was concluded in October 2020.

Key CERF initiatives that are related to the review findings and recommendations include amongst others:

- **Enhanced expert support:** Two IASC expert groups on gender and disability have been established to provide strategic and technical advice on how to improve the impact of CERF and CBPFs within the two areas of humanitarian response. The groups were formed in early 2021 and will meet regularly with OCHA to identify concrete recommendations and actions to take forward, including on how to support the field better on technical issues. The CERF secretariat itself will also

strengthen its technical capacity in 2021 as it will benefit from an inter-agency secondment of a gender expert from UNFPA.

- **Strategic level engagement:** CERF guidance, communication and application templates have been strengthened to clarify expectations of HC/HCT leadership at the strategic level and improve information on strategic prioritization of the four areas in CERF submissions. This has been complemented with strengthened outreach to senior managers in the field to advance ownership of promoting the four areas in CERF allocation processes, and targeted engagement with agencies at the global level.
- **Project and data improvements:** Project level data and qualitative information on the four areas and other cross-cutting priorities have been improved through a revision of CERF templates in consultation with thematic experts. In addition, enhanced information management systems will allow CERF to better capture and analyze key data related to the four areas, and monitor progress.
- **Technical support to the field:** CERF guidance specific to the four areas has been produced or updated and the revision of the CERF Life-saving Criteria in 2020 ensured that the four areas are now better reflected and included in the criteria. CERF has increased the use of webinars to brief field and HQ partners on expectations and approaches in relation to the initiative, either linked to specific allocations or in general. Thematic experts are involved in briefings and training when relevant.
- **Allocation approaches:** In addition to promoting enhanced mainstreaming and prioritization of the four areas, CERF has since 2020 explored greater use of targeted allocation of funding to ensure that the areas receive adequate attention and funding. This includes targeted allocations for GBV and disability programming. CERF has also adopted application review approaches that specifically recognize the need for smaller targeted projects within the priority areas, to complement larger core humanitarian programming that typically dominates CERF submissions.

The CERF secretariat will continue efforts to strengthen support for the for underfunded priority areas and will keep drawing on relevant findings from the review in this respect.

III. CERF's Role in 'Smaller' Emergencies

Each CERF year supports humanitarian operations in a variety of emergency contexts. While most CERF funds continue to go towards large-scale humanitarian operations, CERF also plays a critical role in supporting response to smaller-scale emergencies in countries with limited existing humanitarian capacity. Recognizing the different dynamics in different emergency contexts, the review of CERF's role in smaller emergencies sought to examine the role of CERF allocations in situations where they are the only or main source of emergency funding in a humanitarian response, given that smaller crises often attract limited donor funding. The review also explored whether CERF should consider different allocation approaches in these contexts to ensure maximum impact. Due to COVID-19 restrictions only three countries were part of the review (Djibouti, Haiti and Lesotho) and only one country mission was possible (Djibouti), thus somewhat limiting the scope of the review.

Summary of Findings

Overall, **the review confirmed CERF's important role in supporting emergency response in small-scale low-profile emergencies.** The study found that in the countries reviewed, CERF provided a critical and reliable source of funding for each new shock and was seen as an essential source of last resort funding in resource-scarce environments with limited donor attention. In line with findings from other reviews, donors were found to often prioritize their humanitarian funding for larger higher-profile emergencies in the respective regions, relying on CERF to step in to address urgent emergency response needs in some low-profile crises.

In all three countries, CERF's rapid response window supported time-critical, multi-sector innovations, and its speed and agility were found to be a 'life-saver' even if amounts provided were less than overall needed. As an important co-benefit the CERF allocation processes and related assessments were found to support the generation of important vulnerability data to drive government action in emergencies. The review specifically highlighted that the underfunded window supported responses which allowed time to prepare, coordinate and include government counterparts in proposals thus helping to improve engagement beyond the CERF allocations.

The review noted the vital role that CERF plays in addressing unmet humanitarian needs that result from chronic structural gaps and that in addition to supporting life-saving humanitarian action, CERF allocations have helped to enhance nexus approaches. The review noted that CERF allocations in the review countries play out in the space between relatively weak national response capacity and a UN system struggling to address emergency needs. There was little perception that an ongoing reliance on CERF during shocks would undermine resilience programming, government ownership or national preparedness. Rather, CERF allocation processes supported national partners by shaping institutional orientation and responsiveness at critical moments, pre- and post-disaster. Overall, the review stresses that CERF allocations alone will never fill the systemic gap in which they add value and that longer-term solutions rely on strengthened Government systems for social protection and emergency preparedness.

The review found that in the three contexts, CERF allocations showed mixed results in helping agencies secure follow-on funding. Three agencies reported success in using CERF rapid response funds to seek allocation of larger internal resources by building on the proven results of early CERF financing. There was also clear evidence of CERF allocations influencing donors' decision-making processes, even if this did not result in rapid, follow on funding. For instance, several donors echoed the view of CERF as an essential 'first responder' whose early action served to alert other donors of the gravity and scale of a given crisis, and as 'ammunition' for internal advocacy around possible funding amounts, sectors and partners. This signal to other donors was recognized and valued irrespective of a donor's final decision, or ability, to engage. Despite these positive elements, the review observed that UN agencies had difficulty leveraging additional funds, building on CERF contributions.

Given this, the review also explored whether CERF should provide allocations that cover a larger portion of overall needs to this type of emergencies from the outset. The review concludes that larger CERF allocations may be warranted in some contexts but does not recommend this as default practice as poor absorption capacity of agencies and their partners would play a role, especially for short term rapid response grants. The review concluded that where absorption capacity is in place, increased allocations covering a larger portion of total requirements could be considered in combination with longer implementation times, if agencies can make a clear case that they are providing resilient solutions, while also saving lives, and that this requires additional funding or a longer implementation window. It was also recognized that the question around larger allocations is not a straight-forward one – as a number of context-specific parameters, beyond overall requirements, influence CERF allocation sizes. These include

the severity of the situation, the type of humanitarian services needed, existing capacity as well as the availability of CERF funding, and as such, the question around larger allocations is not a straightforward one.

The study also argued that joint agency proposals should be considered for greater complementarity and multisectoral response in smaller emergencies. The review proposed that CERF should consider allowing joint proposals and integrated delivery between smaller, complementary agencies within or across sectors to lower transaction costs, promote ONE UN values and further improve coordination and integration.

Overall, the study foresees that CERF assistance will continue to be an indispensable source of emergency funding in countries with recurrent small-scale emergencies that attract limited attention from other donors, and where government capacity to respond is lacking.

Recommendations

While the review provides important country-specific findings related to how CERF allocations have added value in meeting humanitarian needs in each of the three countries reviewed (Haiti, Lesotho and Djibouti) the overall focus of the review was on exploring common findings and conclusions related to CERF's role in smaller emergencies more broadly. This broad research scope does not necessarily lend itself well to a set of narrow and specific recommendations, but the study does set out some broad recommendations for consideration when CERF decides allocations for smaller emergencies of similar profiles. The broad recommendations put forward include:

- When certain criteria are met³, consider increasing CERF allocations (as a proportion of needs) for smaller emergencies where experience suggests that emergency funding from other sources will be lacking and where absorption capacity is in place.
- Where larger CERF allocations are warranted and absorption capacity is low for reasons which can be remedied by longer implementation times, consider allowing longer grant durations in combination with larger allocations (this may also allow better linkages to resilience building efforts - see below)
- CERF allocations should when relevant support purposeful linkages between humanitarian action and resilient solutions, while continuing to focus on priority needs and avoiding dilution into non-life saving activities.
- While CERF generally does not fund joint UN projects, in these types of contexts CERF may consider promoting joined-up UN agency activities with complementary, overlapping sectors in order to drive greater synergy between emergency response and resilience.

Key Takeaways

The review confirmed CERF's specific added value in responding to humanitarian needs in Haiti, Djibouti and Lesotho, all frequent recipients of CERF funding. The findings help provide the ERC and the CERF secretariat with assurance that CERF allocations in the three countries have met their intended objectives in line with CERF's mandate.

The review also provided the CERF Secretariat with important insights into allocations in smaller-scale emergencies. It further confirmed CERF's essential role in enabling UN and partners to provide life-saving

³ Criteria proposed in the review: CERF projects would support greater geographical coverage of humanitarian need; Technical assessments and allocation processes meet key performance benchmarks; It is possible to predict based on historic analysis and current assessment that a shortfall in support from mainstream humanitarian donors is likely. Additional desirable criteria may include that CERF projects would contribute towards system strengthening and resilience building;

humanitarian assistance to crises affected people as a “provider of last resort” in the absence of other predictable humanitarian funding.

In line with the broader research topic, the review has given the CERF secretariat valuable additional information in understanding how CERF allocations play out in smaller-scale emergency contexts, and will help inform allocation considerations and decisions when CERF assesses requests from the types of emergencies covered by the review. The broad recommendations provided generally link well with already ongoing CERF considerations of tailoring approaches to context situations, including as it relates to the types of interventions funded, the volume of funding provided and extending grant durations when justified⁴.

Specific reflections on the recommendations include:

Potential larger allocations (as a proportion of overall needs) for smaller emergencies with low donor attention: The CERF secretariat determines the size of allocations based on a number of context-specific parameters beyond overall funding requirements, including the severity of the situation, the type of humanitarian interventions needed, existing in-country resources and absorption capacity as well as the expected availability of other funding. In this respect, CERF also considers the appropriate proportion of overall requirements that should be covered by CERF in a given emergency, based on a careful assessment of the specific context. The findings from the review have provided additional insights to inform such decision making, and has in line with findings from other reviews⁵ confirmed that increased amounts of short-term CERF funding may not by themselves help mitigate response gaps as agencies’ absorption capacity is often a limiting factor. CERF will continue to determine the most appropriate allocation amounts on a case-by-case basis informed by an assessment of the humanitarian situation, including a country team’s absorption capacity.

Potential longer grant durations: CERF has since 2019 made use of flexible grant durations and allowed longer implementation times for CERF projects when deemed necessary to better meet humanitarian needs in a given emergency context. This has mainly been done in protracted emergencies, but CERF will, based on the review findings, consider the value of applying this in certain small-scale shocks with limited short-term absorption capacity and expected low donor follow-up support. The criteria would remain that affected people receive the assistance they need when they need it, and potential longer running rapid response grants would not mean a slower response, but a more sustained response when deemed necessary.

Purposeful linkages to resilience-building efforts: Ensuring strong linkages between CERF-funded life-saving humanitarian action and longer-term outcomes, including resilience building and durable solutions, in humanitarian contexts where this is relevant, is already a key consideration when reviewing CERF proposals. This is particularly the case in nexus contexts and when longer CERF implementation times are awarded (see above). The recommendations are therefore well aligned with CERF’s approach and the review has helped situate these considerations more strongly in the context of small-scale emergencies.

Joint agency proposals for greater complementarity and multisectoral response: To ensure that CERF-funded projects collectively meet the needs of affected people, CERF submissions are always expected to provide a joined-up complementarity and multisectoral response among the best placed humanitarian agencies. For administrative reasons CERF does not fund joint projects that include multiple agencies in one single grant, but CERF does encourage strongly aligned project submissions across sectors from multiple agencies. CERF will explore the review findings further to see if any adjustments to the current approach or

⁴ Since 2019 CERF has under both windows occasionally allowed longer implementation times than the standard durations, when deemed necessary to better meet humanitarian needs.

⁵ Independent Review of the Added Value of CERF in Cuba and the eastern Caribbean

guidance are warranted. In addition, CERF will consider whether added flexibility should be granted to submissions from small-scale emergencies in certain situations, potentially allowing more projects and agencies to be included in an allocation than what would normally be accepted, to ensure an appropriate sectoral coverage of needs.

In addition, **recognizing the observed challenges in leveraging CERF funding for mobilizing additional resources in the countries reviewed**, the CERF secretariat will work with agencies and RC/HCs to explore opportunities for better leveraging of CERF funding for mobilizing of additional resources in this type of low-profile emergencies.