

## Background

Every year, the CERF secretariat commissions reviews under the CERF's Performance and Accountability Framework (PAF) to assess CERF's added value to humanitarian responses around the world. The reviews, which are carried out by independent consultants 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, reviews may have a specific thematic focus to help answer broader strategic questions that will help guide CERF operations and feed into wider global discussions.

In 2023, the Emergency Relief Coordinator decided to advance Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) as part of the second 2023 and first 2024 CERF allocation rounds for Underfunded Emergencies (UFE). The allocations included dedicated collective AAP envelopes of \$4.5 million and \$4 million respectively and were the first of their kind. The envelopes operated as an optional, additional funding for UFE recipient countries. This approach provided an opportunity for countries to advance collective AAP in ways that were contextually relevant and operationally feasible.

The following summary outlines the key findings of the review commissioned to assess the above-mentioned allocation. Given the importance of strategic complementarity between CERF and Country-based Pooled Funds (CBPFs), the review was expanded to also cover recent CBPF allocations for collective AAP and other CBPF AAP-focused initiatives.

The main objective of the review was to generate learning and build evidence regarding the OCHA-managed Pooled Funds' efforts to advance collective AAP. The review focused on stakeholder engagement and inclusiveness in CERF and CBPF AAP efforts and on their efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability. By identifying best practices, challenges, and lessons learned, the review aimed to inform future Pooled Fund initiatives and contributed to broader learning within the humanitarian system.

The review started in 2024 and was conducted remotely through desk reviews, informant interviews, and case studies. It focused on CERF-and CBPF-funded AAP interventions in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, CAR, Haiti, Myanmar, Niger, Syria, oPt and Venezuela.

## Key findings

The review noted that CERF had provided clear, flexible, and well-received guidance, including an indicator catalogue and a strategic emphasis on context-specific design. The guidance was found helpful in shaping project proposals, and it provided a structured reference point for agencies unfamiliar with collective AAP requirements. However, in some contexts staffing cost limitations set out in the guidance posed challenges. While process guidance was provided, instances of opaque recipient agency selection processes at country level were reported, which may have led to agencies with less capacity and knowhow being selected for funding.

The review found that stakeholder engagement in collective AAP design was strong across most countries, with AAP Working Groups and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) regularly being consulted and endorsing projects. However, the review noted that in some countries, implementation revealed disconnects between leadership and operational staff, leading to weak ownership and diluted effectiveness.

In multiple countries (e.g. CAR, Syria, Myanmar) CERF allocations complemented and reinforced existing, often CBPF-supported mechanisms, deepening long-standing efforts rather than establishing entirely new systems. CERF-funded collective AAP projects also successfully built upon existing structures to avoid duplication and enhance coherence. Efforts to strengthen coherence and efficiency were also supported by CERF guidance at the proposal stage. CBPFs were seen as responsive and adaptive in supporting

collective AAP initiatives due to their more localized governance, monitoring, and more direct links to coordination structures, reinforcing the integration of AAP into broader humanitarian planning.

**While the 12-month implementation period was standard for CERF and CBPF allocations that supported collective AAP, interviewees noted that this timeframe was particularly short in the context of the dedicated CERF envelope.** To fulfill commitments on collective AAP, these efforts often required extensive consultation, coordination, and onboarding across multiple actors, as well as time to establish new systems, governance arrangements, and feedback pathways. In contrast, CBPF allocations, though similarly bound by 12-month periods, were generally perceived as more feasible due to their sustained processes and closer integration with established initiatives and interagency coordination structures.

**The review found that the supported collective AAP mechanisms achieved tangible improvements in several countries.** Afghanistan stands out as a good example, where CERF- and CBPF-supported platforms informed strategic decisions, increased women's participation, and integrated community data into HCT-level planning. In Northwest Syria and Venezuela, feedback systems helped shape programming, messaging, and response prioritization. However, while overall leading to positive outcomes, there were also clear challenges, with many efforts lacking sufficient follow-through, struggling to demonstrate closed feedback loops, or faced interoperability issues. The strongest outcomes were tied to high-level leadership buy-in and inter-agency coherence.

**Community participation through AAP initiatives was found to vary across contexts.** In most countries, AAP efforts have been sustained over time and included efforts related to community communication preferences and monitoring their perceptions. However, while some AAP projects, such as in Niger, Afghanistan, and Syria, enabled participatory planning and feedback loops that informed strategic decisions, most community engagements occurred post-project design, which limited their influence.

**CERF funding was seen as catalytic, as intended, allowing agencies to prioritize AAP as a standalone investment.** However, the short-term nature of the funding made sustainability challenging. CBPFs were found to be better positioned for long-term institutionalization, thanks to their sustained presence and stronger links to local structures allowing strategic use of funding to promote localization and shared ownership. In addition, while appropriate project level AAP measures are a condition for both CERF- and CBPF-funded projects, CBPFs have further integrated AAP into proposal scoring, monitoring systems, and strategic guidance.

**The review found that OCHA has played a critical role in supporting collective AAP through CERF and CBPFs, with AAP focal points often leading project design, coordination, and monitoring.** Platforms like the CERF AAP Learning Group and the AAP Community of Practice supported good practice sharing. However, the review also found inconsistencies across OCHA, with non-AAP staff often lacking understanding of how feedback informs programming. While OCHA's convening power and neutrality were widely valued, its approach was sometimes seen as top-down, not always well-coordinated, and often disconnected from meaningful community participation. The review highlighted the need for a clearer, more coherent institutional approach and better integration of AAP across OCHA's functions.

**The review noted that collective AAP has not yet been fully institutionalized across the humanitarian system, but CERF and CBPF investments have contributed to establishing "stepping stones" and incremental systemic shifts.** As the system engages in the Humanitarian Rest, there is a risk of investments in collective AAP being lost as agencies focus on their individual needs and direct mandates.

## Conclusions

**The review concluded that CBPFs and CERF have played a critical role in advancing collective AAP by catalysing inter-agency collaboration, piloting inclusive feedback mechanisms, and promoting community-driven decision-making.** Several country-level initiatives have demonstrated that with the right investment and coordination, collective AAP mechanisms can be effectively designed, implemented, and

scaled. While positive examples exist, long-term success depends on addressing structural constraints, embedding AAP into existing systems, ensuring shared ownership and sustaining leadership support. While CBPFs are better positioned to advance collective AAP given their sustained country-level presence and partnerships, **the dedicated CERF AAP funding envelopes, in particular, served as a critical proof of concept—showing that targeted, time-bound funding can catalyse initiatives. To build on this momentum, broader institutional and donor commitment will be essential to ensure continuity and long-term impact.**

**The review further concluded that realizing the full potential of collective AAP requires a shift in power dynamics—beyond messaging or outreach—to include transparency, participation, community influence over decisions, and robust feedback and learning systems.** While progress is evident, persistent barriers remain. These include short-term funding and staffing models, technical capacity gaps, access limitations, the use of tools not tailored to context, digital exclusion, coordination silos, and occasional reluctance among agencies to collaborate or share information. In some settings, AAP has not yet been fully integrated into programming or decision-making processes. **Leadership support and planning for sustainability have emerged as key enablers of success.**

**Finally, the review observed that the Humanitarian Reset provides an opportunity to realign funding models with community priorities and set new standards for principled, inclusive and accountable humanitarian action.** AAP is essential not only for upholding the dignity and agency of crisis-affected people, but also for ensuring the relevance, quality, and effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. It represents a key safeguard against exclusion, abuse, and inefficiency, particularly in complex and protracted crises

## Recommendations

The review provided several recommendations for consideration by OCHA, as well as for the wider humanitarian system. For the purpose of this summary note an overview of key recommendations are provided below, condensed and summarized for brevity. For a detailed list of all recommendations in their full articulation, the review report will shortly be available on the CERF website.

### Key recommendations for CERF and CBPFs

- CERF should consider supporting collective AAP as a part of its overall efforts when this is prioritized by the HC and HCT. It could be included as an add-on within CERF-supported projects.
- Consider Country- and Regional Fund-based models for sustainable resourcing of collective AAP, including for example fixed-percentage set-asides or shared cost frameworks in CBPF allocations.
- Focus pooled funds' support to AAP on shared, inter-agency AAP platforms that are interoperable, contextually adaptable, and avoid unnecessary duplication.
- Consider making feedback influence and closed feedback loop reporting a requirement in CERF and CBPF grants funding collective AAP initiatives, with standardized templates for reporting.
- Ensure that proposals funded under CERF and CBPF clearly demonstrate community consultation and integration into collective AAP systems where appropriate.
- Encourage adaptive project implementation approaches in CERF and CBPF-funded projects, that use feedback and perception data to adapt projects and make mid-course corrections.
- Define collective AAP indicators and country-level targets that CERF and CBPF-funded projects are expected to contribute to.
- Require sustainability and transition plans as part of CBPF collective AAP project design.

## Key system-wide recommendations

- Strengthen internal coherence within and across agencies by ensuring that AAP commitments made at the HCT level are operationalized at technical and field levels.
- Support AAP Working Groups as effective coordination bodies, through dedicated resourcing, mandate clarity, and diverse membership (including local NGOs).
- HCTs and AAP Working Groups should actively consult and engage local actors in collective AAP processes.
- Encourage mapping and integration of collective AAP into cluster workflows and coordination structures to avoid fragmentation.
- Embed feedback-to-decision protocols in inter-agency coordination (ICCG, clusters, HCTs), requiring documentation of how feedback shapes decisions.
- To help ensure sustainability, encourage donor support for collective AAP through multi-year, predictable financing, including integration into CBPFs.
- Promote collective ownership through inter-agency commitments and burden-sharing to institutionalize AAP systems.

The CERF secretariat will identify and implement relevant follow-up actions to those recommendations of the review directed to CERF, and will engage with relevant partners on the recommendations directed to other stakeholders.