Introduction

For each CERF grant, the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator submits a narrative report to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), via the CERF secretariat. The reports provide information on the results and added value of the overall CERF grant, as well as on the results of individual projects. All reports are available on the CERF website, at http://www.unocha.org/cerf/reportsevaluations/residenthumanitarian-coordinators-reports/rchc-reports-2015.

The new CERF reporting framework launched in 2013 includes a dedicated section in the "chapeau" of the reporting template (Section V) to capture the Humanitarian Country Teams' reflections as lessons learned in the CERF process. Lessons are presented separately as observations for the CERF secretariat and for the country partners. CERF recipient countries are encouraged to provide lessons learned but this is not mandatory.

This note summarizes the lessons learned listed in the CERF narrative reports submitted by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HCs) on the use of CERF funds in 2015. Only those lessons that are explicitly noted in the relevant tables of the reporting template are considered for this summary, i.e., only those which the Humanitarian Country Team (or equivalent) decided were important enough to pass on to the CERF secretariat. The note focuses on observations made for the CERF secretariat and describes the CERF secretariat's response and possible actions to address them where relevant. In total, the CERF secretariat received 68 reports from 44 countries for rapid response and under-funded allocations in 2015, of which 47 reports included lessons for the CERF secretariat. This analysis is therefore based on 128 lessons drawn from these 47 reports across 33 countries.

Lessons Learned

For analysis purposes, the lessons are grouped into three phases of the CERF process: (1) application, (2) implementation, and (3) reporting. They are further mapped by topics relevant to each of these phases to identify common themes shared by different countries. A lesson can apply to one or more of the CERF stages, depending on the complexity of the issue expressed. This note captures the key themes and experiences of the country partners in the CERF process, both positive and critical, and does not describe all details.

Phase 1: Application

As a general observation, a large proportion of the lessons (about 70 per cent of the total) referred to the application stage. The two top areas, in terms of the number of lessons, were funding policies and criteria and application approval process, followed by the application guidance and templates.

Funding policies and criteria

A large proportion of lessons regarding the application phase related to the CERF funding policies and criteria.

Some countries expressed appreciation in regards to CERF specific policies and tools. For example, Vanuatu, Myanmar and Rwanda highlighted the crucial role of CERF rapid response funding to enable early response in sudden onset crisis. Rwanda and Iraq also flagged the importance of Underfunded Emergency funds to meet life-saving needs in forgotten emergencies and protracted crisis. Vanuatu also praised the "early start date" option which enables

agencies to immediately begin response activities advancing from available resources and retroactively charging CERF projects once approved.

Many countries elaborated on the need to allow more flexibility and adapt CERF's funding policies and life-saving criteria to the type of crises, context-specific factors, and sector-specific needs and constraints. Several countries, including Central African Republic, Jordan, Myanmar, Niger, Rep of Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania believed that sustainability and durability elements require further consideration in CERF's criteria to allow longer-term impact and more effective use of resources. Some of these raised the need to consider more systematically livelihood protection interventions as life saving. Other recommended that also preparedness, prevention and risk reduction interventions, disease prevention, capacity development and infrastructure construction and/or rehabilitation, should be considered eligible for CERF funding, when justified by the context. Mozambique and El Salvador observed that CERF funding should also be made available for initial needs assessments.

Finally, a few countries, including Afghanistan, Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Vanuatu, demanded more context-specific flexibility on CERF project budget lines (staff costs, logistic costs etc.) to enable more efficient and effective responses. They also flagged the need for clearer guidance on how to estimate the share of the total sectoral needs that can be covered by CERF funding in a specific emergency.

CERF Response

CERF has a targeted focus on response to new, deteriorated or protracted emergencies to ensure comparative advantage and increase its added value. CERF only funds life-saving humanitarian assistance to people in need. A clearly prioritized and coherent allocation of funds focused on the most urgent life-saving needs and underfunded crises keeps this sharp focus on the needs of affected people. The CERF life-saving criteria define which activities are and are not eligible in each sector, while maintaining a degree of context specific flexibility.

2015 studies[1] on the added value of a reformed CERF confirmed that the vast majority of its partners (UN agencies, donors, NGOs, and others) want CERF to keep this narrow focus and not to expand its funding criteria. Other funding mechanisms, such as bilateral donor contributions, country-based pooled funds or the Peacebuilding Fund, are available to support activities beyond life-saving humanitarian aid.

Within the life-saving focus, CERF does support elements of early action[2] to mitigate the risks of deepening crises, and early interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of shocks on the lives and livelihoods of crisis-affected populations. While the life-saving criteria allow the programming of early action elements into emergency response actions that strengthen the local actors' capacities to react faster in the face of crises, CERF cannot fund outright prevention and preparedness programmes.

The CERF secretariat does not foresee the existing criteria to be broadened under CERF's current configuration. However, the plan to double the volume of CERF to US$ 1 billion per year by 2018 may provide opportunities to reorient approaches to better meet emerging threats and challenges, addressing some of the concerns expressed by recipient countries. A US$ 1 billion CERF will also be able to respond to growing needs by scaling up allocations to provide more robust funding for humanitarian response to new humanitarian emergencies and ongoing and protracted crises and increase effectiveness and efficiency by providing larger grants to individual humanitarian crises and programmes, thereby increasing CERF's strategic impact and added value, while reducing transaction costs.

Application approval process

A similar number of lessons commented on the application approval process. Broadly considered, there seemed to be polarized views about the CERF approval process. On the one hand, CERF was appreciated for its fast turnaround in

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[1] Two studies on the added value of a reformed CERF; Study on the Added value of a Reformed Central Emergency Response Fund (Barnaby Willitts-King, March 2015) and Review of the Potential for Assessed Funding for the Central Emergency Response Fund (Edward Tsui, February 2015)

[2] In the context of humanitarian response, early action should be distinguished from the prevention and preparedness programmes that would require multi-year development commitments, often at the institutional and policy levels, to achieve full impact.

approvals, leading to quick disbursement of funds to enable immediate response by field actors, as highlighted by DPRK, Eritrea, Mozambique, Myanmar, South Sudan, Vanuatu, and Zimbabwe. There was a strong emphasis on the timeliness and speed of CERF allocations and the proactive support received from CERF secretariat and OCHA in general, which enabled humanitarian actors to design a faster and more strategically focused response and address time-critical needs more effectively.

On the other hand, a number of countries reported some issues related to the CERF application approval process and provided recommendations and suggestions for improving it.

Iraq, Mozambique, Nepal, and South Sudan reported delays either in the approval process or on the disbursement of funds and recommended that the approval of time-critical responses should be fast-tracked. It is interesting to note that two of these countries have also praised CERF for its speed in approving and disbursing funds, in relation to different applications.

Afghanistan, Chile, El Salvador, Honduras, Mauritania, Myanmar, Nepal, South Sudan, United Republic of Tanzania, and Vanuatu highlighted the overall complexity of the CERF application process, flagging the difficulty to provide the required level of financial details at the application stage when information from needs assessments is limited and/or inaccurate and calling for an overall simplification of the process.

Afghanistan, Burundi, and Myanmar recommended adjusting the timeline of the Underfunded Emergencies application process, taking into account other humanitarian processes ongoing in parallel, such as Country Based Pool Funds allocations, CERF rapid response applications and humanitarian appeal processes.

Finally, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Jordan, and Pakistan identified areas where more clarity would help making CERF application process easier; some specific areas mentioned included the application of CERF life-saving criteria to different contexts, the principles guiding the CERF secretariat when commenting on technical aspects of project proposals, and the role of clusters in the various stages of CERF process.

CERF Response

One of CERF's key performance indicators is the time taken to review and approve applications, and disburse funding to projects. The CERF secretariat closely tracks the timeliness of the review and approval process and continuously works to shorten it. The CERF secretariat target is to provide comments on official rapid response applications (including all project proposals) within two working days; and, similarly, for official underfunded emergencies submissions within five working days. For rapid response projects, UN agencies can request that CERF funds are used to cover implementation costs up to six weeks before the disbursement date of the CERF grant (early start date) which further increases CERF's timeliness.[3] It is positive to see the several countries expressing appreciation for the speed and efficiency of CERF application process.

The CERF secretariat is also mandated to ensure that grants have common focus and are strategic, and support a clear, joint prioritization process involving the HCT, government, clusters and other relevant stakeholders. A clearly prioritized strategy is required as the basis for each CERF application. When a grant has not been clearly prioritized, the secretariat, on behalf of the ERC, may ask that such a strategy be developed and communicated. In some cases, the CERF secretariat will advise RC/HCs not to include certain activities in an application, if these would fall outside of the life-saving criteria. In other cases, further information is required to ensure that this is the case. The above actions may lead to additional revision by the field and extra but necessary time to the approval process. In specific situations, especially in the context of slow-onset emergencies or protracted crises, the CERF secretariat takes a proactive role and works with the RC/HCs and HCTs prior to an application to define/clarify triggers and formulate a prioritised response strategy. Finally, it has been observed that no access to the information related to the time it takes in some cases some additional time is needed to discuss and reach consensus at HCT/UNCT level in determining if and when to approach the CERF, which may prolong further the perceived duration of the CERF application process.

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[3] Implementation can, of course, not begin before the start of the emergency and only if internal UN agency rules allow it.

Nevertheless, CERF acknowledges that there is always room for improving and streamlining internal processes, tools and procedures. The ongoing work of the internal CERF secretariat Efficiency Task Team, established in 2016, aims to identify efficiency gains to decrease transaction costs while maintaining CERF's overall effectiveness. In particular, it is looking at ways to streamline processes to reduce time and resources spent by the CERF secretariat and by external stakeholders involved in CERF processes, while ensuring that necessary checks and balances are met, quality is maintained and minimum requirements for information and documentation are adhered to. The recent revision of the CERF application template, was driven by three main objectives: (i) enhance overall clarity through improved guidance and examples, (ii) simplify and clarify the information requirements and minimize duplications between chapeau and project proposal, and (iii) ensure all essential data and information is collected in the simplest way. CERF will continue efforts to minimize programmatic and budget requirements for submissions to help avoid unnecessary back-and-forth during the application process.

Application guidance and templates

A few countries also provided lessons learned on the application guidance and templates (narrative and budget). Myanmar and United Republic of Tanzania found both the application templates and guidance clear, easy, concise and user-friendly and appreciated the support received from OCHA and the CERF secretariat. On the other hand, Tanzania flagged the need for more guidance on how to include cross-cutting issues, such as protection and gender based violence in CERF proposals, and recommended reducing duplication of information requirements between chapeau and project proposals..

Central African Republic, Honduras, Mozambique, and South Sudan called for a simplified application template, more guidance on the application process, and more flexibility with regard to details to be provided. It was also suggested that CERF provide more support and training to agencies to avoid unnecessary back and forth. Another key concern was the appropriateness of staffing cost provisions in the budget to enable adequate coverage for the CERF response. It was recommended that CERF takes into consideration the specific nature of the response when reviewing and approving the level of each budget line and specifically staffing and logistics/operational costs in a project, possibly by developing more detailed budget guidance by type of response.

CERF Response

The CERF secretariat has recently introduced a revised application template, officially introduced in March 2017. The lessons learned analysed in this paper are related to 2015 grants, which were approved still using the old application template. As mentioned earlier, the aim of the new template is to simplify the application drafting process by providing clearer guidance and improved structure. It is also hoped to shorten the review process by minimizing the need for several rounds of revisions during the application phase.

The new application template requires more structured information on issues related to gender and gender-based violence, cash programming and accountability to affected people. The template asks for sex- and age-disaggregated data and gender is mainstreamed throughout the document.

The CERF secretariat is regularly reviewing all CERF application-related processes, including budget requirements and guidelines, with the aim of streamlining and simplifying application requirements, also in view of Grand Bargain commitments. This process aims at clarifying the minimum requirements for programmatic and budget details in CERF proposals and establishing what additional guidance is required to avoid unnecessary delays during the application review and approval phase. CERF is also carrying out profiling of the different typologies of emergency response funded, with the aim of identifying and grouping responses based on common characteristics and define possible adjustments of CERF criteria, rules and approaches applicable to different typology groups.

The CERF secretariat is constantly updating and improving its training programme, methodology and targeting. Over the course of 2016, CERF expanded the use of webinars aiming to improve understanding of what is required and eligible in CERF submissions, thereby helping to reduce unnecessary back-and-forth during the application phase. Ad-hoc webinars are currently offered to recipient countries at the start of the Underfunded Emergencies application process as well as to countries applying for rapid response grants.

Phase 2: Implementation

A number of lessons learned regarded the implementation phase, with major focus on programmatic, geographical and timing flexibility, as well as on monitoring and evaluation. While countries like Iraq, Turkey and Vanuatu praised CERF for its programmatic flexibility enabling agencies to adjust their responses to evolving contexts and needs, others called for more flexibility in terms of budget revisions, geographical focus, project duration including no-cost extension and reprogramming to adapt to fast evolving conditions and/or needs and priorities. Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan advocated for increased programmatic flexibility to adjust the response to changing conditions. Some also recommended more flexibility in the geographical focus of interventions to better adapt to rapidly changing conditions on the ground, and provide uninterrupted assistance to populations escaping from conflict. Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, Pakistan, Rwanda, and Turkey flagged the need for more flexibility in terms of implementation timeline, including the need for extended timeframes and improved guidance on no-cost extensions. Major factors affecting project duration included: access constraints and volatile context related to conflict and insecurity, sector-specific climate and seasonal requirements, and the need to gradually phase out humanitarian assistance in countries without permanent humanitarian structures and programmes.

A few countries, including Lebanon, Myanmar and Yemen, made observations on monitoring and evaluation in relation to the CERF implementation. Lebanon and Myanmar recommended the introduction of an official CERF monitoring guidance and related tools, while Yemen suggested adding a few questions on monitoring in the reporting template. Finally, the possibility of allowing sub-granting of CERF funds to UN agencies was suggested.

CERF Response

As noted above, CERF focuses on life-saving humanitarian action and, under its rapid response window, on kick-starting a quick response to new or deteriorating crises. The implementation period for CERF rapid response grants was increased in 2010, in consultation with UN agencies, from three to six months. Grants from the window for underfunded emergencies have to be implemented within nine months. If, due to unforeseen circumstances, more time is needed, the RC/HC can request a no-cost extension. The ERC will approve project extensions only in exceptional circumstances, if the reasons for the inability to implement are clearly documented to be outside of the control of the recipient agency. Compelling reasons for project extensions include, but are not limited to, unforeseen and increased access restrictions, unforeseen changes in government policy, or a fundamental change in the socio-political climate underpinning the application for CERF funds. Those that could have been avoided by better planning are rejected. Guidance on no-cost extensions and reprogramming is shared with each CERF recipient country about half way into project implementation.

As humanitarian contexts often change rapidly, CERF-funded projects might need to be adjusted. In addition to no-cost extensions, UN agencies can request two types of project revisions: changes in programmatic activities, and changes to the budgets. The CERF secretariat reviews these requests individually and the ERC approves only those that are well justified due to circumstances outside the agency's control. For smaller changes, UN agencies agreed in the 'Umbrella Letters of Understanding' with OCHA to have a flexibility of up to 15% for each budget category, such as supplies, equipment or transfers to implementing partners.

As mentioned above, the ongoing profiling of emergency response typologies may result in possible adjustments of CERF criteria, rules and approaches applicable to different typology groups. This may include adjustments in project durations, budgets and other aspects of project design and implementation, depending on the specific characteristics of the emergency response funded (protracted crises, slow onset, sudden onset in non-humanitarian context etc).

UN agencies are responsible for monitoring, evaluation and reporting with regard to CERF-funded action. Monitoring should be an ongoing activity during all phases of implementation, while an evaluation could take place after the project implementation. As CERF usually funds only a part of an agency project or programme, monitoring and evaluation by agencies will usually cover activities beyond what was funded by CERF, and will often continue beyond the implementation period of a CERF project.

In late 2015 the CERF secretariat developed the CERF Monitoring Guidance, to provide guidance on the monitoring of CERF-funded projects at field level. This document is shared systematically with RC/HCs upon approval of each CERF grant. The note seeks to clarify roles and responsibilities in monitoring the implementation of CERF grants and outlines activities that shall take place to ensure availability of necessary information during and after the implementation phase.

According to the guidance, agencies are accountable for their CERF funded projects, and therefore responsible for monitoring project implementation. As CERF projects have been collectively prioritized under the leadership of the RC/HC, agencies shall provide information on implementation of CERF projects to the RC/HC. The objective of CERF monitoring is to give the RC/HC and the HCT assurance that CERF funded activities are implemented as intended and to enable corrective actions to be taken if necessary. It is also important in fostering joint learning in support of improved response. Monitoring arrangements should be agreed by the HCT at the beginning of the CERF process, communicated by the RC/HC to relevant stakeholders and documented in the CERF application submitted to the ERC. Information and details about the modalities, timing, roles and responsibilities of monitoring activities have to be provided in the application template, both in the chapeau and in the project proposals.

To facilitate the collection of information by the RC/HC, an Interim Update template has been developed and rolled out for all 2016 grants. A copy of this template, pre-populated with key project data, is shared systematically with RC/HCs upon approval of each CERF grant. While the use of the Interim Update provided by CERF was optional, leaving to RC/HCs the final decision on how to monitor CERF projects, based on recommendations from the field and from several audits, the use of the Interim Update for monitoring the implementation of CERF grants is becoming a mandatory requirement in 2017.

Both the CERF Monitoring Guidance and the Interim Update template are available on the CERF website at

http://www.unocha.org/cerf/resources/guidance-and-templates

CERF also encourages humanitarian country teams to conduct inclusive after action reviews (AAR) to assess the results achieved with CERF funds and to reflect on lessons learned from CERF processes. AARs can serve as a cornerstone for the preparation of CERF narrative reports.

From central level, CERF seeks to monitor the Fund's performance at strategic level. In line with its Performance and Accountability Framework (PAF), the CERF secretariat commissions three to five reviews annually to assess the value added by CERF to humanitarian response in selected countries. These reviews are conducted by independent evaluation experts and are available on the CERF website at

 http://www.unocha.org/cerf/reportsevaluations/evaluations/country-reviews/performance-and-accountability-framework

Phase 3: Reporting

Very few countries who received CERF grants in 2015 reflected upon the reporting process. The decreasing trend in the number of observations regarding RC/HC reports already recorded last year was confirmed by this year analysis, with substantially fewer lessons learned on reporting. This may be related to the increased familiarity and experience with the reporting framework, process, and templates as well as the constant guidance and follow up provided by the CERF secretariat. This trend is also confirmed by the progressively higher quality of RC/HC reports submitted.

Afghanistan, Philippines, and Yemen asked for more guidance, both in terms of tools and training, to improve beneficiary data collection. Myanmar recommended informing agencies upon grant approval about the need to collect detailed beneficiary data disaggregated by age, sex and sector. Finally, Central African Republic, and Yemen suggested some specific changes and improvements to the template, based on their experience as users.

CERF Response

The narrative reports are the main accountability tools for CERF grants and these are important for the CERF secretariat and for CERF's donors. The reports are published on CERF's website and are meant to provide donors and other stakeholders with a comprehensive overview of the CERF grant, including the emergency to which CERF has helped respond, CERF's role in the response, what has been achieved with CERF funding and what the added value of the CERF funding has been.

In line with the Grand Bargain commitment to harmonise and simplify reporting requirements, CERF will continue its efforts to minimize transaction costs related to reporting as much as possible while maintaining the necessary levels of accountability and quality of processes and operations.

The reporting template is currently being updated to be aligned with the new CERF application template. The CERF secretariat is continuously reviewing its reporting template, to make it user-friendly, informative to the CERF secretariat and to donors and other users of the reports and to support better collection of data and information. Review of the reporting framework is also a specific objective of the CERF Efficiency Task Team. To this end, CERF will take the feedback and suggestions received into consideration and incorporate them in the template and apply them to processes when deemed appropriate. The CERF secretariat is about to introduce a survey/questionnaire about the reporting process, targeting reporting focal points at country level, with the aim to receive more detailed and real-time feedback on the reporting process.

CERF fully recognises that the process of counting the number of people reached by CERF at project, sector and application level, minimizing double counting, presents substantial methodological and practical difficulties and limitations. In view of this, CERF expects the beneficiaries' numbers reported in RC/HC reports to be the best possible estimates within the limitations of the given circumstances. Moreover, beneficiary estimation is also challenging when preparing CERF applications and CERF is cognizant that planned figures may not always correspond to the number of people reached and eventually reported. CERF therefore accepts discrepancies but seeks to understand the background when significant differences are encountered. As mentioned earlier, CERF has fully aligned the application and reporting templates for what concerns information on beneficiaries. The guidance in the application template will also inform agencies about the need to collect sex-, age- and sector-disaggregated beneficiaries' data for the RC/HC report.

Finally, CERF started offering ad-hoc webinars on reporting requirements and processes, to countries in the early stages of the reporting process.

Conclusion

The analysis of lessons learned from CERF reports submitted by RC/HC for 2015 allocations showed an increasing focus toward fewer and more homogeneous issues. The keywords from the vast majority of lessons learned received are flexibility, clarity, simplification and timeliness, which provide a clear direction for CERF on where to focus to improve its internal processes and efficiency.

As on previous years, the largest number of lessons learned is related to the application phase, and particularly to the CERF funding policies and criteria and the review and approval process. On the other end, substantially fewer lessons regarding the reporting phase were received this year, as compared to the 2013 and 2014 reports analysis. It is positive to note that the vast majority of RC/HC reports for 2015 grants included lessons learned either for the CERF Secretariat, for country actors or for both, which suggests that most countries dedicated time towards reflecting upon CERF processes. Approximately 70 per cent of the reports contained specific feedback to the CERF secretariat.

The feedback received through the lessons learned are important for the ongoing CERF efficiency review process and some emerging themes will help feed into processes leading to the expansion of CERF to $1 billion and CERF's commitments to the Grand Bargain. The lessons learned from RC/HC reports provide useful information and recommendations and offer CERF a unique direct feedback channel with partners at field level. And - while some

suggestions may yield direct changes or actions while others may not - they will all help inform initiatives by the CERF secretariat to make CERF more effective and efficient. CERF will continue to systematically analyse and follow-up to lessons learned from the field.

CERF secretariat, April 2017