DONOR INTELLIGENCE

CERF: funding and application reference

Last updated 2026-11-19 | Version 1

Scope: UN Central Emergency Response Fund

Evidence: Official donor references reviewed 2026-11-19

https://salientone.eu/humanitarian/donors/cerf/

Funding perspective

Salient One analysis

CERF is the UN's central pooled fund for rapid and underfunded crises. It is country-driven: the RC/HC leads the request, the ERC decides, and UN agencies implement. NGOs cannot apply directly, but they shape priorities through the HCT and clusters and often deliver as implementing partners. The practical route is influence plus a UN agency partnership, not a proposal to CERF.

Funding routes and access

Rapid response allocation. Access: RC/HC request after HCT consultation; ERC decision. Purpose: Seed funding for sudden-onset, rapidly deteriorating or time-critical crises.

Underfunded emergencies allocation. Access: ERC country selection; RC/HC strategy and projects. Purpose: Support to neglected crises in two rounds a year.

Implementing partnership. Access: UN agency project with an NGO as implementing partner. Purpose: Delivery role within a CERF-funded project.

Global priorities

CERF provides seed funds to jump-start critical relief operations and fund life-saving programmes not covered by other donors. Rapid response supports sudden-onset crises, rapid deterioration and time-critical interventions; one-third of grants support underfunded emergencies.

Underfunded emergencies. Twice a year the ERC selects countries against funding levels, humanitarian needs, risk and vulnerability, UN agency recommendations, consultations with UN agencies and NGOs, and humanitarian plans. Where a Humanitarian Response Plan exists, the window can only fund HRP projects.

Eligibility and partner access

All UN organisations except OCHA are eligible for funding. NGOs cannot directly request CERF funds, and agencies cannot submit proposals directly to the ERC.

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The NGO route. NGOs participate in prioritisation through the HCT, clusters or sector coordination and often implement CERF-funded projects as partners. Inclusion in the country strategy is the practical route to funding, not a direct application.

Application process

Rapid response. The RC/HC consults the humanitarian country team, requests funding from the CERF secretariat and, after the ERC decision, submits a strategy and project package. The ERC approves and CERF disburses to the UN agencies. Requests are accepted throughout the year.

Underfunded emergencies. The ERC selects countries and invites the RC/HC to develop a prioritised, implementable strategy with the HCT and identify projects. The ERC then decides whether to allocate the requested funds.

Who submits. The country team's package is the application. An NGO's route is through the lead UN agency and coordination structures, not a submission to the ERC.

Documents and attachments

Application package. A strategy and project proposals prepared by the country team under the RC/HC, following the life-saving criteria and the current allocation guidance.

System and templates. Applications, revision requests and programme reports are managed in OneGMS. The guidance page holds the handbook, life-saving criteria, application guidelines and standard indicators.

Revisions. No-cost extensions, reprogramming and redeployment of funds follow separate guidance and templates rather than a new application.

Funding cycles and timing

Rapid response. Requests are accepted throughout the year. Funds should be committed and activities completed within six months of disbursement, with an early start date of up to six weeks before disbursement.

Underfunded emergencies. Two rounds a year. The ERC selects countries first; the RC/HC then develops the strategy and projects. There is no single global application window an NGO can enter directly.

Programme design and donor methods

CERF is country-driven and intended to be inclusive and transparent; the process asks country teams to engage NGO and government partners. HNO needs analysis and HRP priorities inform the request where they exist.

Gap-filling. CERF jump-starts an emergency response and does not fund 100 per cent of an

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emergency's requirements except in rare circumstances. It is not a substitute for the main donor funding of a programme.

Assessment and scoring

Projects must respond to the crisis, demonstrate access and implementation capacity, be essential to the response and be prioritised by the HCT and RC/HC through consultation. They must comply with the life-saving criteria.

The cited pages do not publish a weighted scoring grid. The ERC decision, the country strategy and the life-saving criteria govern the allocation; CERF should not be presented as a competitive call with published weights.

Financing and delivery conditions

Grant modality. Grants are disbursed to UN agency headquarters and implemented within six months. CERF also operates a separate loan element.

Gap-filling. CERF does not fund 100 per cent of requirements except rarely; counterpart resources and complementarity with other funding matter.

What this means for applicants

Salient One analysis

Influence before submission. The useful entry point is the country strategy: cluster and HCT engagement before the RC/HC package is fixed. A proposal sent after the allocation is too late.

Partner choice is the access route. Choose a UN agency with a credible CERF record and a project where the organisation's access or capacity is material. The NGO role should be specified in the project, not added after the award.

Scope and applicability

CERF is a pooled fund, not an open call. NGOs cannot apply directly; access is through the RC/HC-led country process, UN agencies and coordination structures. The allocation decision and current guidance govern any project.

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Sources and evidence notes

CERF grant cycle: overview

Reference edition 2026-11-19

Reviewed 19 November 2026. Explains the seed-funding purpose, the RC/HC-led process and the ERC decision.

Used for: Global priorities; Programme design and donor methods; Financing and delivery conditions

https://cerf.un.org/apply-for-a-grant/apply-now

CERF rapid response

Reference edition 2026-11-19

Reviewed 19 November 2026. Process, UN eligibility, the six-month implementation window and the exclusion of direct NGO requests.

Used for: Funding routes and access; Eligibility and partner access; Application process; Documents and attachments; Funding cycles and timing; Programme design and donor methods; Assessment and scoring; Financing and delivery conditions; What this means for applicants

https://cerf.un.org/apply-for-a-grant/rapid-response

CERF underfunded emergencies

Reference edition 2026-11-19

Reviewed 19 November 2026. Twice-yearly country selection, NGO participation and the HRP limitation.

Used for: Funding routes and access; Global priorities; Eligibility and partner access; Application process; Funding cycles and timing; Programme design and donor methods; Assessment and scoring; What this means for applicants

https://cerf.un.org/apply-for-a-grant/underfunded-emergencies

CERF guidance and templates

Reference edition 2026-11-19

Reviewed 19 November 2026. Handbook, life-saving criteria, OneGMS application guidance, standard indicators and revision templates.

Used for: Documents and attachments

https://cerf.un.org/grant-cycle/guidance-and-templates

CERF Handbook

Reference edition 2026-11-19

Reference handbook linked from the guidance page; the current guidance and allocation decision govern an application.

https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/CERF_Handbook_.pdf

CERF life-saving criteria (2020, August 2024 amendment)

Reference edition 2026-11-19

Criteria referenced by the rapid response page; read with the current allocation guidance.

https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/CERF_Life_Saving_Criteria_2020_Aug_2024_Amendment_English.pdf

Salient One analysis is editorial interpretation of the official references. Current calls, amendments and signed agreements determine binding requirements. A donor strategy or historical procedure does not establish an open funding opportunity.