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### Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

### Universal periodic review

## Operations of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review

### Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

#### *Summary*

The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council decision 17/119, in which the Council requested the secretariat to provide an annual written update on the operations of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review and on the resources available to it. The report contains a description of the activities implemented with the support of the Voluntary Fund during the reporting period and highlights ways the Voluntary Fund has been used to facilitate and enhance the participation of Member States, especially least developed countries and small island developing States, during the reporting period. The report provides an overview of contributions and expenditure for the period from 1 January to 31 December 2023. It also offers an overview of participation, over a year and a half into the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, and an update on the implementation of Council resolution 51/30 on strengthening the voluntary funds for the universal periodic review mechanism.



## I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 6/17, the Human Rights Council requested the Secretary-General to establish a universal periodic review voluntary fund to facilitate the participation of developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in the universal periodic review. In its resolution 16/21, the Council requested that the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review be strengthened and operationalized in order to encourage a significant participation of developing countries, in particular least developed countries and small island developing States, in their review.
2. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) administers the Voluntary Fund jointly with the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review, also established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 6/17. The present report should be read in conjunction with the report on the operations of the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review.<sup>1</sup>
3. In its resolution 51/30, entitled “Strengthening the voluntary funds for the universal periodic review mechanism of the Human Rights Council”, the Council requested the Secretary-General to further strengthen the regular budget-funded dedicated capacity of OHCHR to implement the mandates of the two voluntary funds. In 2023, during the general debates held at the fifty-third and fifty-fourth sessions of the Council under agenda item 6, numerous States reiterated their calls for assistance to increase participation in the universal periodic review.

## II. Operations of the Voluntary Fund

4. The Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review facilitates the participation of developing countries, in particular least developed countries and small island developing States, in the universal periodic review mechanism. The support provided by the Voluntary Fund ensures that delegates from eligible countries are able to participate in person in the sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and in the meetings of the Human Rights Council at which the outcome of the review is adopted.
5. The Voluntary Fund also supports the engagement of States in the preparatory process of the review, including through technical advice provided by OHCHR on the preparation of their national reports and on the possibility of undertaking a participatory and comprehensive assessment of the human rights situation in the country. In its resolution 35/29, the Human Rights Council encouraged States to promote the involvement of parliaments in all stages of the universal periodic review reporting process.
6. In accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 6/30, on integrating the human rights of women throughout the United Nations system, OHCHR encouraged States to consider ensuring gender balance in the composition of their delegations and in the sharing of responsibilities among members of the delegations.
7. Geneva-based delegations take part in the informational briefings organized by OHCHR before each Working Group session, which contribute to raising their awareness of the process of follow-up to recommendations received and the support available for this purpose, including through the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review.
8. In conducting these operations, OHCHR ensures effective coordination between the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review and the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund to Support the Participation of Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in the Work of the Human Rights Council. For instance, the secretariat of the Voluntary Fund provides briefings for the beneficiary delegates of the Trust Fund on the work of the Council, including the universal periodic review, during the induction courses organized by the latter in Geneva. Former beneficiaries of the Trust Fund

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<sup>1</sup> [A/HRC/56/18](#).

have often been involved in the universal periodic review process at the national level and/or as a member of the delegation of their State.

## A. Travel to meetings

9. The Voluntary Fund provides financial support to developing countries, in particular least developed countries and small islands developing States, to cover travel to Geneva by one official State representative to participate in sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and in meetings of the Human Rights Council at which the outcome of the review of the representative's country is put forth for adoption.

10. The Voluntary Fund also provides for the travel of one official representative per delegation of eligible States that are members of the Human Rights Council and do not have a permanent mission in Geneva to act as rapporteurs, that is, as members of a troika. In addition to covering travel costs, the Voluntary Fund also provides for the payment of a daily subsistence allowance at the rate applicable to Geneva at the time of travel.

11. In 2023, the Voluntary Fund supported the participation of 13 delegates (9 women and 4 men) from eligible countries, including 7 delegates from least developed countries or small islands developing States, in three sessions of the Working Group. To participate in the forty-second session of the Working Group, the Voluntary Fund supported the travel of one delegate each from Argentina, Benin, Ghana, Guatemala, Pakistan, Peru and Sri Lanka. To participate in the forty-third session of the Working Group, the Voluntary Fund supported the travel of one delegate each from the Bahamas, Barbados and Tonga. To participate in the forty-fourth session of the Working Group, the Voluntary Fund supported the travel of one delegate each from Bangladesh, Cuba and Djibouti.

12. Since its establishment, the Voluntary Fund has facilitated the participation of 248 delegates from 118 States, with many States having received funding in two or more cycles of the review. Of those 118 States, 70 are least developed countries or small island developing States; 29 per cent are least developed countries, 24 per cent are small island developing States and 7 per cent are both least developed countries and small island developing States. The Voluntary Fund has supported States from all geographical regions: 40 per cent are African States, 30 per cent are Asia-Pacific States, 24 per cent are Latin American and Caribbean States, 5 per cent are Eastern European States and 1 per cent are Western European and other States.

13. Table 1 below sets out the number of delegates per year that have received support from the Voluntary Fund to participate in sessions of the Working Group and meetings of the Human Rights Council at which the outcomes of the reviews are adopted.

Table 1

### **Delegates supported by the Voluntary Fund from the establishment of the Voluntary Fund to 31 December 2023**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of delegates funded</i>
2008	6
2009	17
2010	23
2011	21
2012	3
2013	6
2014	15
2015	23
2016	26
2017	15
2018	22

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of delegates funded</i>
2019	26
2020	10
2021	3
2022	19
2023	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>248</b>

14. The number of delegates supported annually by the Voluntary Fund varies depending on the number of eligible countries to be reviewed and the number of the outcomes thereof up for adoption in a given year. It should be recalled that delegates' travel to Geneva was affected by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, the sessions of the Working Group followed the hybrid modalities introduced by the Human Rights Council, which combined virtual participation through statements delivered by pre-recorded video message with participation through live video links. In that context, the Voluntary Fund was also used to provide financial support for virtual participation.

## **B. Training**

15. The terms of reference of the Voluntary Fund provide for financial support for in-country or online briefings prior to the sessions of the Working Group to assist countries in the preparatory process and to promote better understanding of the challenges faced in, and the opportunities provided by, engaging with the review mechanism at the country level. The briefings provide an opportunity to review the policies and procedures of the universal periodic review and to discuss good practices concerning the organization of national consultations, setting up national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up, drafting national reports and participation in the interactive dialogues held at the sessions of the Working Group and the Human Rights Council.

16. In 2023, in-country briefings were provided for the Governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Senegal. For example, with financial support from the Voluntary Fund, OHCHR provided the Government of Senegal with technical assistance to recap and assess the implementation of the recommendations received during its third review through a consultative process and to draft its national report. To that end, a workshop was held in Mbour, Senegal, in September 2023, in which 30 representatives of relevant State agencies and various stakeholders participated, discussing the implementation of the recommendations from the third cycle, including progress achieved and remaining challenges. The findings of the workshop were used to prepare the national report of Senegal for its fourth review.

17. In 2023, OHCHR organized online briefings for several States, including Argentina, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Cuba, Gabon, Montenegro, Uzbekistan and Vanuatu, prior to their reviews in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review. The briefings enabled the States concerned to enhance their knowledge of the processes and procedures of the universal periodic review in general and helped prepare them to draft their national reports and participate in the interactive dialogues with the Working Group in particular.

18. In addition, in 2023 OHCHR organized three pre-session informational meetings in Geneva prior to the forty-second, forty-third and forty-fourth sessions of the Working Group for the representatives of States under review and members of the troikas based in Geneva. The meetings were conducted in both English and French. Building upon previous years' experience, the meetings covered the organizational aspects of the Working Group, such as the composition of the delegation of the State under review, the accreditation process, how to join the list of speakers and the modalities of participation. More substantive aspects were also addressed, including the role of the troika, the preparation of reports of the Working Group and the positions that the State under review can take on the recommendations received, pursuant to the respective resolutions of the Human Rights Council.

19. Since the start of the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, OHCHR has also held informational meetings in Geneva tailored to delegates whose participation in the Working Group is supported by the Voluntary Fund, while they are in Geneva. The aim is to establish a virtual network of delegates who are well-versed in the universal periodic review, build in-country capacity and foster the identification of best practices in review preparation and follow-up. Numerous participants who have benefited from financial assistance to attend the Geneva sessions, at which they received comprehensive information on follow-up procedures, have expressed their deep appreciation for the support. According to their testimonies, it has provided a pivotal capacity-building opportunity, enabling them to sustain their effective contributions throughout all phases of the mechanism, including the follow-up phase.

20. In its resolution 35/29, the Human Rights Council acknowledged the crucial role that parliaments played in translating international commitments into national policies and laws. It encouraged States to promote the involvement of parliaments in all stages of the universal periodic review reporting process through, inter alia, the inclusion of the national parliament as a relevant stakeholder in the consultation process for the national report and in the implementation of supported recommendations by the State concerned.<sup>2</sup>

21. In 2023, OHCHR and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) held briefings for parliamentarians of States under review prior to the forty-third to forty-seventh sessions of the Working Group. That practice was introduced at the beginning of the fourth cycle. At the briefings, staff of OHCHR and IPU informed a total of 33 parliamentarians from 30 States and 50 parliamentary staff members about their role at each phase of the review process and addressed their queries. The parliamentarians shared information on the participation of their countries in the universal periodic review process. During the three sessions of the Working Group held in 2023, a total of 17 parliamentarians from 13 States under review participated in the interactive dialogues.

### III. Financial situation of the Voluntary Fund

22. Table 2 below sets out the detailed financial situation of the Voluntary Fund as at 31 December 2023. Between 2014 and 2022, total expenditure per year exceeded the annual contributions received, as a result of a negative pattern of income experienced in recent years, which is endangering the long-term sustainability of the Voluntary Fund. Consequently, at the beginning of 2023, a decision was made to extend financial support to delegations to cover participation in the sessions of the Working Group only, not in the meetings at which the Human Rights Council adopts the outcomes of the reviews. This conservative approach was taken to safeguard some reserves to guarantee the continuity of the Voluntary Fund's work in 2024. In 2023, for the first time since 2014, annual contributions exceeded total expenditure.

Table 2

#### Statement of income and expenditure for the period 1 January–31 December 2023

(United States dollars)

<i>Component</i>	
<i>Income</i>	
Voluntary contributions received in 2023	373 832.77
Gain and loss on exchange	(33.67)
Pledges received for 2023	–
Miscellaneous and investment income	26 037.51
<b>Total income</b>	<b>399 836.61</b>

<sup>2</sup> See [A/HRC/38/25](#).

<i>Component</i>	
<i>Expenditure</i>	
Staff costs	21 043.00
Other personnel costs (consultants' fees and travel)	(34.62)
Travel of staff	5 246.26
Travel of representatives and participants to meetings and seminars	35 695.07
Contractual services	40 140.00
General operating and other direct costs	1 133.79
Equipment, vehicles and furniture	–
Transfers and grants to implementing partners (>\$50,000)	–
Grants out (<\$50,000) and fellowships	–
Programme support (indirect) costs	13 416.75
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>116 640.25</b>
Net excess (shortfall) of income over expenditure for the period	283 196.36
Opening balance on 1 January 2023	453 809.28
Other adjustments (prior period)	–
Unpaid pledges	–
<b>Total fund balance as at 31 December 2023</b>	<b>737 005.64</b>

23. The Voluntary Fund can receive contributions from States, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, private institutions and individuals. As at 31 December 2023, 21 countries and one intergovernmental organization had made voluntary contributions for a total of \$4,183,080 (see table 3 below).

24. In 2023, four States contributed to the Voluntary Fund, for a total amount of \$373,833 (see table 4 below). This constituted an encouraging increase compared with the year 2022 and with the average level of annual contributions (\$250,000) since the establishment of the Voluntary Fund.

25. To ensure an adequate level of support during the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, an annual income of at least \$500,000 in voluntary contributions needs to be sustained. In 2024, the Voluntary Fund continues to prioritize supporting the travel of delegates from least developed countries and small island developing States.

Table 3

**Contributions received, from the establishment of the Voluntary Fund to 31 December 2023**

(United States dollars)

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Albania	2 729
Australia	387 580
Austria	157 729
Belgium	57 681
China	550 000
Colombia	26 668
Cuba	3 817
Denmark	359 002
Germany	795 397
Hungary	19 083
Italy	422 852

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Japan	480 000
Kuwait	50 000
Poland	22 172
Republic of Korea	50 000
Romania	73 746
Russian Federation	100 000
Saudi Arabia	199 866
Singapore	75 000
Sweden	100 000
Switzerland	95 238
International Organization of la Francophonie	154 178
Other and individual donors	341
<b>Total contributions</b>	<b>4 183 080</b>

Table 4  
**Contributions received, 1 January–31 December 2023**

(United States dollars)

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Albania	2 729
China	300 000
Poland	11 238
Saudi Arabia	59 866
<b>Total contributions</b>	<b>373 833</b>

#### IV. Increasing participation of Member States in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review

26. In 2023, OHCHR continued to take measures to increase the participation of Member States and other stakeholders in the universal periodic review. The secretariat of the universal periodic review has widely disseminated relevant information and made it accessible through various means, enhancing its visibility with a view to increasing the engagement of States and other stakeholders with the mechanism. The OHCHR web page on the universal periodic review has been regularly updated with the most recent news, information regarding forthcoming sessions of the Working Group, review outcomes before the Human Rights Council for adoption and tools available for the preparation of the review and the implementation of the recommendations emanating from the review.<sup>3</sup>

27. In 2023, a short promotional video on the Voluntary Fund was produced and posted on the OHCHR website. It features beneficiaries speaking about the importance of their in-person participation, which was enabled by the Voluntary Fund.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the extranet of the universal periodic review has been regularly updated, providing a platform where schedules, oral statements and reports are readily available and accessible.<sup>5</sup>

28. Furthermore, in 2023 OHCHR engaged with the media on all issues relating to the Working Group, enabling accurate and timely reporting through press releases produced in English and 23 languages spoken in the States that were reviewed. Similarly, OHCHR has

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-home>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-home>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://uprmeetings.ohchr.org/Pages/default.aspx>.

used social media to disseminate information on the universal periodic review in a timely and accurate manner.

29. With the support of the United Nations country teams, OHCHR has encouraged national stakeholders to follow online the discussions in the interactive dialogue during the review, in order to ensure that they are informed about progress and challenges that are highlighted and concerns that are expressed by other Member States. On average, some 10,000 viewers were recorded during the live broadcasts of the meetings of five sessions of the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review.

30. In addition, the recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review have been systematically included in the Universal Human Rights Index, which is a database containing the recommendations made by all human rights mechanisms.<sup>6</sup>

31. The efforts of OHCHR to bolster the capacity of national parliaments to meaningfully engage throughout the universal periodic review process have been supported financially by the Voluntary Fund, in close partnership with Inter-Parliamentary Union. Moreover, the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review has enabled OHCHR to work closely with the national parliaments of several States, including those of Brazil and Chad, to strengthen their role in implementing specific recommendations and overseeing the effective implementation of the recommendations across various branches of government.<sup>7</sup>

32. During the first five sessions of the fourth cycle of the mechanism, Member States have actively engaged during the reviews. On average, 100 speakers took floor during each review, making 270 recommendations for each State under review. That represents an increase compared to the average number of speakers and of recommendations made during the third cycle.

33. Since the beginning of the fourth cycle, there has also been an increase in the participation of parliamentarians in the sessions of the Working Group. A total of 39 parliamentarians from 23 States under review participated in the interactive dialogues of the reviews during the first year and a half of the fourth cycle (in 5 of the 14 sessions of the fourth cycle held to date). Delegations of six States under review were headed by parliamentarians. Throughout the third cycle of the universal periodic review, 52 parliamentarians from 32 States under review took part in the sessions of the Working Group.

34. OHCHR has continued to encourage the equal representation of women in the delegations of States under review. In 2023, 15 out of the 47 delegations were headed by women, namely the delegations of Burundi, Cabo Verde, Colombia, Czechia, France, Gabon, Germany, Israel, Liechtenstein, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Tonga, Tuvalu and the United Arab Emirates. During the forty-second session, the composition of the delegations of the 13 States under review was 45 per cent women and 55 per cent men. During the forty-third session, the composition of the delegations of the 14 States under review was 54 per cent women and 46 per cent men. During the forty-fourth session, the composition of the delegations of the 14 States under review was 40 per cent women and 60 per cent men.

35. In 2023, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/30 and following the approval of the corresponding budget by the General Assembly in December 2022 to implement the resolution, OHCHR initiated the process of deploying 11 universal periodic review regional advisers. They were tasked with ensuring the effective provision of capacity-building support to States in their respective regions. This included preparing for the review, drafting the national reports taking a consultative approach and supporting the identification of and follow-up with beneficiaries of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review.

36. In the first half of 2023, the selection process of regional advisers began in order to ensure their deployment in the respective regional offices in the second half of the year.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://uhri.ohchr.org>.

<sup>7</sup> See [A/HRC/50/18](#) and [A/HRC/53/57](#).



However, the process was affected by the temporary hiring restrictions put in place by the Secretary-General to manage the evolving liquidity situation of the United Nations.

## V. Conclusions

37. Since its establishment, the universal periodic review, functioning as a peer-to-peer review mechanism, has provided a dedicated platform for States to engage in forward-thinking discussions on human rights priorities and challenges in a constructive and transparent manner. The Voluntary Fund continues to be instrumental in ensuring the full participation and engagement of States, in particular least developed countries and small island developing States. Therefore, it plays a crucial role in bridging capacity gaps to ensure the meaningful participation of all States in the review process.

38. With the support of the Voluntary Fund, OHCHR will also continue to strengthen its support to Member States, in particular least developed countries and small island developing States, to build their capacity for meaningful participation in all stages of the universal periodic review, by providing them with virtual and in-country briefings and training.

39. To this end, OHCHR will continue its efforts to develop a virtual network of beneficiary delegates and facilitate their regular exchange of experiences in preparation for and follow-up to the universal periodic review process, their participation in training courses and workshops on the universal periodic review as a resource person, their participation in other activities relating to the international human rights mechanisms organized by OHCHR and the sharing of best practices and lessons learned with regard to their engagement with the universal periodic review. OHCHR also plans to develop an e-learning tool on the universal periodic review and to conduct remote sessions with the delegates selected to support them prior to their travel to Geneva and in follow-up to their participation.

40. Furthermore, the mechanism has fostered dialogue among diverse national actors, including Governments, parliaments, the judiciary, national human rights institutions and civil society. OHCHR remains committed to collaborating with relevant partners to promote the participation and engagement of parliamentarians and other key national actors, such as national human rights institutions, in the universal periodic review process.

41. Informed participation by delegates in sessions of the Working Group and the Human Rights Council is critical to ensuring proper follow-up at the national level. To ensure that the support provided by the Voluntary Fund is part of a continuing process leading to the implementation at the national level of the recommendations emanating from the review. OHCHR will further align the support provided by the Voluntary Fund with that provided by the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review.

42. The active engagement of States, coupled with their growing interest in technical assistance to enhance their national capacities for meaningful participation in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, necessitates significant reinforcement of both the dedicated capacity of OHCHR and the financial resources of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review. The enhancement of the secretariat of the Voluntary Fund in Geneva and the establishment of 11 regional advisers on the universal periodic review in the OHCHR regional offices in early 2024 are imperative to enable the Voluntary Fund to carry out its mandate effectively in response to the growing number of requests for assistance from States.

43. Furthermore, given that the Voluntary Fund relies entirely on voluntary contributions to fulfil its mandate, predictable financing and further expansion of its donor base are crucial to facilitate effective planning and implementation of the capacity-building activities it supports, as well as to enhance both the quantity and quality of its support to effectively address the growing number of requests for

**assistance from Member States. Building on the positive increase in income recorded in 2024, it is essential to secure a regular annual income of \$500,000 in voluntary contributions to ensure the participation of more delegates in the proceedings of the universal periodic review, the delivery of comprehensive training prior to the review and the development of tailored tools and guidance for more informed participation.**

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