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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda items 2 and 6

### 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 Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of 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 Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review and on the resources available to it. The report was prepared in consultation with the Board of Trustees of the Voluntary Fund and contains an overview of contributions and expenditure, as well as a description of activities funded and the results achieved since the submission of the previous report. The report includes information on the initiatives supported by the Voluntary Fund to enhance technical cooperation during the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review and an update on the progress made in implementing Human Rights 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 voluntary fund for financial and technical assistance to provide, in conjunction with multilateral funding mechanisms, a source of financial and technical assistance to help countries to implement the recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review, in consultation with, and with the consent of, the country concerned. In its resolution 16/21, the Council requested that the Voluntary Fund be strengthened and operationalized to help countries, in particular least developed countries and small island developing States, to implement recommendations emanating from their respective reviews. It also requested that a board of trustees of the Voluntary Fund be established in accordance with the rules of the United Nations and considering equitable geographical representation.

2. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) administers the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review jointly with the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review, also established by resolution 6/17. As the combined assistance provided by the two voluntary funds enables States to engage with the universal periodic review process in all its phases, the present report should be read in conjunction with the report on the operations of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in 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 Human Rights 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 under agenda item 6 at the fifty-third and fifty-fourth sessions of the Council, numerous State delegations reiterated calls for further assistance in the implementation of recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review.

## II. Operations of the Voluntary Fund

### A. Board of Trustees of the Voluntary Fund

4. The Board of Trustees of the Voluntary Fund advises OHCHR on policy orientation and strategy in the operationalization of the Fund. In 2013, in view of the complementarities of the mandate of the Voluntary Fund with that of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights, the Secretary-General appointed the members of the latter to serve on the Board of Trustees of both funds. The members of the Board are appointed for a three-year term, renewable once, and are chosen for their extensive experience in the field of human rights and technical cooperation. The members of the Board are Azita Berar Awad (Islamic Republic of Iran) (Chair), Nozipho January-Bardill (South Africa), Santiago Corcuera-Cabezut (Mexico), Margaret Nicholson (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and Dainius Pūras (Lithuania). The position of Chair is held on a rotational basis, covering at least two sessions of the Board and an annual Human Rights Council oral update. In 2023, the Board re-elected Ms. Berar Awad as Chair.

5. The Board of Trustees holds two regular sessions per year. The nineteenth session of the Board of Trustees of the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review was held in Geneva, from 24 to 26 May 2023. The nineteenth session, the first held in person in Geneva since 2019, focused on assessing the role of the technical cooperation and advisory services provided by OHCHR in the promotion and protection of human rights in Member States, against the backdrop of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. Discussions focused on the review of the technical assistance offered to States to establish or strengthen national mechanisms for reporting and following up on recommendations from

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<sup>1</sup> [A/HRC/56/19](#).

United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review. The Board took note of the ongoing collaboration between the Voluntary Fund and the treaty body capacity-building programme created by General Assembly resolution 68/268, which reinforces the principle of complementarity as one of the main principles of the universal periodic review as created by the Human Rights Council.

6. Emphasizing the essential role of parliaments in implementing recommendations from human rights mechanisms that require legislative action, the Board underlined the need to enhance coordination within OHCHR, including among staff working with other mechanisms and in the field, to maximize the support provided by OHCHR to parliaments in the promotion and protection of human rights. Members of the Board underscored that the technical cooperation provided by OHCHR and the United Nations system to Member States needed to be an important complement to the work undertaken by the international human rights system, including the universal periodic review mechanism. Consequently, OHCHR would need to continue its efforts to strengthen engagement and collaboration between the United Nations system and its human rights mechanisms to harness the full potential of the mechanisms in advancing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at both the national and the local levels. The Board suggested that the deployment of regional universal periodic review advisers in 11 OHCHR regional offices, as envisioned by the Council in resolution 51/30, provided an opportunity to expand the technical support provided to Governments, in particular those of least developed countries and small island developing States.

7. The twentieth session of the Board was held in Bishkek, in Kyrgyzstan, and in Almaty and Astana, in Kazakhstan, from 12 to 17 November 2023, marking the first visit of the Board to the Central Asia region. The session focused on reviewing the technical cooperation and advisory services provided by OHCHR, including with the support of the Voluntary Fund, to enhance the realization of human rights in the region. A hybrid meeting held as part of the session encompassed in-person discussions with OHCHR partners in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and virtual dialogues with selected partners in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and with different divisions and units of OHCHR in Geneva.

8. The Board noted with satisfaction that effective technical assistance had been provided to strengthen national human rights institutions in the region, including in Kazakhstan, to establish or strengthen national mechanisms to report and follow up on recommendations from the United Nations human rights mechanisms and to ensure the effective implementation of recommendations from the universal periodic review and other human rights mechanisms, in close linkage with the Sustainable Development Goals. The Board considered that the efforts made by OHCHR, jointly with United Nations country teams in the region, to include explicit references to recommendations from the universal periodic review in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks constituted a good practice.

9. Given that the Board of Trustees oversees the activities of two funds, the latest report to the Human Rights Council by the Chair of the Board of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights<sup>2</sup> also contains information on technical cooperation relating to follow-up on the outcomes of the universal periodic review.

## **B. Results achieved through the implementation of activities supported by the Voluntary Fund in 2023**

10. During the reporting period, OHCHR provided technical assistance and support in consultation with, and with the consent of, the States concerned. In 2023, several initiatives were implemented with the support of the Voluntary Fund, including in Antigua and Barbuda, the Dominican Republic, Eswatini, the Gambia, Haiti, Lesotho, the Niger, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Togo.

11. OHCHR ensured a comprehensive, whole-of-Office approach to the delivery of assistance to Member States through the Voluntary Fund, fostering coordination and

<sup>2</sup> [A/HRC/55/78](#).

complementarity with the treaty body capacity-building programme, the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights and OHCHR regional or field offices. On the basis of the terms of reference of the Voluntary Fund, OHCHR focused its technical assistance on five priority areas, which are described below.

#### **1. Implementation of key recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review**

12. Since the second cycle, a particular focus of the reviews has been on the implementation of previously accepted recommendations. The recommendations serve as an entry point for OHCHR to engage constructively with all States, fostering nationally led and owned processes. The support of OHCHR is grounded in a comprehensive and integrated approach to technical assistance, which encompasses recommendations from the universal periodic review together with those of other international human rights mechanisms.

13. In 2023, the Voluntary Fund enabled OHCHR regional offices and human rights advisers working at the country level to provide technical support to States for the implementation of accepted recommendations. In Tajikistan, the OHCHR Human Rights Adviser assisted the authorities in improving the legislative framework pertaining to freedom of the press, the rights of persons with disabilities and the rights of individuals deprived of their liberty. OHCHR provided technical support for the drafting of a new media law, including through a round table with the participation of parliamentarians and media experts to discuss the regulation of social networks and bloggers. Furthermore, with the support of the Voluntary Fund, consultations were held between State representatives and civil society organizations working on the rights of persons with disabilities, contributing to the formulation of a new law concerning persons with disabilities in line with international human rights standards. Support was also extended to a working group tasked with drafting a law on probation.

14. In Eswatini, technical support was provided for the implementation of accepted recommendations concerning women's participation in decision-making and concerning violence against women and children. The Voluntary Fund enabled the OHCHR Senior Human Rights Adviser to contribute to enhancing national capacity to address domestic violence and sexual offences. The initiative involved a range of stakeholders, including prosecutors, police officers, social workers, health professionals and judicial officers, ensuring comprehensive involvement across relevant sectors. In collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), a workshop was held, attended by 40 representatives of key justice and law enforcement institutions, such as representatives of the Royal Eswatini Police Service and the judiciary and the Director of Public Prosecutions. The workshop focused on the practical application of legal provisions related to sexual offences and domestic violence. The discussions enabled the authorities to identify capacity gaps within relevant State institutions at the regional and community levels, where implementation remains limited.

15. Furthermore, the technical assistance provided by OHCHR, with the financial support of the Voluntary Fund, has played a crucial role in promoting women's participation in political life in Eswatini, in line with several accepted recommendations from the universal periodic review on enhancing gender equality and the empowerment of women in the country. Awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives targeting 400 EmaSwati women were carried out to encourage nominations of women candidates. These initiatives included civic education in SiSwati, particularly in rural areas. In collaboration with the African Women Peace and Development Foundation and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, four regional workshops were delivered to step up women's participation through leadership and empowerment training. As a complement to those efforts, a multimedia campaign was launched, with endorsements from influential figures, including King Mswati III, underscoring the importance of women's leadership. By aligning its messages with recommendations from the universal periodic review, the campaign was aimed at further reinforcing the imperative of women's leadership in Eswatini.

16. The tangible impact of the targeted regional workshops and media campaign in Eswatini was evident in the surge in the number of women nominated for and contesting national elections, with over 30 women standing as candidates to become Members of

Parliament, marking a substantial increase since 2018. The rise in women candidates translated into significant gains in Parliament, with 13 women elected to the Senate and 12 elected to the House of Assembly.

17. In the Dominican Republic, awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives, supported by the OHCHR Senior Human Rights Adviser, contributed to national efforts to implement recommendations from the universal periodic review on combating hate speech and discrimination. The Voluntary Fund was used to reinforce national capacity in integrating a human rights approach into legislative reforms, focusing on anti-discrimination legislation. In September 2023, a seminar was organized in cooperation with the Standing Committee on Human Rights of the Chamber of Deputies, bringing together 42 participants (including 15 women), among them 31 parliamentarians, to discuss and review anti-discrimination legislation with a view to drafting a comprehensive anti-discrimination bill. A follow-up workshop for 45 participants was organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Inter-Institutional Commission on Human Rights. The discussions at the seminar were guided by the OHCHR publication entitled *Protecting Minority Rights: Practical Guide to Developing Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Legislation*.

18. Furthermore, with the financial support of the Voluntary Fund, OHCHR contributed to strengthening the capacity of the Inter-Institutional Commission on Human Rights, which is chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Dominican Republic and comprises 37 representatives of State institutions and civil society organizations, to combat hate speech and misinformation and to prevent hate crime and racial discrimination. A comprehensive toolkit was developed on the basis of international legal instruments and relevant publications of the United Nations, offering key definitions, messages and additional resources for delving deeper into each topic. Outreach initiatives were also organized. They included a workshop in December 2023 for the Inter-Institutional Commission on Human Rights and the communications directors of key State institutions. There were 51 participants, including 35 women.

19. In Kazakhstan, the OHCHR Regional Office for Central Asia, in partnership with the Asia-Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions, provided assistance to the national human rights institution. This support was aimed at facilitating a comprehensive assessment of the institution's capacity and its underlying legal framework, with a view to fostering further enhancements. Through a consultative process with relevant stakeholders, the assessment exercise identified gaps and helped in the formulation of solutions to bolster the institution's efficacy, aligning it with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles).

20. In the Gambia, the OHCHR Senior Human Rights Adviser, with the financial assistance of the Voluntary Fund, assisted the Ministry of Justice in organizing consultations with relevant stakeholders on the implementation of recommendations stemming from the universal periodic review. These consultations were attended by more than 100 participants, representing government ministries, civil society organizations, the National Human Rights Commission and United Nations agencies. Discussions focused on the progress made in implementing the recommendations and on procedures and reporting requirements for the country's fourth review, scheduled for 2024.

21. The Ministry of Justice organized consultations aimed at addressing sexual and gender-based violence in the Gambia. In the context of the third review of the country, challenges in addressing sexual and gender-based violence had been identified, resulting in numerous recommendations by Member States for effective measures to combat such violations. In view of the recommendations, approximately 50 representatives of law enforcement agencies and line ministries participated in the national consultations, which focused on the need for effective coordination and cooperation among diverse State entities, strategies for improving the investigation and prosecution of cases of sexual and gender-based violence and mechanisms for addressing barriers hindering the reporting of such cases and the subsequent prosecution of perpetrators. Through these collaborative efforts, stakeholders sought to strengthen mechanisms for combating gender-based violence in the Gambia. These efforts were bolstered by a public awareness campaign on violence against women, children and persons with disabilities, launched in the context of the

commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

22. In Antigua and Barbuda, with the financial support of the Voluntary Fund, a campaign was implemented to enhance public awareness of the principles of equality and non-discrimination outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in line with the supported recommendations from the universal periodic review. In December 2023, in commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a series of billboards were unveiled at prominent public sites, including the international airport. The initiative was carried out with the active involvement of high-level State officials and representatives of the United Nations. Aligned with recommendations accepted during the third cycle of the universal periodic review, this campaign was held in conjunction with national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

23. In Lesotho, the OHCHR Human Rights Adviser collaborated closely with the Ministry of Justice, Law and Parliamentary Affairs, alongside the Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled, to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the country's compliance with its international human rights obligations pertaining to the rights of persons with disabilities, in an effort to implement recommendations from the universal periodic review for the strengthened protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. In November 2023, OHCHR facilitated a session, joined by members of the national mechanism on reporting, implementation and follow-up and national experts on the rights of persons with disabilities, to assess the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As a result of the collaboration, a draft initial report under the Convention was produced and has been submitted to the Cabinet for approval.

## **2. Establishment or strengthening of national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up**

24. In its resolution 51/33, the Human Rights Council encouraged States to establish or strengthen national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up and to share good practices and experiences in their use for the elaboration of public policies with a human rights approach. Furthermore, States regularly receive recommendations to establish such mechanisms in the context of the universal periodic review. These mechanisms ensure effective coordination between government entities and work in coordination with ministries and other State bodies, such as the national statistical office, the parliament and the judiciary, and in consultation with national human rights institutions and civil society organizations. OHCHR helps States to establish or strengthen such mechanisms, including through its treaty body capacity-building programme and with the financial support of the Voluntary Fund.

25. In 2023, the Voluntary Fund provided such support to several countries. In Lesotho, the Voluntary Fund enabled the OHCHR Human Rights Adviser to continue the provision of technical assistance to a newly established national mechanism for implementation, reporting and follow-up. The Lesotho National Mechanism for Reporting, Implementation and Follow-up, chaired by the Minister of Justice, Law and Parliamentary Affairs, has seen a significant enhancement in its capacity. After a seven-year delay in reporting, Lesotho submitted its fifth periodic report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in October 2023. In addition, a periodic report under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment was drafted and is awaiting clearance by the Cabinet.

26. In 2023, the Interministerial Committee on Human Rights of Haiti conducted a campaign in eight departments of the country, with the support of the Voluntary Fund, to disseminate the recommendations recently addressed to the country in the context of the universal periodic review. The campaign served as an opportunity to raise awareness among 188 representatives of State institutions (including 41 women), among them members of the security forces and civil society organizations and journalists, regarding the roles of each actor in implementing the recommendations. The two outreach workshops also facilitated the prioritization of key recommendations from the universal periodic review on the basis of local needs and situations.

27. Moreover, the Interministerial Committee on Human Rights of Haiti identified 22 local focal points within key ministries through these workshops. The focal points are tasked with supporting the Committee in implementing its mandate at the local level by gathering information on the implementation of recommendations from the universal periodic review and treaty bodies. These visits were the Committee's inaugural in-person missions at the departmental level, marking its first direct engagements with departmental and local government authorities since its inception in 2013. Both the Committee and local authorities conveyed their satisfaction with the awareness-raising and information sessions, expressing keen interest in sustaining such exchanges in the future.

### 3. Development of plans for the implementation of recommendations

28. As a result of the increased coordination capacity provided by national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up, States are developing plans for the implementation of recommendations received from human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, and linking them to national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Plans for the implementation of recommendations are often supported by a database hosted by the relevant ministry. At the request of Member States, OHCHR makes the National Recommendations Tracking Database<sup>3</sup> available to them. The Database allows States to import recommendations emanating from United Nations human rights mechanisms directly from the Universal Human Rights Index<sup>4</sup> developed by OHCHR, to add recommendations from regional mechanisms, if relevant, to cluster and prioritize them, to draft an implementation plan and to report on their implementation.

29. In 2023, the Voluntary Fund supported initiatives proposed by States to develop plans for the implementation of recommendations and national human rights action plans and to establish online databases linked to them. In Eswatini, an implementation plan for the universal periodic review was developed and adopted for the first time. Similarly, the OHCHR Human Rights Adviser supported the Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan in drafting a national action plan for the implementation of recommendations from the universal periodic review.

30. The human rights component of the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti supported the Interministerial Committee on Human Rights in harmonizing human rights policies in accordance with recommendations from the universal periodic review. Haiti drafted its first national human rights action plan, which has been awaiting approval by the Council of Ministers since 2019 owing to a prolonged political impasse and socioeconomic instability in the country. In February and May 2023, the Committee, with the assistance of the human rights component and the financial support of the Voluntary Fund, organized two workshops to ensure a consultative process for the review of the plan, considering the recommendations made during the review of Haiti in 2022. Through the workshops, stakeholders representing diverse sectors across the country identified key recommendations for implementation, including those concerning the rights to health and education, access to justice, child protection and the equal participation of women in political decision-making processes. The updated action plan was submitted to the Council of Ministers for validation.

31. In the Dominican Republic, the OHCHR Senior Human Rights Adviser supported the Inter-Institutional Commission on Human Rights, chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and comprising 37 representatives of State institutions and civil society organizations, in finalizing the revision of the National Plan on Human Rights for 2018–2022 and adopting the extension of the plan for 2023–2034. The collaborative process of finalizing the revised national plan concluded in May 2023 and benefited from substantive input from 11 United Nations agencies with a presence in the country. The plan identified seven distinct groups, recognizing their unique vulnerabilities and need for specific attention, as well as specific measures to address discrimination. The Voluntary Fund also supported the launch of a national dialogue in August 2023 by promoting the Human Rights 75 campaign, thereby

<sup>3</sup> See <https://nrt.d.ohchr.org/en>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en>.

creating a platform for members of the Inter-Institutional Commission to identify priority actions for the implementation of the extended plan through a consultative process.

32. In the Niger, OHCHR collaborated with the authorities to facilitate the execution of a national plan aimed at implementing recommendations stemming from its third review process. To mobilize governmental efforts across all levels, four regional workshops were conducted in November and December 2023, in Tahoua, Dosso, Zinder and Niamey, serving as platforms to disseminate the operationalization plan to stakeholders across all regions of the country. A total of 189 participants (144 men and 45 women), including directors of various decentralized regional State services, attended these workshops. The workshops fostered productive exchanges concerning the measures necessary to achieve the objectives outlined in the national plan for implementing recommendations. The technical assistance provided to the Government of the Niger was jointly supported by the Voluntary Fund and UNFPA, exemplifying the effective collaboration among various United Nations entities in assisting the Government with the implementation of recommendations from international human rights mechanisms.

33. Following the adoption, in April 2023, of a national action plan for the implementation of recommendations from the universal periodic review, the Government of Tajikistan, with assistance from the OHCHR Human Rights Adviser and the financial support of the Voluntary Fund, initiated a campaign to sensitize and raise awareness among local government officials about the national plan, to ensure their active participation in the implementation of human rights recommendations. A delegation comprising representatives of the Human Rights Department under the President's Office, the Ombudsman's Office, the Ministry of Justice, the General Prosecutor's Office and the Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, a non-governmental organization, convened outreach meetings in five municipalities. These gatherings, attended by a total of 194 local officials, served to foster understanding and commitment towards the implementation of human rights principles at the local level. OHCHR supported the Government's efforts to assess the implementation of the recommendations received during the third cycle of the universal periodic review through a participatory process. The results of these discussions are meant to serve as a basis for the preparation of a midterm report by Tajikistan for submission to the mechanism in 2024.

34. In Haiti and Lesotho, OHCHR supported the establishment of a national recommendations tracking database, which serves as a tool for effective coordination and monitoring of progress in implementing recommendations from the Human Rights Mechanism. In Lesotho, funding from the Voluntary Fund allowed for the provision of training for members of the Human Rights Unit of the Ministry of Justice, Law and Parliamentary Affairs to empower them to establish and maintain a national recommendations tracking database.

35. Furthermore, civil society organizations and human rights defenders in Lesotho were granted access to the tracking database. This access empowered them to acquire updated information regarding the status of recommendation implementation for their advocacy and monitoring endeavours. They regarded the database as a crucial instrument in ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the process.

#### **4. Strengthening parliamentary capacities for implementation**

36. In its report on the contribution of parliaments to the work of the Human Rights Council and the universal periodic review mechanism,<sup>5</sup> OHCHR recommended that parliaments set up human rights committees and strengthen their engagement with international human rights mechanisms, in particular the universal periodic review.

37. The Voluntary Fund, in coordination with the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review and through joint activities with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, provides support for strengthening the capacity of national parliaments to engage at all stages of the universal periodic review process.

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<sup>5</sup> [A/HRC/38/25](#).



38. In 2023, the Voluntary Fund supported in-country activities, including capacity-building initiatives for members of relevant parliamentary committees, with a view to strengthening the oversight functions of those committees. For example, in Lesotho, the OHCHR Human Rights Adviser, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, Law and Parliamentary Affairs, facilitated a workshop for 60 parliamentarians on its oversight role in the promotion and protection of human rights. Discussions delved into the existing challenges and opportunities in fulfilling the oversight functions of national parliaments, along with strategies to bolster the oversight role of the Parliament of Lesotho. It is worth noting that 90 per cent of workshop attendees were newly elected parliamentarians, rendering these discussions timely and of significant value.

#### **5. Strengthening the capacity of United Nations country teams**

39. An additional area of support provided by the Voluntary Fund is the integration of recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review and other human rights mechanisms into United Nations common country programming documents. In line with the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights,<sup>6</sup> such recommendations should increasingly be reflected in United Nations common country assessments and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks, as well as in the programming of individual United Nations agencies, funds and programmes.

40. Most of the activities that benefited from the support of the Voluntary Fund in 2023 were implemented in collaboration with other United Nations agencies. In addition, the Voluntary Fund supported specific initiatives aimed at mobilizing the United Nations system to strengthen the capacity of States to implement human rights recommendations and foster synergies with national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, as part of the preparation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for 2023–2027, the human rights component of the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti provided support to the United Nations country team to integrate recommendations addressed to Haiti during the third review, of 2022, into both the common country analysis and the cooperation framework.

41. The OHCHR Human Rights Adviser supported the United Nations country team in Kazakhstan in aligning its programmes with recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review and the treaty bodies through a capacity-building workshop held in November 2023. Technical assistance was also provided to facilitate discussions with the country team and civil society organizations on their role in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the supported recommendations for the forthcoming review of Kazakhstan, in 2025.

42. During its visit to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in November 2023, the Board of Trustees of the Voluntary Fund noted with appreciation the efforts of OHCHR in the region to ensure that recommendations from the universal periodic review were included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.

### **III. Financial situation of the Voluntary Fund**

43. Table 1 below sets out the detailed financial situation (income and expenditure) of the Voluntary Fund as at 31 December 2023. In previous years, total expenditure exceeded the contributions received, reflecting the substantial increase in the number of requests for support received from States and the decrease in contributions experienced since 2019. In 2023, the decision was taken to limit expenditure to ensure an adequate level of reserves for the continuity of the work of the Voluntary Fund in 2024.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.un.org/en/content/action-for-human-rights/index.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/content/action-for-human-rights/index.shtml).

Table 1  
**Statement of income and expenditure for the period 1 January–31 December 2023**  
 (United States dollars)

<i>Component</i>	
<b>Income</b>	
Voluntary contributions received in 2023	703 232.07
Gain (loss) on exchange	(1 462.91)
Miscellaneous and investment income	76 731.98
<b>Total income</b>	<b>778 501.14</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>	
Staff costs	9 230.00
Other personnel costs (consultants' fees and travel)	71 563.96
Travel of staff and consultants	8 877.78
Travel of representatives and participants to meetings and seminars	103 668.15
Contractual services	101 175.56
General operating and other direct costs	148 887.61
Supplies, commodities and materials	549.38
Equipment, vehicles and furniture	7 029.61
Grants out (<\$50,000) and fellowships	–
Programme support (indirect) costs	58 620.56
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>509 602.61</b>
Adjustments to prior year expenditure (liquidation of commitments)	–
Net excess (shortfall) of income over expenditures for the period	268 898.53
Opening balance 1 January 2023	1 086 341.73
Outstanding contributions receivable	–
<b>Total fund balance as at 31 December 2023</b>	<b>1 355 240.26</b>

44. The Voluntary Fund receives voluntary contributions from Governments, organizations and individuals. From the establishment of the Voluntary Fund to the end of 2023, a total of \$8,137,929 has been received from 24 States (see table 2 below).

45. In 2023, contributions to the Voluntary Fund were higher than in the years affected by the global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Eleven countries contributed to the Voluntary Fund, for a total amount of \$703,232 (see table 3 below). However, the level of funding of the Voluntary Fund is not sufficient to respond to the growing number of requests for technical assistance. In 2022 and 2023, of over 30 submitted proposals for technical assistance projects, the Voluntary Fund was able to fund only one third of projects owing to the limited funding available. The financial situation of the Fund needs to be progressively strengthened to reach an annual income of at least \$3 million in voluntary contributions.

Table 2  
**Contributions received from the establishment of the Voluntary Fund to 31 December 2023**  
 (United States dollars)

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Australia	387 580
Belgium	51 706
Brazil	10 000

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
China	300 000
Colombia	40 000
France	371 729
Germany	1 326 665
India	400 000
Kazakhstan	128 865
Morocco	500 000
Netherlands (Kingdom of the)	30 000
Norway	2 283 483
Oman	10 000
Pakistan	20 492
Paraguay	3 000
Philippines	75 000
Republic of Korea	250 000
Romania	47 790
Russian Federation	850 000
Saudi Arabia	410 000
Singapore	45 000
Spain	217 585
United Arab Emirates	200 000
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	179 033
<b>Total contributions</b>	<b>8 137 929</b>

Table 3  
**Contributions received, 1 January–31 December 2023**

(United States dollars)

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Brazil	10 000.00
China	300 000.00
France	21 810.25
India	100 000.00
Kazakhstan	15 000.00
Pakistan	9 492.00
Philippines	25 000.00
Saudi Arabia	90 000.00
Singapore	10 000.00
Spain	21 929.82
United Arab Emirates	100 000.00
<b>Total contributions</b>	<b>703 232.07</b>

#### **IV. Strengthening technical assistance provided by the Voluntary Fund during the fourth cycle of the review, including through the reinforced regional capacity of the Universal Periodic Review Branch**

46. OHCHR continues to focus on the enhanced implementation of recommendations stemming from the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review through the strategic use of the Voluntary Fund to maximize the impact of the mechanism. This approach involves strengthened technical support to reinforce the development of robust national protection systems, thereby ensuring tangible improvements on the ground. During the high-level panel discussion held at the fifty-second session of the Human Rights Council, in 2023, many beneficiary States, acknowledging the positive impact made by the Voluntary Fund at the national level, underscored the importance of the financial and technical assistance received in strengthening national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up, developing databases for tracking recommendations and supporting a consultation process towards developing a national action plan for the implementation of recommendations.<sup>7</sup>

47. It was affirmed during the high-level panel discussion that the universal periodic review was uniquely situated to promote human rights as part of development efforts and to advance the Sustainable Development Goals. The Secretary-General's call to action for human rights underscored the critical role of mechanisms such as the universal periodic review in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, a principle echoed in Our Common Agenda. Recommendations from human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, are increasingly becoming part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks adopted by United Nations country teams.

48. Joint initiatives are being undertaken, with the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Development Coordination Office and the Peacebuilding Support Office, to promote the use of the universal periodic review as an entry point for United Nations engagement with States and maximize the impact of activities at the country level by combining various sources of funding. During its visit to the Central Asia region, the Board of Trustees was pleased to see the deepening of collaboration with the rest of the United Nations system, including with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, leveraging the additional capacities in analysis, advocacy and programmes that the rest of the system brings to enhancing the promotion and protection of human rights at the country level.

49. OHCHR maintains effective cooperation with the United Nations Development Coordination Office to deepen the engagement of resident coordinators and United Nations country teams with the universal periodic review, leveraging the mechanism to aid Governments and stakeholders in tackling key human rights challenges. The Development Coordination Office, in close collaboration with OHCHR, holds focused discussions with the resident coordinators 9 to 10 months prior to the review of the countries concerned to encourage the engagement of the whole country team with the mechanism, including in the implementation of recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review. Such meetings enable resident coordinators to delve into the analysis of key human rights challenges identified in past reviews on the basis of information from the outcomes of the previous reviews and a better understanding of the role of United Nations entities at all stages of the universal periodic review process.

50. In 2023, United Nations entities continued to make submissions for one of the three reports that serve as a basis for the interactive dialogue held in the Working Group. On average, at each of its sessions in 2023, the Working Group received 39 submissions from various United Nations entities, marking an increase of 40 per cent compared to the second cycle of the mechanism. Increasingly, resident coordinators utilize the sessions of the Human Rights Council to express their support for Member States during the follow-up stage. For example, at the fifty-second session of the Human Rights Council, the Resident Coordinator in the Philippines stated that the outcomes of the review of the Philippines would play a

<sup>7</sup> [A/HRC/53/58](#), para. 61.

significant role in shaping the design and implementation of the United Nations Development System Cooperation Framework for 2024–2028.

51. During its visit to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Board of Trustees witnessed several examples of how the United Nations country teams can provide integrated and high-quality policy advice when they come together in support of human rights. The Board considers that continued close cooperation among United Nations entities on the ground will be fundamental to addressing newer challenges, including mitigating the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable in the region.

52. Pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/30, and following the approval by the General Assembly in December 2022 of the budget to implement the resolution, efforts to scale up the dedicated capacity of OHCHR in all regional offices to effectively respond to requests for assistance from Member States and manage the Voluntary Funds commenced in 2023. OHCHR has initiated the process of deploying 11 universal periodic review regional advisers tasked with ensuring the provision of capacity-building support to States in their respective regions. However, the selection process was delayed because of temporary hiring restrictions put in place by the Secretary-General to manage the evolving liquidity situation of the United Nations.

## V. Conclusions

53. **The universal periodic review provides a crucial platform for cooperation, fostering dialogue and the sharing of best practices among Member States, the United Nations system and national stakeholders. Recommendations received by States undergoing review offer a road map for technical cooperation, aiding them to tackle the most urgent human rights issues and identify populations vulnerable to being marginalized or overlooked. Technical cooperation supported by the Voluntary Fund is provided, inter alia, to initiatives to strengthen national institutions, legal frameworks, policies, services and stakeholder capacities, fostering enduring positive impacts on the implementation of the international human rights obligations of States. OHCHR works with United Nations entities to strengthen synergies across national efforts to implement human rights recommendations and national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.**

54. **The deployment of universal periodic review regional advisers will enable OHCHR to respond to the increasing number of requests for technical assistance more effectively and provide timely advice and support to States in implementing recommendations emanating from the United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review. The regional advisers' active engagement with United Nations country teams will strengthen the support provided by OHCHR for the integration of recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review into United Nations common programming documents and into national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.**

55. **OHCHR will continue to ensure that effective technical cooperation, leading to enduring transformations on the ground, is carried out through robust coordination and complementarity and the active engagement of States, national human rights institutions, civil society, donors, regional organizations and other stakeholders. Furthermore, OHCHR will continue to strengthen its active engagement with the United Nations development system to ensure that the universal periodic review mechanism plays an instrumental role in advancing human rights as part of development efforts, including by explicitly linking programme and project outcomes and outputs to the implementation of country-specific recommendations made by international human rights mechanisms. Considering the current situation, which is characterized by a surge in demands for technical cooperation coupled with constrained resources, OHCHR will work to bolster the effectiveness of such cooperation.**

56. **At the same time, it is equally important to ensure sufficient and predictable funding for technical cooperation from regular and voluntary contributions to adequately respond to increased demands for technical assistance in the**

implementation of recommendations from international human rights mechanisms. States and other stakeholders engaged in the high-level panel discussion at the fifty-second session of the Human Rights Council, in 2023, highlighted the need for sustainable funding for the two voluntary funds of the universal periodic review and called for further and strengthened financial support for them.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, OHCHR will advocate for predictable, multi-year and long-term funding for the Voluntary Fund, including by expanding the donor base for the Voluntary Fund and for a minimum annual income of \$3 million in voluntary contributions to meet the growing demand for technical assistance from States.

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<sup>8</sup> [A/HRC/53/58](#), paras. 33, 44 and 50.