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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 outlines the activities implemented with the support of the Voluntary Fund in 2024 to facilitate the participation of States, particularly the least developed countries and small island developing States, in the universal periodic review mechanism and includes an overview of contributions and expenditures. In addition, it contains a description of the results achieved through the combined support of the Voluntary Fund and the universal periodic review advisers deployed in the regional offices of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/30 of 2022 on strengthening the voluntary funds of the universal periodic review mechanism.



I. Introduction

1. The Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review was established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 6/17, in which the Council, emphasizing that the universal periodic review was a cooperative mechanism with the full involvement of the country concerned, requested the Secretary-General to establish a voluntary fund to facilitate the participation of developing countries in the review process. In 2011, the Council adopted resolution 16/21, requesting that the Voluntary Fund be strengthened and operationalized in order to encourage significant participation from developing countries, in particular the least developed countries and small island developing States, in their reviews.

2. The Voluntary Fund facilitates the participation of delegates from eligible countries 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. It also supports States in the preparatory process of the review through capacity-building activities for the preparation of the national report.

3. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) administers the Voluntary Fund together 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. Since the combined support from 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 Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review.¹

4. In 2022, marking the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of both voluntary funds, the Council adopted resolution 51/30, requesting the Secretary-General to further strengthen the capacity of OHCHR to implement the mandates of the two voluntary funds, including by scaling up the dedicated capacity of the Universal Periodic Review Branch in each regional office during the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review. In 2023, Argentina, Armenia, Fiji, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa, as principal sponsors of resolution 51/30, formed a Group of Friends on the Universal Periodic Review within the Human Rights Council. The Group of Friends is dedicated to raising awareness of and mobilizing support for the universal periodic review, including its two voluntary funds, among both member and observer States of the Council.

II. Operations of the Voluntary Fund

5. The active participation of all States in the universal periodic review is crucial to ensuring a constructive dialogue among States, sharing best practices and building international cooperation and a common understanding of development challenges, all of which are essential for addressing complex human rights issues. That is particularly relevant in the case of the least developed countries and small island developing States, which often face unique human rights challenges and have limited resources. By actively engaging in the universal periodic review, these countries can highlight their specific contexts, needs and experiences, facilitating the exchange of best practices and enabling the provision of tailored technical assistance and capacity-building.

6. The Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review allows delegations from eligible States to contribute to a truly universal interactive dialogue in the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and in the Human Rights Council. In line with Human Rights Council resolutions 6/17 and 16/21, the Voluntary Fund facilitates the in-person participation of delegates from eligible countries in the sessions of the Working Group and in the meetings of the Council at which the outcome of the review is adopted.

¹ [A/HRC/59/18](#).

OHCHR encourages States to consider ensuring gender balance in the composition of their delegations and in the sharing of responsibilities among members of the delegations.

7. OHCHR promotes the creation of synergies between the support provided through the Voluntary Fund and that provided through 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, which is also managed by OHCHR. For example, the secretariat of the Voluntary Fund provides briefings on the universal periodic review to the beneficiary delegates of the Trust Fund during the induction courses organized by the latter in Geneva. In addition, former beneficiaries of the Trust Fund 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.

8. The Voluntary Fund also supports the engagement of States in the preparatory process of their review, including through the advice provided to them on the preparation of their national reports and on the opportunity offered by the preparatory process to undertake a participatory and comprehensive assessment of the human rights situation in the country. Furthermore, in line with Human Rights Council resolution 35/29, in which the Council encouraged States to promote the involvement of parliaments in all stages of the universal periodic review reporting process, the Voluntary Fund encourages the participation and engagement of parliamentarians in the universal periodic review.

A. Support to the participation of States in the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and the Human Rights Council

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

10. The Voluntary Fund can also provide for the travel of one official representative from each 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, namely 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 2024, the Voluntary Fund supported the participation of 14 delegates from eligible countries in three sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review. To participate in the forty-fifth session of the Working Group, the Voluntary Fund supported the travel of one delegate each from Belize, Central African Republic, Chad, Mauritius and Senegal. To participate in the forty-sixth session of the Working Group, the Voluntary Fund supported the travel of one delegate each from Afghanistan, Comoros, Dominican Republic, Eritrea and Vanuatu. To participate in the forty-seventh session of the Working Group, the Voluntary Fund supported the travel of one delegate each from Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Dominica (see table 1 below).

Table 1
Delegates supported by the Voluntary Fund in 2024

<i>Country</i>	<i>Working Group session</i>	<i>Number of delegates funded</i>
Belize	45	1
Chad	45	1
Mauritius	45	1
Senegal	45	1
Central African Republic	45	1
Vanuatu	46	1
Eritrea	46	1
Dominican Republic	46	1
Afghanistan	46	1
Comoros	46	1
Bhutan	47	1
Dominica	47	1
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	47	1
Democratic Republic of the Congo	47	1
Total		14

12. Since its establishment, the Voluntary Fund has facilitated the participation of 262 delegates from 119 States, with many States having received funding for two or more cycles of the review. Of those 119 States, 71 are least developed countries or small island developing States. The Voluntary Fund has supported States from all geographical regions: 40 per cent from Africa, 29 per cent from the Asia-Pacific region, 24 per cent from the Latin American and Caribbean region, 7 per cent from Eastern Europe and 1 per cent from the Western European and Other States Group.

13. Table 2 below sets out the number of delegates that have received support from the Voluntary Fund each year since its establishment to participate in sessions of the Working Group and meetings of the Human Rights Council at which the outcomes of the reviews are adopted. 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 that are up for adoption in a given year.

Table 2
Delegates supported by the Voluntary Fund from the establishment of the Voluntary Fund to 31 December 2024

<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
2019	26

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of delegates funded</i>
2020	10
2021	3
2022	19
2023	13
2024	14
Total	262

14. In addition to the support provided by the Voluntary Fund, in 2024 OHCHR continued to take measures to facilitate the engagement of developing countries, including the least developed countries and small island developing States, in the universal periodic review by widely disseminating relevant information and making it accessible through various means and in a timely manner. The OHCHR web page on the universal periodic review was regularly updated with the most recent news, information regarding forthcoming sessions of the Working Group, review outcomes for adoption by the Human Rights Council and the tools available for the preparation of the review.²

15. OHCHR has produced short promotional videos on the Voluntary Fund and posted them on the OHCHR website. The videos feature beneficiaries speaking about the importance of their in-person participation that was enabled by the Voluntary Fund.³ 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.⁴ Furthermore, OHCHR has engaged with the media on all issues relating to the Working Group, enabling accurate and timely reporting through press releases produced in English and the languages spoken in the States under review. OHCHR has also used social media to disseminate information on the universal periodic review in a timely and accurate manner.

B. Assistance in the preparatory process of the review, including through the reinforced regional capacity of the Universal Periodic Review Branch

16. The terms of reference of the Voluntary Fund allow for the financing of briefings and consultations at the national level, prior to the sessions of the Working Group, to assist States in the preparatory process and promote a greater understanding of the opportunities provided by engagement with the universal periodic review at the country level. OHCHR provides this support through its Universal Periodic Review Branch in Geneva and, increasingly, through the universal periodic review advisers deployed in OHCHR regional offices in line with Human Right Council resolution 51/30.

17. After experiencing a delay in 2023, due to the hiring restrictions applied by the Secretary-General to manage the evolving liquidity situation of the United Nations, in 2024 OHCHR resumed efforts to implement Human Rights Council resolution 51/30 and deploy the 11 universal periodic review advisers tasked with ensuring the provision of support to States in their respective regions. By the end of 2024, 9 out of 11 advisers had been deployed in OHCHR regional offices in East Africa (Addis Ababa), Central Africa (Yaoundé), Southern Africa (Pretoria), West Africa (Dakar), Central Asia (Bishkek), South-East Asia (Bangkok), Europe (Brussels), South America (Santiago) and Central America (Panama). The two remaining advisers, to be deployed in the regional offices in the Pacific region (Suva) and the Middle East and North Africa (Beirut) were under recruitment.

18. Although the regional advisers were mainly deployed during the latter part of 2024 (between September and November), their impact was already significant in terms of the increased support provided to States on their engagement with the mechanism prior to their

² See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-home>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See <https://uprmeetings.ohchr.org/Pages/default.aspx>.

review in the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, including the preparation of national reports. In 2024, in-country briefings and support to the preparatory process of the review were provided in Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Kyrgyzstan and Panama.

19. In Kyrgyzstan, the universal periodic review adviser for Central Asia assisted the Coordination Council on Human Rights under the Cabinet of Ministers in holding broad national consultations on the national report for the country's fourth universal periodic review. National consultations were held with the participation of the Deputy Chair of the Cabinet of Ministers, the Ombudsperson and over 50 other participants from State structures, civil society organizations and the legal profession. While the discussion covered diverse human rights issues, it focused, in particular, on the status of implementation of the recommendations from the previous cycle of the universal periodic review related to civil society, freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, the right to a fair trial, the rights of persons with disabilities and combating torture and gender-based violence.

20. In Panama, the universal periodic review adviser for Central America assisted the Permanent Human Rights Commission to use the drafting of the national report to analyse the progress and challenges in the country's human rights situation through a consultative process with civil society organizations. Support was also provided to the national human rights institution (Defensoría del Pueblo) to strengthen its role in the review process. Workshops with civil society organizations were initiated on the rights of persons with disabilities, women's rights, LGBTIQ+ rights and the rights of people of African descent to enhance the understanding of the universal periodic review as a tool to advance the human rights situation in Panama, evaluating progress in implementing the recommendations from the third cycle of the review, preparing submissions and developing advocacy strategies based on best practices.

21. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the Government organized a validation workshop for the national report of the country to the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review. The workshop brought together several stakeholders at the national level, including members of the Interministerial Committee on Human Rights, civil society organizations and the donor community. As a result of the workshop, the national report was finalized and submitted, enabling the Democratic Republic of the Congo to highlight the efforts made to improve the human rights situation in the country and to implement the commitments made during the Human Rights 75 initiative.

22. In Equatorial Guinea, OHCHR, at the request of the Government, provided technical support to the heads of ministerial departments on the preparation and submission of the national report to the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review. In Côte d'Ivoire, the universal periodic review adviser for West Africa delivered a preparatory briefing to the national delegation ahead of its participation in the review session in Geneva. In Angola, the universal periodic review adviser for Southern Africa provided technical guidance and support to the United Nations country team on the preparation of the written submission to the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review.

23. In addition to the direct support provided by regional universal periodic review advisers, the Universal Periodic Review Branch of OHCHR continued to organize online briefings to countries in preparation for their universal periodic reviews. For example, OHCHR conducted online briefings for government representatives of the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Costa Rica on the upcoming reviews of the two countries. The briefings enabled the States concerned to enhance their knowledge of the processes and procedures of the universal periodic review and helped to prepare them for participation in the interactive dialogues with the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review.

24. Prior to the forty-fifth, forty-sixth and forty-seventh sessions of the Working Group, OHCHR also organized three pre-session informational meetings in Geneva for the representatives of the States under review and Geneva-based members of the troikas. The meetings were conducted in both English and French and 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 inscribe in 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 could take on the recommendations received.

25. In line with Human Rights Council resolution 35/29, OHCHR also promoted the involvement of parliaments at 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 recommendations supported by the State concerned. In 2024, OHCHR, in cooperation with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, held briefings for a total of 40 parliamentarians of States under review on the role of parliamentarians at all stages of the universal periodic review process.

III. Financial situation of the Voluntary Fund

26. The Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review can receive voluntary contributions from States, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, private institutions and individuals. In 2024, the Voluntary Fund received contributions from five States for a total amount of \$152,250 (see table 3 below). That represented only 41 per cent of the contributions received in 2023 (\$373,833) and only 60 per cent of the average annual contributions (\$250,000) received since the establishment of the Voluntary Fund. From the establishment of the Voluntary Fund until the end of 2024, a total of \$4,335,330 has been received from 23 countries and one intergovernmental organization (see table 4 below). The total fund balance as of 31 December 2024 was \$611,752.64.

27. Due to the decreasing level of contributions received in 2024, OHCHR has carefully monitored expenditures to ensure an adequate level of reserves for the continuity of the work of the Voluntary Fund in 2025. In 2024, the Voluntary Fund allocated resources to facilitate the travel of delegation members from all eligible countries and to support the preparation of national reports, with a total expenditure of \$163,633.

Table 3
Contributions received, 1 January–31 December 2024
(United States dollars)

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Albania	5 302.82
China	45 000.00
France	5 446.62
Iceland	36 634.27
Saudi Arabia	59 866.00
Total contributions	152 249.71

Table 4
Contributions received, from the establishment of the Voluntary Fund to 31 December 2024
(United States dollars)

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Albania	8 032
Australia	387 580
Austria	157 729
Belgium	57 681
China	595 000

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Colombia	26 668
Cuba	3 817
Denmark	359 002
France	5 447
Germany	795 397
Hungary	19 083
Iceland	36 634
Italy	422 852
Japan	480 000
Korea, Republic of	50 000
Kuwait	50 000
Poland	22 172
Romania	73 746
Russian Federation	100 000
Saudi Arabia	259 732
Singapore	75 000
Sweden	100 000
Switzerland	95 238
International Organization of la Francophonie	154 178
Other and individual donors	341
Total contributions	4 335 330

IV. Conclusions

28. The fourth cycle of the universal periodic review has generated momentum for the constructive engagement of States in the work of the universal periodic review. During the fifty-fifth and fifty-seventh sessions of the Human Rights Council in 2024, numerous State delegations reiterated their commitment to the universal periodic review as a fundamental mechanism to advance the protection and promotion of human rights worldwide. Member States affirmed that, owing to its universal coverage and equal treatment of all countries, the universal periodic review continued to serve as a unique platform for constructive cooperation, fostering dialogue and the exchange of good practices among States, the United Nations system and national stakeholders.

29. The Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review has played a vital role in enabling the meaningful and informed engagement of all States – particularly least developed countries and small island developing States – with the universal periodic review mechanism, while helping to bridge capacity gaps in States operating at the front line of today's multiple crises. Informed participation by delegates in sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and the Human Rights Council is also critical to ensuring proper follow-up of the outcome of the review at the national level. OHCHR will continue to provide States with virtual and in-country briefings, as well as technical support to strengthen their engagement with the mechanism prior to their review. It will also continue its efforts to promote the participation and engagement of parliamentarians and other key national actors, such as national human rights institutions and national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up, in the universal periodic review process. In that context, OHCHR will 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.

30. During 2024, OHCHR expanded its regional presence through the deployment of universal periodic review advisers, in accordance with Human Rights Council

resolution 51/30. OHCHR will enhance its support to States, particularly the least developed countries and small island developing States, through coordinated use of the Voluntary Fund and the additional capacity provided by the regional advisers.

31. OHCHR promotes the sharing of best practices and lessons learned by States with regard to their engagement with the universal periodic review. To that end, it will strengthen its engagement with beneficiary delegates in follow-up to the universal periodic review process after their participation in the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review and the adoption of the review outcome, and 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.

32. The growing interest of States in receiving technical assistance to enhance their national capacities for meaningful participation in the review necessitates significant reinforcement of the financial resources of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review. Given that the Fund relies entirely on voluntary contributions to fulfil its mandate, predictable financing and an expanded donor base are essential. Achieving an annual income of \$500,000 in voluntary contributions would enable effective planning and implementation of capacity-building activities, including the development of a tailored training programme for selected beneficiaries, and support the participation of delegates from eligible countries in the sessions of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review and the meetings of the Human Rights Council at which review outcomes are adopted.

33. The creation of the Group of Friends of the Universal Periodic Review within the Human Rights Council is a welcome initiative to support the visibility and impact of the universal periodic review and its two voluntary funds. OHCHR will continue to work in partnership with the Group of Friends to strengthen the voluntary funds, ensuring they effectively support States in meeting their human rights obligations and achieving tangible improvements.
