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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**



I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 16/22 and 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. As indicated in the previous update report,¹ in an effort to consolidate information related to the universal periodic review, and on the basis of Council decision 17/119, the secretariat aligned the timing of submission of the reports on the activities supported through the two universal periodic review trust funds, namely, the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review and the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review. Consequently, as from 2015, both annual reports are submitted to the Council at its June session. The present report provides an overview of contributions and expenditures, together with a description of activities funded since the previous report until 31 December 2020.
2. Participation of Member States in the review process has been universal ever since the launch of the mechanism, demonstrating strong commitment to and acceptance of the mechanism as a critical tool of the Human Rights Council and States Members of the United Nations. Their commitment has been reiterated not only during reviews and interactive dialogues held by the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review but also at the adoption of the outcomes of the universal periodic review and general debate under agenda item 6 of the regular sessions of the Council. It has also been reiterated increasingly by senior representatives of Member States during the high-level segment at the plenary sessions of the Council.
3. The support provided through the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review remains instrumental, allowing delegations to participate in the presentation of national reports and contribute to an interactive dialogue that is universal, independent, impartial and non-politicized, with recommendations that are constructive, specific, action-oriented and implementable, taking into account national capacities. Fund-supported participation also contributes to raising delegations' awareness of the need for close coordination of implementation efforts at the national level, through national mechanisms for reporting and follow-up. This need primarily stems from the fact that substantive issues raised in the universal periodic reviews often mirror the recommendations of other human rights mechanisms and complement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
4. At the opening of the forty-third session of the Human Rights Council, on 24 February 2020, the Secretary-General addressed the Council and launched an ambitious call to action for human rights, stressing that the universal periodic review was a critical tool of the United Nations for country-level engagement.² Practical guidance on maximizing the use of the universal periodic review at the country level, developed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in close cooperation with several United Nations entities, was finalized in mid-August 2020.³ The aim of the guidance is to provide practical advice on how United Nations entities at the country level can engage in the universal periodic review process to support progress by Member States on human rights, including on gender equality and equal rights for women, one of the key areas of the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights.
5. While the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic poses an unprecedented challenge to all humanity, disproportionately affecting women and girls, it also presents an opportunity for change and improvement in order to recover better. As the Secretary-General has stated, human rights are critical for the response and the recovery, and are obligations by

¹ A/HRC/44/18.

² See www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/The_Highest_Aspiration_A_Call_To_Action_For_Human_Right_English.pdf. See also www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-02-24/human-rights-council-remarks-the-highest-aspiration.

³ See www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/UPR/UPR_Practical_Guidance.pdf.

which States must abide.⁴ Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has appealed to the international community to renew its collective commitment to act on multilateral solutions to global problems, international solidarity and cooperation, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.⁵

II. Financial situation of the Fund

6. Table 1 shows the detailed financial situation of the Fund as at 31 December 2020 (statement of income and expenditure).

Table 1

Statement of income and expenditure for the period 1 January–31 December 2020
(United States dollars)

<i>Component</i>	
Income	
Voluntary contributions received in 2020	–
Gain/loss on exchange	–
Interest and miscellaneous income	7 606.99
Total income	7 606.99
Expenditure	
Staff costs	40 924.94
Other personnel costs (consultants' fees and travel)	71 677.66
Staff travel	–
Travel of representatives/participants to meetings and seminars	38 726.61
Contractual services	–
General operating and other direct costs	17 001.73
Equipment, vehicles and furniture	–
Grants out (<\$50,000) and fellowships	–
Programme support (indirect) costs	21 716.44
Total expenditure	190 047.38
Adjustments to prior year expenditure (liquidation of commitments)	–
Net excess (shortfall) of income over expenditure for the period	(182 440.39)
Opening balance on 1 January 2020	913 466.69
Other adjustments (prior period)	–
Unpaid pledges	–
Total Fund balance as at 31 December 2020	731 026.30

7. Since the establishment of the Fund, 19 countries have made financial contributions. In 2020, there were no contributions.

8. Since the Fund has not enjoyed a predictable pattern of income, substantial resources are systematically kept as a reserve for future activities; the secretariat of the Fund has approved all requests, in line with the Fund's terms of reference, to enable participation in the universal periodic review.

⁴ See www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf.

⁵ See A/HRC/44/28.

III. Activities

A. Travel to meetings

9. Under the terms of reference of the Fund, financial support is made available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to cover travel to Geneva by one official government representative in order to participate:

(a) In sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review during which the representative's country is considered;

(b) In plenary sessions of the Human Rights Council during which the outcome of the review of the representative's country is adopted.

10. The Fund also provides for the travel of official representatives (one per delegation) of developing countries, in particular least developed countries, 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 the troika).

11. Since the Fund was established in 2008, 112 States have benefited from the travel assistance of the Fund. In 2020, 10 of the 22 States that were considered eligible for the travel assistance of the Fund benefited from financial assistance to participate in the thirty-fifth session of the Working Group, at which they were reviewed, or in the forty-third session of the Human Rights Council, at which the outcomes of their reviews were adopted: Egypt, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Kenya, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho and Turkey. In total, 10 delegates received funds.

12. In accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 6/30 on integrating the human rights of women throughout the United Nations system, and bearing in mind that Council resolution 5/1 on institution-building of the United Nations Human Rights Council, in which the universal periodic review mechanism was established, stipulated that the mechanism should fully integrate a gender perspective (para. 3 (k)), the secretariat has been encouraging States to consider the possibility of taking into account aspects related to gender balance in the composition of their delegation and in the sharing of responsibilities among its members. Since the beginning of the third cycle of the universal periodic review, in May 2017, 33 women and 43 men have received funds. Of the 10 delegates assisted under the Fund in 2020, 4 were women and 6 were men.

13. The secretariat implements a proactive approach through targeted correspondence to encourage States to avail themselves of the support provided through the Fund. A few weeks prior to a session, the secretariat addresses correspondence to States that could benefit from the assistance of the Fund, indicating the first steps that need to be taken to request the assistance and setting out the main entitlements. Such a targeted approach has enabled States – in particular small island developing States and least developed countries without representation in Geneva, and therefore unfamiliar with the human rights framework and machinery – to become more familiar with the Fund and to request support. To the extent possible, the secretariat ensures complementarity between the support provided through the 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. Since the beginning of the third cycle, the secretariat has been encouraging States to nominate a senior representative from the national mechanism for reporting and follow-up as a member of the delegation benefiting from the travel assistance under the Fund.

14. In addition to covering travel costs, the Fund also provides for the payment of a daily subsistence allowance at the rate applicable to Geneva at the time of travel. Once a Government requests the assistance of the Fund, it is advised of the official entitlements for travel and daily subsistence allowance. OHCHR is required to make the necessary arrangements for the issuance and payment of the ticket in advance. This system of direct ticketing by OHCHR requires advance planning, since Governments need to designate their delegate with sufficient lead time to enable the secretariat to make the travel arrangements and issue the ticket in accordance with the United Nations official travel policies. The daily

subsistence allowance is provided in two instalments, with 75 per cent of the total amount paid in advance, either by bank transfer or upon arrival in Geneva, and the remaining amount and terminal expenses disbursed after the completion of the mission, on the basis of required documentation.

15. Table 2 shows the yearly expenditures for travel of government representatives to attend sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and plenary sessions of the Human Rights Council.

Table 2

Expenditure for travel of government representatives to attend sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and plenary sessions of the Human Rights Council

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of countries funded</i>	<i>Amount paid (United States dollars)</i>
2008	6	16 885.00
2009	17	23 568.00
2010	23	39 942.00
2011	21	11 698.00
2012	3	11 295.00
2013	6	35 176.00
2014	15	53 939.00
2015	23	95 512.00
2016	26	82 300.25
2017	15	55 912.27
2018	22	228 584.06
2019	26	179 496.78
2020	10	38 726.61
Total		873 034.97

16. In March 2020, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, adjustments were made to the travel assistance for representatives to attend the forty-third session of the Human Rights Council, in accordance with the decision of 2 March 2020 by the Bureau of the Council to encourage representatives to refrain from travelling to Geneva to attend the rest of the Council session. Consequently, only one State benefited from the travel assistance to attend the adoption of the outcome of its review.

17. In order to ensure that States and all the stakeholders could engage in the universal periodic review process constructively and in a safe environment, the secretariat, in close discussion with the Office of the President of the Human Rights Council, decided to postpone the thirty-sixth session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, originally scheduled for May 2020, to November 2020. It was also decided that the thirty-seventh session of the Working Group, scheduled for November 2020, would be held in January 2021. Given the worsening COVID-19 situation, all travel arrangements that had been made using the Fund for the remainder of the year were cancelled.

18. In November 2020, the Swiss authorities reduced the maximum number of in-person participants from 50 to 5. The thirty-sixth session of the Working Group was therefore held in hybrid mode, combining in-person participation with pre-recorded video interventions and live video streams. The secretariat, in cooperation with the Office of the President of the Human Rights Council, adopted an innovative approach and used the Fund to facilitate the remote participation of Member States under review and of other Member States, resulting in approximately 650 video statements and 350 live videoconference calls.

B. Training

19. The terms of reference of the Fund allow the financing of briefings prior to the sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review to assist countries in the preparatory process. These briefings usually consist of plenary segments and breakout group discussions during which the policies, procedures and modalities of the universal periodic review are examined, information is exchanged and good practices and lessons learned are discussed concerning the organization of national consultations, the setting up of interministerial coordination mechanisms (so-called national mechanisms for reporting and follow-up), the drafting of national reports and participation in the interactive dialogues held by the Working Group and the Human Rights Council in plenary session.

20. In its resolution 35/29, the Human Rights Council acknowledged the crucial role that parliaments played in, *inter alia*, translating international commitments into national policies and laws, including by supporting the implementation of recommendations generated by the international human rights mechanisms, especially the recommendations supported by the State concerned in the framework of the universal periodic review. It is noteworthy that, within the context of the universal periodic review, the majority of recommendations require or involve parliamentary action.

21. From the perspective of the OHCHR Management Plan 2018–2021, the enhanced focus on parliaments as key enabling participants in any national human rights protection system will allow OHCHR to deliver results across all pillars. A strengthened parliamentary role in the promotion of human rights, through oversight, and the legislative and budgetary functions of parliaments, will strengthen the implementation of recommendations from human rights mechanisms; better link human rights to national development efforts and budgets; help to detect, address and potentially prevent human rights violations; enhance equality, including gender equality, and counter discrimination, in particular through legislative efforts; strengthen accountability through oversight; and enhance participation, as parliaments are elective bodies to which civil society and national human rights institutions have direct access.

22. In 2020, given the restrictions on the number of in-person participants owing to the pandemic, the briefings and workshops were conducted in a hybrid manner in the form of webinars. On 13 and 14 July 2020, OHCHR, together with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Commonwealth, held webinars on engaging parliaments in the promotion of human rights, including in the work of the Human Rights Council and the universal periodic review, for parliamentary human rights committees of States members of the Commonwealth, from Africa, Europe and the Caribbean and Canada. A total of 17 persons (5 women and 12 men) participated in the session for Africa and Europe, while 26 persons (21 women and 5 men) participated in the session for the Caribbean and Canada.

23. The webinars were aimed at raising awareness among the members of parliamentary human rights committees of the need to become fully involved in promoting and protecting human rights and the means for doing so, including through the work of the Human Rights Council and the universal periodic review mechanism. The workshop equipped participants with the requisite tools to take better account of human rights and to build and strengthen partnerships between their committees and other actors, in particular national human rights institutions, civil society and non-governmental organizations, with a view to coordinating strategies for promoting human rights. Participants shared experiences and drew up an implementation road map for each parliament that took account of existing recommendations from the universal periodic review and concluding observations from the treaty bodies. The contributions from OHCHR focused on sharing good practices on cooperation between parliaments and the United Nations human rights mechanisms.

24. On 17 and 18 November 2020, OHCHR, jointly with the IPU and the Commonwealth, held a workshop for parliamentarians in charge of human rights in States in the Asia-Pacific region, namely Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Malaysia, Maldives, Nauru, New Zealand, Pakistan, Solomon Islands and Tonga. The workshop enabled participants to share experiences and good practices regarding parliamentary involvement in the Human Rights Council and the treaty bodies, parliamentary strategies for human rights protection and promotion in light of

the COVID-19 pandemic, and parliamentary involvement in the universal periodic review process and the implementation of recommendations emanating from it. A total of 17 persons (8 women and 9 men) participated.

25. Since May 2017, OHCHR has been organizing informal briefings during the sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review for members of delegations participating in the review, especially those who have travelled from their capitals. The briefings, which are held in the first and second week of the sessions, have provided visiting delegations with an overview of follow-up processes and measures for the implementation of recommendations made by human rights mechanisms, in particular in the context of the universal periodic review, in light of existing good practices. The briefings have been received positively by Member States and will continue to be systematically offered to delegations during sessions of the Working Group in the third cycle of the universal periodic review.

26. The subjects covered in the informal briefings include: introduction to the third cycle of the universal periodic review and its focus on implementation; overview of OHCHR field-related activities; national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up; human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals; and overview of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review and the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review. The material used in the briefings is available on the universal periodic review section of the OHCHR website.⁶

IV. Conclusions

27. **The Secretary-General, in his report on strengthening United Nations action in the field of human rights through the promotion of international cooperation and the importance of non-selectivity, impartiality and objectivity,⁷ stated that the increased focus on the follow-up and implementation of the recommendations from human rights mechanisms provided the United Nations system with an opportunity to engage with Member States. He also stated that international cooperation, including through human rights mechanisms and their recommendations, provided an important basis for States to achieve greater results in both the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and human rights protection at the country level.**

28. **In his call to action for human rights, the Secretary-General highlighted the importance of the universal periodic review recommendations to advance the 2030 Agenda. He encouraged the full use of the human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, to contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly at the national and local levels. He also called for better use to be made of the universal periodic review outcomes in national development planning and in follow-up and reporting, including on the Goals and in the preparation of voluntary national reviews. Moreover, the Secretary-General stated that the United Nations would make fuller use of its human rights tools and entry points, including the universal periodic review, as a basis for meeting the challenges, opportunities and needs of the twenty-first century and for implementing the 2030 Agenda. Given that the universal periodic review, in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 5/1, should fully integrate a gender perspective, the mechanism is well placed to contribute in another key area of the Secretary-General's call to action, that of gender equality and equal rights for women.**

29. **In 2020, OHCHR issued practical guidance on maximizing the use of the universal periodic review to achieve an impact at the country level for all United Nations officials at headquarters, in missions and in country teams, noting that the universal periodic review was an entry point for engagement with Member States. The guidance should assist United Nations entities in taking action on human rights in line with their**

⁶ www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/UPRMain.aspx.

⁷ A/72/351.

mandates and in support of specific Sustainable Development Goal targets and indicators.

30. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the High Commissioner appealed to the international community to renew its collective commitment to act on multilateral solutions to global problems, international solidarity and cooperation, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented crisis with profound human rights implications, was a stark reminder of the interdependence of the international community and the imperative for urgent collective action, which required human, social, international and intergenerational solidarity and shared responsibility, and global, regional and national action. Echoing the Secretary-General's call to action, she stressed that human rights must be at the heart of collective action, and in any effective response to crises and emergencies.

31. During the reporting period, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, only two sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review were held, and almost all travel arrangements that had been made using the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review were cancelled. Nevertheless, the Fund continued to facilitate the participation of representatives of developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, in the relevant session of the Working Group.

32. Since the launching of the universal periodic review process and in recognition of the inherent challenge of ensuring that participation is indeed universal, the needs and constraints of least developed countries have been considered. Ensuring the informed, regular and full participation of States with limited resources and no representation in Geneva, in addition to the participation of all other States, requires regular outreach activities. For the thirty-sixth session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, postponed from May to November 2020 owing to the pandemic, the secretariat, in cooperation with the Office of the President of the Human Rights Council, adopted an innovative approach and used the Fund to facilitate the remote participation of States under review and of other Member States. Approximately 650 video statements and 350 live videoconference calls were thus enabled, whereby 1,152 speakers (429 women and 723 men) took the floor to make more than 3,000 recommendations to the 14 States under review.

33. The thirty-sixth session of the Working Group was the tenth session of the third cycle of the universal periodic review and the first hybrid session in the mechanism's history. Despite the extraordinary modalities of participation, all States under review participated, with high-level representation. In total, the 14 delegations were composed of 268 members (149 women and 119 men), of whom 60 were from least developed countries and small island developing States. The full participation of the States under review, their high-level representation and the considerable number of speakers and recommendations demonstrated a continued high level of interest in the third cycle, the commitment of the international community to the continued relevance of multilateralism and human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, and the importance of this mechanism at the national level.

34. Furthermore, during the reporting period, the secretariat continued to help States not only to participate in the universal periodic review but also to understand the review as a full process, in particular at the national level, focusing on the implementation of recommendations made during the previous cycles. The webinars organized by OHCHR, jointly with IPU and the Commonwealth, to promote the role of parliaments and parliamentary human rights committees in the universal periodic review process in, *inter alia*, translating international commitments into national policies and laws, and the briefings organized by OHCHR during the sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review for members of delegations participating in the review of their countries, contribute to that understanding. These webinars and briefings allow Member States to share best practices regarding their national implementation and follow-up processes.

35. The Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review is instrumental in ensuring the contribution of many delegation members. It allows those

members to participate in and contribute to the presentation of national reports describing the implementation of previous recommendations at the national level, which further feeds into an interactive dialogue that is universal, independent, impartial and non-politicized, the quality of which contributes anew to recommendations that are constructive, specific, action-oriented and implementable, taking into account national capacities. OHCHR will continue this strategic use of the Fund, which contributes to the increasing understanding of the review as a full process, in particular at the national level, focusing on the implementation of recommendations.
