



Human Rights Council**Fiftieth session**

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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 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 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. It provides an overview of contributions and expenditures, together with a description of the activities funded over the period since the previous report up to 31 December 2021. It highlights, in particular, ways in which the Voluntary Fund was utilized to facilitate the participation of the least developed countries and small island developing States during the reporting period, despite restrictions on international travel due to the pandemic, thus maintaining 100 per cent participation of States. In light of the upcoming fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, the report also includes an analysis of how the Voluntary Fund could remain instrumental and strategic by contributing to the universal participation of Member States in the review process and to their increased understanding of the review as a full process at the national level, focusing on the implementation of recommendations.



I. Introduction

1. The Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review was established in 2008, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 6/17, to facilitate the participation of developing countries, particularly the least developed countries, in the universal periodic review mechanism, bearing in mind that the universal periodic review is a cooperative mechanism with the full involvement of the country concerned and with consideration given to its capacity-building needs in accordance with General Assembly resolution 60/251. Subsequently, in resolution 16/21, adopted in March 2011 before the end of the first cycle of the universal periodic review, the Human Rights Council stipulated that the Fund should be strengthened and operationalized in order to encourage significant participation by developing countries, particularly the least developed countries and small island developing States, in their reviews.

2. Participation of Member States in the review process has been universal ever since the launch of the universal periodic review mechanism, demonstrating a 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 importance of universal participation by the least developed countries and small island developing States in the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, for achieving greater promotion and protection of human rights was reaffirmed by panellists and participants ranging from State representatives to those from intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations in the annual high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming, held during the forty-ninth session of the Human Rights Council on 28 February 2022.¹

4. The support provided through the Fund remains instrumental, allowing delegations to participate in the presentation of national reports and contribute to a universal, interactive dialogue, with recommendations that are constructive, specific, action-oriented and implementable, taking into account national capacities. Fund-supported participation also contributes to raising awareness among delegations of the need for close coordination of implementation efforts at the national level.

¹ See [A/HRC/49/92](#).

II. Financial situation of the Fund

5. Table 1 shows the detailed financial situation of the Fund as at 31 December 2021 (statement of income and expenditure).

Table 1

Statement of income and expenditure for the period 1 January–31 December 2021

(United States dollars)

<i>Component</i>	
Income	
Voluntary contributions received in 2021	92 964.55
Gain/loss on exchange	
Pledges received for 2021	
International Organization of la Francophonie	10 741.14
Miscellaneous and investment income	(138.71)
Total income	103 566.98
Expenditure	
Staff costs	55 280.94
Other personnel costs (consultants' fees and travel)	24 312.19
Staff travel	(1 292.00)
Travel of representatives/participants to meetings and seminars	60 235.40
Contractual services	63 000.00
General operating and other direct costs	2 256.06
Equipment, vehicles and furniture	–
Grants out (<\$50,000) and fellowships	–
Programme support (indirect) costs	26 360.08
Total expenditure	230 152.67
Adjustments to prior year expenditure (liquidation of commitments)	–
Net excess (shortfall) of income over expenditure for the period	(126 585.69)
Opening balance on 1 January 2021	739 020.34
Other adjustments (prior period)	–
Unpaid pledges	(10 741.14)
Total fund balance as at 31 December 2021	612 434.65

6. The Fund can receive voluntary contributions from States, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations or private institutions and individuals. Since its establishment, 19 countries have made financial contributions.² In 2019, for the first time since the establishment of the Fund, an intergovernmental organization, the International Organization of la Francophonie, made a contribution to the Fund. In 2021, Saudi Arabia contributed a total of \$50,000.

7. 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

² Australia, Austria, Belgium, China, Colombia, Cuba, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sweden and Switzerland.

approved all requests received, in line with the terms of reference of the Fund, to enable participation in the universal periodic review.

III. Activities

A. Travel to meetings

8. Under the terms of reference of the Fund, financial support is made available to developing countries, in particular the 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.

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

10. Since the Fund was established in 2008, 112 States have benefited from the travel assistance of the Fund. Of those 112 States, approximately 40 per cent are least developed countries and 33 per cent are small island developing States.

11. During most of 2021, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic still affected the travel of delegates to participate in person in sessions of the Working Group and the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Rapidly evolving situations worldwide, coupled with the different rules and regulations that were applicable to the entry of the designated delegates into Switzerland, depending on where she or he lived and how she or he travelled, made it extremely challenging for the secretariat to make travel arrangements. Designated delegates were strongly advised to keep themselves informed of the updated COVID-related developments both in their own countries, in places of possible transit and in Switzerland.

12. Consequently, although 41 States were identified as eligible for travel assistance under the Fund in 2021, invitations were not extended to States until the thirty-ninth session of the Working Group in November 2021, when the Government of Switzerland had eased COVID restrictions. Three of the 10 States that were considered eligible for travel assistance under the Fund benefited from it to participate in the thirty-ninth session of the Working Group, at which their countries were reviewed: Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and the United Republic of Tanzania. In total, three delegates received funds to travel to Geneva.

13. 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 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, 34 women and 45 men have received funds. Of the three delegates assisted under the Fund in 2021, one was a woman and two were men.

14. 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 the 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.

15. 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. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (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 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.

16. 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

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

<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
2021	3	60 235.40
Total		933 270.37

17. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, since the thirty-sixth session in November 2020, Working Group sessions have been held under hybrid modalities, which combine virtual participation through statements delivered by pre-recorded video messages and live video link, with limited in-person participation.

18. During 2021, despite the pandemic, which affected the travel of delegates to Geneva and the in-person participation of delegations, the secretariat continued its work to facilitate

the participation of delegations from developing countries and in particular the least developed countries and small island developing States, in their reviews by the Working Group through hybrid modalities. The Fund was utilized to provide technical moderation and logistical support for their virtual participation. That assistance provided through the Fund enabled representatives of those States, who would have otherwise been eligible to receive travel assistance to come to Geneva in person, to participate in their reviews virtually.

19. The annual statistics on the number of participants from the least developed countries and small island developing States in the Working Group sessions and the adoption of the outcomes by the Human Rights Council vary, depending on how many such countries were scheduled for reviews and the adoption of them in the given year. Nevertheless, when the statistics of the periods before and during the pandemic are compared, the advantage of hybrid modalities in terms of participation by members of delegations from the least developed countries and small island developing States is clearly noticeable. In 2019, before the pandemic, when the three Working Group sessions were held in person, approximately 189 delegates from the least developed countries and small island developing States participated, whereas in 2020, when one Working Group session was cancelled due to the pandemic and two sessions were held under hybrid modalities, 125 delegates took part, the majority virtually, owing to the restrictions applied by the Government of Switzerland to the number of participants who could attend in person. In 2021, the pandemic still affected the travel of delegates to Geneva and all three sessions were held under hybrid modalities: 274 delegates took part, the majority virtually, as in the previous year.

B. Training

20. The terms of reference of the Fund allow the financing of briefings prior to the sessions of the Working Group to assist countries in the preparatory process. These briefings usually consist of plenary segments and break-out group discussions, during which the policies, procedures and modalities of the universal periodic review are examined. Information is also 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 implementation, 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.

21. 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, in particular 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.

22. Under the extension of the OHCHR Management Plan for the period 2022–2023, 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.

23. In the first half of 2021, given the continued restrictions on the number of participants who could attend in person, owing to the pandemic, a workshop was held virtually. On 29 and 30 June 2021, OHCHR and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) held a global virtual workshop for parliamentarians on the contribution of parliaments to the recovery response to the COVID-19 pandemic from a human rights perspective. The workshop was organized by

staff supporting the Fund. It was dedicated to the impact of the pandemic on the broad spectrum of human rights; the role of parliamentary human rights committees in ensuring that government responses to the pandemic were rights-based; the importance of addressing inequalities and discrimination; and the use by parliaments of the international human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review. Some 150 parliamentarians, from all regions of the world, participated in the workshop, with those from Argentina, Bahrain, Canada, China, Fiji, India, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, South Africa, Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, actively engaged in sharing experiences from their respective national contexts.

24. On 25 and 26 October 2021, OHCHR, in cooperation with the Organization of la Francophonie (OIF) and IPU, organized a workshop aimed at strengthening the capacity of parliamentarians from OIF member States during the universal periodic review process. The event was enabled by the Fund, as well as by financial contributions from OIF and IPU. It took place in Geneva with the in-person participation of 18 parliamentarians from Armenia, Cameroon, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, France, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, North Macedonia and Senegal. Four parliamentarians from Viet Nam participated in the meeting remotely. Participants in the workshop also discussed cooperation with national human rights institutions and civil society organizations in the implementation of the recommendations of the universal periodic review and the role of their parliaments in assessing the impact on the rights of their citizens of the measures taken by their governments to address the COVID-19 crisis. A number of tools developed by OHCHR to assist States in dealing with the pandemic were also shared with the participants. The parliamentarians committed to being more proactive in dealing with their governments on the universal periodic review, including contributing to the preparation of the national report, participating in the review as part of the delegation of the State and, more relevant, taking action to implement the recommendations of the universal periodic review. The parliamentarians also decided to establish a network of all the participants in the workshop, in order to continue sharing experiences and good practices of their cooperation with international human rights mechanisms in general and the universal periodic review in particular.

25. The workshops aimed at encouraging greater integration by parliamentarians of international human rights standards into the legislation of their countries and their greater involvement in the universal periodic review process and in the work of other human rights mechanisms. The objectives of the workshops were also to raise 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. The workshops 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. The contributions from OHCHR focused on sharing good practices on cooperation between parliaments and the United Nations human rights mechanisms.

26. During the reporting period, as has been the usual practice since the first cycle, OHCHR also organized pre-session information meetings on the Working Group sessions for the States under review and troika members. The sessions are organized by staff supporting the Fund. They are conducted in English and French and open to all Member States. Due to restrictions on the number of in-person participants in the meetings, they took place in virtual or hybrid manners. The discussions in the meetings encompassed the organizational aspects of the Working Group sessions, such as the composition of the delegation of the State under review, their accreditation and modalities of participation, in-person or remote, how to inscribe on the lists of speaker and speaking time limits, as well as more substantive aspects, including the role of the troika members, drafting of the report of the Working Group and the categories of the position that the State under review should take on the recommendations received. In addition, the secretariat provided targeted individual training sessions to representatives of Member States on how to engage with the universal

periodic review, including Comoros, Eswatini, Fiji, Iceland, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Lesotho, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, South Sudan, Sudan, Togo and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

27. Since May 2017, OHCHR has also been organizing informal briefings during the sessions of the Working Group for members of delegations participating in the universal periodic review, especially those who have travelled from their capitals, including delegates sponsored by the Fund. The briefings are organized by staff supporting the Fund. In 2021, they were provided in a virtual or hybrid manner. The briefings, which are normally held in the first and second week of the sessions, provide 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 the 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 fourth cycle.

28. The subjects covered in the informal briefings include: introduction to the third cycle of the universal periodic review and its focus on implementation; an overview of OHCHR field-related activities; national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up; human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals; and an 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.³

IV. Conclusions

29. **For most of the reporting period, the COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected the possibility of delegates travelling to Geneva. Consequently, the secretariat did not extend invitations to States until the thirty-ninth session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review in November 2021, by which time the entry restrictions imposed by the Government of Switzerland had eased. Nevertheless, the Fund continued to facilitate the virtual participation of representatives of developing countries, in particular, the least developed countries and small island developing States, in the relevant sessions of the Working Group and the adoption of their outcomes by the Human Rights Council in its plenary sessions.**

30. **By the end of 2021, out of 193 Member States, 181 had been reviewed during the third cycle, with 100 per cent participation. All three sessions of the Working Group in 2021 were held under hybrid modalities. The thirty-ninth session, the final session in 2021, was the thirteenth session of the third cycle and the fourth hybrid session since the pandemic started in 2020. Despite the extraordinary modalities of participation, the Working Group continued to count on the participation of all States under review and with high-level representation. In total, the 41 delegations were composed of 720 members (366 women and 354 men), of whom 274 were from the 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 continuing 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.**

31. **Furthermore, during the reporting period, the secretariat continued to assist 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 workshops organized by OHCHR jointly with IPU and OIF to promote the role of parliaments and parliamentary human rights committees in the universal periodic review process in,**

³ www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/UPRMain.aspx.

inter alia, translating international commitments into national policies and laws, and the briefings organized by OHCHR during the sessions of the Working Group for members of delegations participating in the review of their countries, contribute to that understanding. The workshops allow Member States to share best practices regarding their national implementation and follow-up processes.

32. In his report “Our Common Agenda”, the Secretary-General called for a stronger, more networked and inclusive multilateral system anchored within the United Nations. He emphasized that fuller use could be made of human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, in solving pressing social, economic and political challenges and that over 90 per cent of the Sustainable Development Goals were linked to human rights.⁴

33. In July 2021, during its forty-seventh session, the Human Rights Council decided that the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review should commence in October/November 2022.⁵ The fourth cycle will place emphasis on the enhanced implementation of recommendations and the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review will continue to be instrumental in ensuring the contributions of many delegates. In particular, it will allow delegates to participate in and contribute to the presentation of national reports describing, inter alia, the implementation of previous recommendations at the national level. They will feed into an interactive dialogue that is universal and geared to the formulation of new recommendations that are constructive, specific, action-oriented and implementable. OHCHR will pursue this strategic use of the Fund, with the aim of increasing understanding of the review as a full process, including the implementation of recommendations at the national level.

34. In 2022, with the gradual lifting of COVID-related measures and a return to in-person sessions, OHCHR is appealing for additional support and contributions from Member States to the Fund. That would sustain strategic use of the Fund as a tool to contribute to the maintenance of 100 per cent participation of all Member States in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, in particular the regular and full participation of States with limited resources and no representation in Geneva.

⁴ See https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf.

⁵ See decision 47/115.