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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**

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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 (A/HRC/41/28), 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 for 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 2019.

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. 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.

4. 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, as highlighted during the two intersessional meetings of the Human Rights Council for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda, held on 16 January and 3 December 2019 pursuant to Council resolution 37/24.

II. Financial situation of the fund

5. Table 1 shows the detailed financial situation of the fund as at 31 December 2019 (statement of income and expenditure).

Table 1

Statement of income and expenditure for the period 1 January–31 December 2019

(United States dollars)

<i>Income</i>	
Voluntary contributions received in 2019	147 167.01
Government of China (pledged in 2018 and paid in 2019)	150 000.00
Gain/loss on exchange	296.67

<i>Income</i>	
Interest and miscellaneous income	20 926.50
Total income	318 390.18
Expenditure	
Staff costs	42 240.11
Other personnel costs (consultants' fees and travel)	–
Staff travel	3 842.54
Travel of representatives/participants to meetings and seminars	179 496.78
Contractual services	2 600.00
General operating and other direct costs	26 692.81
Equipment, vehicles and furniture	–
Grants out (<\$50,000) and fellowships	19 445.72
Programme support (indirect) costs	35 244.26
Total expenditure	309 562.22
Adjustments to prior year expenditure (liquidation of commitments)	–
Net excess (shortfall) of income over expenditure for the period	8 827.96
Opening balance on 1 January 2019	904 638.73
Other adjustments (prior period)	–
Unpaid pledges	–
Total fund balance as at 31 December 2019	913 466.69

6. Since the establishment of the fund, 19 countries have made financial contributions. China has contributed a total of \$250,000.00, of which \$150,000.00 was pledged in 2018 and received in 2019. Furthermore, in 2019, for the first time, an intergovernmental organization made a contribution to the fund: the International Organization of la Francophonie contributed \$47,167.01.

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 approved all requests, in line with the fund's terms of reference, 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 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 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. In 2019, 26 of the 42 States that were considered eligible for the travel assistance of the fund benefited from financial assistance to participate in the sessions of the Working Group at which they were reviewed or in the Human Rights Council plenary sessions: Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Belize, Bhutan, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Gambia, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, Mauritius, North Macedonia, Senegal, Vanuatu, Viet Nam, Uruguay and Yemen. In total, 31 delegates received funds.

11. In accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 6/30 on integrating the human rights of women throughout the United Nations system, 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. Of the 31 delegates assisted under the fund in 2019, 13 were women and 18 were men.

12. Since November 2015, when the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), together with most of the United Nations secretariat, started using Umoja, the way in which travel arrangements are processed has changed. 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. 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.

13. The direct ticketing does, however, require more advance planning since Governments are required 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. However, in cases where such direct ticketing is not possible, the previous arrangement for retroactive reimbursement of travel expenses can no longer be provided. Undoubtedly, the fact that retroactive travel reimbursement is no longer an option under Umoja has had a substantial impact on the support provided to States.

14. Table 2 below 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

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of countries funded</i>	<i>Amount paid (United States dollars)</i>
2018	22	228 584.06
2019	26	179 496.78
Total		834 308.36

B. Training

15. 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.

16. In its resolution 35/29, the Human Rights Council acknowledged the crucial role that parliaments play 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.

17. 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 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.

18. In 2019, the fund was used to actively promote the role of parliaments and parliamentary human rights committees in the universal periodic review process. On 13 and 14 June 2019, the fund supported a workshop on the role of francophone parliamentarians in the process that was co-organized by OHCHR and the International Organization of la Francophonie. The objective of the workshop was to strengthen the capacity of members of parliaments to engage in all stages of the process, including in the preparation, review and implementation of the recommendations arising from the universal periodic review. Fourteen members of parliament from the following countries attended: Burkina Faso, Burundi, France, Gabon, Mali, Morocco, Romania and Switzerland.

19. The opening ceremony was attended by the group of francophone ambassadors and representatives of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). It was followed by a briefing on the outcome of the subregional workshop co-organized by OHCHR and the International Organization of la Francophonie and held in Dakar in July 2018. The workshop addressed substantive human rights issues, especially the report of OHCHR on the contribution of parliaments to the work of the Human Rights Council and its universal periodic review (A/HRC/38/25) and the draft principles on parliaments and human rights (A/HRC/38/25, annex I). Workshop participants heard about good practices of engagement with the human rights mechanisms and challenges faced by members of parliament.

20. From 24 to 26 June 2019, IPU and OHCHR jointly organized a seminar for members of parliamentary human rights committees entitled “Parliamentary engagement on

human rights: identifying good practices and new opportunities for action". Over 90 members of parliament from 36 countries participated in the seminar. Participants shared examples of parliamentary engagement on human rights and parliamentary involvement in the work of United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review. They emphasized the important role played by IPU and OHCHR in guiding and supporting parliaments in these tasks. The participants also examined inspiring examples of cooperation between parliaments, national human rights institutions and civil society and considered the action that parliaments could take to create an environment in which national human rights stakeholders could work freely and effectively. The participants also considered the above-mentioned draft principles on parliaments and human rights. As noted by several speakers, the seminar was an excellent opportunity to discuss and agree on the need for greater engagement by parliaments with international human rights mechanisms and the Human Rights Council.

21. 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.

IV. Conclusions

22. **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 (A/72/351), 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. He pointed out that technical assistance in the field of human rights should be based on such recommendations and be provided in closer cooperation and partnership with Member States, regional human rights mechanisms, national human rights institutions, non-governmental organizations and the wider United Nations system.**

23. **Recommendations from human rights mechanisms, in particular the recommendations arising from the universal periodic review that are accepted by States, are one of the best entry points for engagement with the United Nations system at the national level. Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and linking it to the recommendations arising from the universal periodic review allow the United Nations to support States in achieving concrete results both in terms of the promotion of human rights and the achievement of their development targets.**

24. **It was also highlighted at the high-level panel discussion held on 26 February 2018, during the thirty-seventh session of the Human Rights Council, that recommendations arising from the universal periodic review could be an entry point for cooperation with and action by Governments, the United Nations system and the wider international community, including donors. Common themes of the statements and interventions made during the panel discussion were the importance of implementing the recommendations arising from the universal periodic review and the potential for a better and more focused use of human rights recommendations in action across the United Nations system in support of the prevention of human rights violations and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.**

25. In her dialogue with the Human Rights Council on 7 March 2019, during its fortieth session, the Deputy Secretary-General stated that countries could show progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by utilizing human rights reporting processes such as the universal periodic review, which would provide a space for discussion and cooperation among stakeholders, and that those review processes could complement the voluntary national reviews conducted in the framework of the high-level political forum on sustainable development. In her report on the implementation and enhancement of international cooperation in the field of human rights, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that the United Nations system at the country level was well placed to support implementation efforts by Member States through the use of the accepted recommendations of the universal periodic review (A/HRC/41/25, para. 9).

26. During the first of its two intersessional meetings for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, held on 16 January 2019, the Human Rights Council examined numerous aspects of the relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals and human rights. One of the main conclusions was that the implementation of the Goals should be integrated increasingly into the universal periodic review process. Member States and other stakeholders must make better use of the universal periodic review outcomes and reports of the treaty bodies and special procedures to guide their planning, reporting and follow-up procedures for the implementation of the Goals, including in the preparation and consideration of voluntary national reviews of the high-level political forum on sustainable development. Participants concluded that States and other stakeholders should continue to share experiences and good practices in relation to integrating and aligning the promotion of human rights and the implementation of the Goals at the national and international levels.

27. At the second intersessional meeting for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, held on 3 December 2019, participants reaffirmed the indivisible and mutually reinforcing relationship between human rights and the 2030 Agenda as crucial for ensuring accelerated progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by the end of the decade. Participants concluded that accountability for implementation of the Goals needed to be strengthened and that the work of the human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, the special procedures and the treaty bodies, could enhance voluntary national review reporting, including information on efforts to identify those being left behind and specific priorities for targeted action and resources. The universal periodic review was widely highlighted during the meeting as a key entry point for increasing reporting efficiency, enhancing accountability, advancing implementation of the Goals and contributing to prevention efforts.

28. In “The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights”,¹ 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.

¹ 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 <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-02-24/human-rights-council-remarks-the-highest-aspiration>.

29. In 2020, the Secretary-General will issue practical guidance on how to maximize 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, outlining the universal periodic review as 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 mandates and in support of specific Sustainable Development Goal targets and indicators.

30. Since the start of the third cycle of the universal periodic review, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has sent letters to ministers for foreign affairs, after the adoption of the relevant outcome document by the Human Rights Council, containing advice, flagging areas needing particular attention during the 4.5 years until the next cycle and offering support from OHCHR and the United Nations system as a whole under the leadership of resident coordinators.

31. During the reporting period, the voluntary fund for participation in the universal periodic review continued to facilitate the participation of representatives of developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, in the relevant session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review. Assistance was also provided to enable requesting States to participate in the adoption of their outcome document by the Human Rights Council during its plenary sessions. In that regard, the secretariat followed up with delegations through a more proactive approach that included sending targeted correspondence, to ensure that all States entitled to assistance under the fund could avail themselves of the opportunity.

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.

33. 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 activities supported by the fund, including the joint workshop with the International Organization of la Francophonie and the seminar with IPU 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, from May 2017, 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 workshops and briefings allow Member States to share best practices regarding their national implementation and follow-up processes. Also during the reporting period, the secretariat encouraged 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.

34. The voluntary fund for participation in the universal periodic review is instrumental in ensuring the presence 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.