



General Assembly

Distr.: General
12 May 2023

Original: English

Human Rights Council

Fifty-third session

19 June–14 July 2023

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**

High-level panel discussion on the achievements, good practices and lessons learned by the two voluntary funds for the universal periodic review mechanism of the Human Rights Council*

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

The present report contains a summary of the high-level panel discussion that the Human Rights Council convened, pursuant to its resolution 51/30, focusing on the achievements, good practices and lessons learned by the two voluntary funds for the universal periodic review mechanism – 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 – during the implementation of their mandates over the past 15 years, and reflecting on further optimization of the use of these funds to facilitate the participation of States in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, and to support them in the implementation of recommendations emanating from the fourth cycle.

* Agreement was reached to publish the present report after the standard publication date owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.



I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 51/30, the Human Rights Council decided to convene, at its fifty-second session, a high-level panel discussion, fully accessible to persons with disabilities, focusing on the achievements, good practices and lessons learned by the two voluntary funds for the universal periodic review mechanism – 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 Review¹ – during the implementation of their mandates over the past 15 years, and reflecting on further optimization of the use of these funds to facilitate the participation of developing States, particularly least developed countries and small island developing States, in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, and to support them in the implementation of recommendations emanating from the fourth cycle.

2. In accordance with the Human Rights Council resolution 51/30, and on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the thirtieth anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, the high-level panel discussion, attended by high-level representatives of international organizations and relevant development actors, was held on 1 March 2023 with a view to: (a) taking stock of the achievements of the two voluntary funds during the implementation of their mandates and reflecting on avenues for optimizing use of the funds to facilitate participation of developing States, particularly least developed countries and small island developing States, in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review and to support them in implementing recommendations therefrom; (b) showcasing good practices of implementation of recommendations by States supported by the voluntary funds, and promoting reflection on key elements for replicability and sustainability, including in support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals; (c) reflecting on lessons learned during the past 15 years with a view to ensuring greater support to States by the United Nations system and the international community, thus ensuring greater positive impact of the universal periodic review mechanism on the ground.²

3. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) herewith presents a summary of the high-level panel discussion, in accordance with paragraph 5 of Human Rights Council resolution 51/30.

II. Background context and recent institutional developments

4. The universal periodic review is a unique peer-review process, which involves a review of the human rights records of all Member States. Based on the principle of equal treatment for all countries, the mechanism relies for its content on the work of the United Nations human rights treaty bodies and special procedure mandate holders and on recommendations by OHCHR and the entire United Nations system. The essential contribution of other stakeholders, such as regional human rights mechanisms, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations, ensures that the reviews capture all critical protection concerns. During the review, States have an opportunity to declare the action that they have taken to improve the human rights situations and to overcome challenges to the enjoyment of human rights. As a universal peer-review mechanism with the objective of improving the human rights situation on the ground through nationally owned processes, the universal periodic review relies on cooperation and constructive dialogue, and it builds on sovereign decisions made with respect to recommendations that States receive and then commit to supporting and implementing.

5. The universal periodic review has successfully completed its first three cycles with 100-per-cent participation by States. Among the significant developments and achievements, including from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, are the following: an increasing

¹ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/trust-fund-participation> and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/trust-fund-implementation>.

² See the concept note on the high-level panel discussion, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session52/regular-session>.

number of recommendations received, at an average of 230 recommendations per country review; recommendations that are becoming more specific, actionable, time-bound and measurable; significant follow-up action and implementation of accepted recommendations; and increased and more inclusive dialogue of Governments with parliaments and other stakeholders, including national human rights institutions and civil society actors. The mechanism also swiftly adapted to the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, by pioneering hybrid modalities and remote participation in November 2020. These innovative modalities resulted in increased and more inclusive participation in the universal periodic review mechanism, both from countries under review and from other stakeholders in the process.

6. The impact of the universal periodic review at the national level has been significant. During the third cycle, the universal periodic review mechanism yielded a significant impact at the national level, including the following: concrete improvements in various normative, policy and institutional frameworks; the ratification of various international or regional human rights treaties; improvement and reform of legislation in compliance with international human rights legal obligations (notably decriminalization of defamation, criminalization of domestic violence, abolition of the death penalty and increase in the age of marriage to 18 years); an increase in the number of national human rights institutions compliant with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles); the designation of national prevention mechanisms, as foreseen by the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; improvements in gender equality, the protection of the rights of women and girls and the protection of children; the adoption of laws focused on the protection of human rights defenders and vulnerable groups; and the adoption of new legislation and policies focused on the right to health, labour rights, climate change and emergency preparedness and the impact of the global pandemic.

7. The third cycle of the universal periodic review focused on implementation, the building of new partnerships and collaboration with various stakeholders of the mechanism, and the development of new tools to maximize the impact of the mechanism, with a view to the improving human rights situation on the ground. The tools included letters sent by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to all foreign ministers, and the development of a matrix of thematically clustered recommendations, available to all States online, which indicates the recommending State and the position of the State under review, is linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, and includes infographics on trends between cycles, the top five Goals referred to in all recommendations, and the key undertakings made by States from within accepted recommendations. Further, in the third cycle and ahead of the fourth cycle, practical tools for other stakeholders have been developed, such as specific guidance on the universal periodic review mechanism for civil society stakeholders,³ national human rights institutions,⁴ parliaments⁵ and local and regional governments,⁶ a handbook on designing and implementing Model United Nations simulations featuring the universal periodic review, developed in cooperation with academic institutions,⁷ and new guidelines for the fourth cycle for various stakeholders concerning submission and reporting.

8. With respect to the United Nations system, the Secretary-General, in launching his call to action for human rights in February 2020, requested OHCHR to develop new practical guidance for all Member State leader around the world to strengthen platforms of cooperation to address human rights challenges, utilizing the power and potential of the universal periodic review. This practical guidance on maximizing the use of the universal periodic review at the country level was published in 2020, and provides advice on how heads of various United Nations entities at the country level can engage in the review process before, during and after the review to support progress by Member States with respect to human rights and the

³ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/uprcycle4>.

⁴ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-main>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/leaflet-tips-role-lrgs-upr.pdf>.

⁷ Paolo De Stefani and Ling Han, eds., *Model UPR Handbook: A Guide to design and implement a Model UN featuring the Universal Periodic Review* (Padova, Padova University Press, 2021).

Sustainable Development Goals, and with respect to the agendas on prevention and on sustaining peace.⁸

9. As part of the roll-out of the practical guidance, a repository of United Nations good practices was launched in 2022, focusing on how the universal periodic review process supported sustainable development.⁹ It was developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), OHCHR and the Development Coordination Office, and showcased the way in which the United Nations system had used the mechanism to support sustainable development and address relevant human rights issues and concerns on the ground.

10. In October 2022, prior to the start of the fourth cycle, the Human Rights Council adopted, by consensus, resolution 51/30 on strengthening the voluntary funds for the universal periodic review mechanism of the Human Rights Council, which was co-sponsored by 73 States. In the resolution, the Council welcomed the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the two voluntary funds; requested the Secretary-General to further strengthen the regular budget-funded dedicated capacity of OHCHR to implement the mandates of the two voluntary funds, including by scaling up the capacity of the Universal Periodic Review Branch in each regional office during the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review; and encouraged all States to consider contributing to the two voluntary funds.

11. Regarding notable achievements and the impact of the voluntary funds, it is to be noted that, since its inception 15 years ago, the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review has facilitated the attendance during the review process of participants from 112 States, 39 per cent of which are least developed countries and 32 per cent of which are small island developing States. Furthermore, since its establishment, the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review has supported projects in 76 States throughout all regions of the world, especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and Eastern Europe, and has allowed for the organization of eight regional workshops to promote the sharing of good practices in the area of human rights protection.

12. In 2022, the overlapping context of the start of the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review and the fifteenth anniversary of the voluntary funds provided a timely opportunity for Member States, United Nations entities and other stakeholders, including civil society actors, to collectively reflect on past achievements, good practices and lessons learned from the implementation of recommendations under the universal periodic review mechanism.¹⁰ Side events were organized in Geneva, in the margins of the fifty-first session of the Human Rights Council, and in New York, during the seventy-seventh session of the General Assembly, to take stock of the achievements of the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review in ensuring the implementation of recommendations and to promote access by States to the financial and technical assistance available.¹¹

13. Furthermore, the sixth francophone seminar on the universal periodic review, co-organized by OHCHR and the International Organization of la Francophonie, was held on 6 and 7 September 2022 with the aim of sharing experiences from the third cycle and discussing how to strengthen the mechanism ahead of its fourth cycle. The recommendations from the joint seminar included the following: establishing permanent national committees to coordinate follow-up to recommendations from the universal periodic review, which should be open to national human rights organizations and non-governmental organizations; acquiring the National Recommendations Tracking Database;¹² formulating recommendations that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound;

⁸ Available at

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/UPR/UPR_Practical_Guidance.pdf.

⁹ OHCHR, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Development Cooperation Office, *UN Good Practices: How the Universal Periodic Review Process Supports Sustainable Development* (New York, UNDP, 2022).

¹⁰ See also A/HRC/41/25.

¹¹ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-main>.

¹² See <https://nrt.d.ohchr.org>.

developing indicators to assess implementation; increasing the participation of parliaments in the preparation of the national report, in the national delegation to the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review and in the budgetary follow-up to recommendations; increasing the role of the judiciary in the process; disseminating the outcome of the review to the media and to the general public; increasing the engagement of regional human rights mechanisms; strengthening the Universal Periodic Review Branch, including in regional offices; strengthening the partnership between OHCHR and the International Organization of la Francophonie; increasing funding in support of the voluntary funds; integrating recommendations from the universal periodic review into United Nations country programmes; and promoting coordination between technical and financial partners in the field.

14. During the general debate under agenda item 6, on the universal periodic review, at the fifty-first session of the Human Rights Council, on 30 September 2022, many States called for increased technical cooperation and capacity-building for effective implementation of review recommendations, and shared good practices of such implementation. On 17 October 2022, an informal consultation, on strengthening and optimizing the universal periodic review in view of its fourth cycle, was convened by the Permanent Representatives of Armenia and of Morocco to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva. The main issues emerging from the discussion pointed to general recognition that the universal periodic review was a universal and highly successful mechanism that fully complied with the institution-building package; that emphasis on the implementation of accepted recommendations should be matched by increased support from the United Nations system; that development assistance and forms of North-South and South-South cooperation should be increasingly available to States, at their request, to implement recommendations; and that the two voluntary funds should be strengthened. The voluntary practice of midterm reporting was encouraged, as was the use of the general debate under agenda item 6 as a platform to share good practices and to express the need for possible technical and financial assistance.

15. During the general debate under agenda item 6 at the fifty-second session of the Human Rights Council, the newly established Group of Friends of the Universal Periodic Review welcomed the increasing awareness at the highest level in the United Nations system that the universal periodic review was an impactful instrument to promote human rights as part of development efforts. Belgium, on behalf of the International Organization of la Francophonie, underlined the main conclusions from the recent joint seminar. Non-governmental organizations such as UPR Info welcomed the establishment of the Group of Friends, and noted the need for better integration of the universal periodic review into domestic legal proceedings and greater participation of the judiciary and legal professions in the various phases of the process. Amnesty International called for more public awareness of the universal periodic review mechanism and referred to the tools that it had recently developed with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to better protect journalists through the universal periodic review, including a fact sheet on formulating specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound recommendations. Lastly, the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute indicated that the universal periodic review was central to the judicial profession, and underlined the commitment to involve more justice actors in the fourth cycle.

III. Summary of the high-level panel discussion

A. Introduction

16. The high-level panel discussion took place on 1 March 2023. It was broadcast live on United Nations Web TV,¹³ and was made accessible to persons with disabilities through the provision of International Sign interpretation and real-time captioning.

¹³ <http://webtv.un.org>.

17. The high-level panel discussion was opened by the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, followed by the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights. The panel was moderated by the President of the Human Rights Council, Václav Bálek. The three panellists were: Permanent Representative of Argentina to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, Federico Villegas; Chair of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Susanna Moorehead; and Executive Director of UPR Info, Mona M'Bikay.

B. Opening statements

18. The Deputy Secretary-General opened the high-level panel discussion with a video statement. She stated that the universal periodic review was a powerful and unique mechanism, devised by Member States, providing every Member State with an equal opportunity to transform the lives of their people by better delivering on human rights protections, ensuring uniformity in the assessment process and in the process of deciding on and communicating recommended action.

19. The Deputy Secretary-General noted that the high-level panel discussion would focus on how the United Nations could better respond to States' growing demands for assistance in translating recommendations from the universal periodic review into laws and practices that advanced human rights, strengthened national protection systems and built more resilient societies. With the fourth cycle having just been initiated, the universal periodic review was among the most impactful instruments to promote human rights as part of development efforts. In that context, she welcomed tools that OHCHR had developed during the third review cycle to facilitate the implementation of review recommendations, including the advice provided by the High Commissioner for Human Rights to foreign ministers on how better to integrate human rights into efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

20. The Deputy Secretary-General recalled that the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights had led to the publication by OHCHR of the practical guidance on the universal periodic review, which had provided vital support to United Nations presences across the world and had produced a growing number of good practices at the country level. That momentum should be built upon and full use made of the universal periodic review, which was a unique mechanism. She stressed that the United Nations development system and all resident coordinators stood ready to cooperate with all States on implementing review recommendations, in order to leverage the transformative power of human rights and deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals, thus leaving no one behind.

21. In her opening remarks, the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasized that the universal periodic review mechanism was based on several key features. It created a dedicated space for the engagement of States with a forward-looking vision on human rights priorities and challenges, and it involved dialogues between an array of national actors – from Governments and parliaments to the judiciary – and the United Nations and the wider international community. Stressing the complementary nature of human rights mechanisms, she stated that the universal periodic review leveraged the rich expertise of the treaty bodies and special procedures and of regional human rights mechanisms, touching on all human rights issues, including emerging ones such as climate change and international humanitarian law. Equally important had been the inclusion of civil society perspectives in the interactive dialogues, and she noted that the multi-stakeholder dialogues on human rights that the universal periodic review generated had enabled fruitful discussions on national priorities.

22. The Deputy High Commissioner noted that, in order to achieve those results, the universal periodic review mechanism had been supported by 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 two voluntary funds had been established by the Human Rights Council in 2007 with the objective of facilitating the participation of developing States, particularly least developed countries

and small island developing States, in the sessions of the Working Group, and to support States, upon their request, in the implementation of review recommendations.

23. The Deputy High Commissioner recalled that the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review had supported the participation of delegations from 112 States in the sessions of the Working Group and in plenary sessions of the Human Rights Council. The fact that 39 per cent of those States were least developed countries and 32 per cent were small island developing States demonstrated the inclusive aspects of the process. During the third cycle, that voluntary fund had supported the in-persons participation of 95 delegates in Geneva, including 40 women. She further recalled that the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review had provided more than \$5.5 million in funding for projects in 76 States, thus contributing to stronger institutional frameworks and more robust legislation. Stressing that the voluntary funds had addressed capacity gaps and enabled States to take concrete steps to implement recommendations, she encouraged the international community, development cooperation actors and partners to support them.

24. Spotlighting various success stories across the regions, the Deputy High Commissioner noted that the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review had provided support in Panama to the electoral tribunal to ensure birth registration of Indigenous peoples in remote areas, and in Mongolia for the establishment of the national preventive mechanism for the prevention of torture and the adoption of legislation on human rights defenders. In Saint Kitts and Nevis, support from that voluntary fund had focused on the strengthening of data collection and a review of legislation affecting persons with disabilities, whereas in Belize, it had financed a project on a participatory process to establish a national human rights institution in accordance with the Paris Principles. In Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, the voluntary fund had been used to conduct an analysis of the compliance of national legislation with international human rights standards, and in Chad, it had funded a project focused on the strengthening of the national mechanism to monitor places of detention. In combination with strong political will, both voluntary funds had addressed capacity gaps, enabling States to take concrete steps to implement recommendations, complementing action taken as part of broader United Nations initiatives and technical support, and she encouraged States, in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 51/30, and development cooperation actors and partners to continue to support the voluntary funds.

25. Recalling that it was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the thirtieth anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, the Deputy High Commissioner asserted that OHCHR would redouble its efforts to respond to requests from Member States for support in building stronger national protection systems, including through the deployment of additional capacity dedicated to the universal periodic review to the OHCHR regional offices. In closing, she encouraged the international community, development cooperation actors and recommending States to take further steps and consolidate action based on the entry points offered by accepted recommendations, and through various forms of cooperation, including South-South cooperation. Such efforts could contribute to creating more resilient societies while enhancing solidarity and national ownership.

C. Overview of presentations by the panellists

26. Mr. Villegas noted that the universal periodic review was perhaps the most effective transformative tool created by the international community in its history, emphasizing the unique role played by accepted recommendations as an entry point for advocacy. He expressed appreciation for the record-breaking 100-per-cent participation rate and praised the work done under the two voluntary funds. He listed examples of good practices from the Latin America and the Caribbean, including on capacity-building. He stressed the importance of strengthening the universal periodic review, particularly with human and financial resources and political support. A new open-ended Group of Friends of the Universal Periodic Review had been formed, and he invited other States to join that new initiative. The next 15 years of the universal periodic review mechanism would be driven at the grass-roots

level and focused on implementation, to promote real change in the human rights situation on the ground. In conclusion, he emphasized that the United Nations system needed to work together more closely on global issues, and that the universal periodic review could serve as a useful bridge between process in New York and Geneva and between the human rights and development pillars of the United Nations. From a more general perspective, he observed that the universal periodic review could contribute to decreasing politicization and polarization in the Human Rights Council.

27. Ms. Moorhead expressed appreciation for the universal periodic review. Drawing similarities with development assistance reviews and the process of peer reviews among members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, she referred to such reviews as conversations among States, not examinations, and highlighted their importance in human rights and development processes. She noted recent important developments in the field of human rights, including a report on integrating human rights into development and a groundbreaking set of guidance on protecting the rights of women, both published by OECD. She expressed the hope that her presence on the panel would encourage members of the Development Assistance Committee to work further on linkages between development and the implementation of recommendations from the universal periodic review.

28. Recognizing that human rights were under threat, and that more and more people lived in fragile contexts, Ms. Moorehead stressed that it was more important in such a challenging period than ever before to join forces across international systems and communities to strengthen the nexus between human rights and development, and to live up to commitments. As an example, she noted that on the basis of recommendations from the universal periodic review made in 2021, the Development Assistance Committee had worked on enabling civil society to support human rights, even in places where the rights of civil society actors were compromised. Ms. Moorehead also expressed support for the work done under the universal periodic review and the voluntary funds. Given the connections between development and human rights, recommending States should explore the possibility of supporting the implementation of recommendations from the universal periodic review. In the context of recent reforms of the United Nations development system, she also called for the use of the enhanced resident coordinator mechanism in human rights protection on the ground.

29. Ms. M'Bikay explained that the fourth cycle represented an opportunity to accelerate progress towards implementation of human rights obligations and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, by anchoring human rights in all sectors and sharing concrete examples of good practices in implementation and engagement. She observed that, from the institutional perspective, the universal periodic review contributed to supporting accountability and transparency, thanks to the consultations held in the process of drafting the national reports and accepting recommendations, and the increased number of States that organized consultations with line ministries, national human rights institutions, parliaments, civil society stakeholders, youth representatives and local and regional governments. Such consultations also paved the way for inclusive implementation of the recommendations. She remarked that the universal periodic review had led to an increase in dialogue between Governments and other stakeholders, such as national human rights institutions and civil society, and she gave examples in which the proactive involvement of civil society and national human rights institutions in the process had led to constructive multi-stakeholder discussions on the implementation of recommendations.

30. Ms. M'Bikay further noted other positive developments, such as the important role that the universal periodic review played in strengthening civil society, in including other stakeholders such as parliaments, in advancing emerging issues such as online violence against children and women, and in increasing dialogue between Governments and various stakeholders. Linking the universal periodic review process to technical and financial assistance, she advocated enhancement of implementation through better alignment of multi-stakeholder technical and financial assistance with the recommendations of the universal periodic review.

D. Statements by representatives of States

31. During the interactive dialogue of the high-level panel discussion, the delegations of the following 28 States and groups of States took the floor (in speaking order): Mozambique, Belgium, South Africa, Finland (on behalf of a group of States), Bahamas (on behalf of a group of States), Maldives (on behalf of a group of States), European Union, Pakistan, Bahrain, Malaysia, Benin, Togo, Paraguay, Viet Nam, Mauritius, Costa Rica, Armenia, United Republic of Tanzania, India, Bangladesh, Azerbaijan, Nepal, Iraq, Mauritania, Gambia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), China and France. Statements by the delegations of the following States were not delivered owing to lack of time: Burkina Faso, Egypt and Malawi.

32. Referring to the universal periodic review as the crown jewel of the Human Rights Council, expressing appreciation for the 100-per-cent participation rate throughout the three cycles and reiterating their strong commitment to the mechanism, many delegations noted that the universal periodic review played a critical role in the promotion and protection of human rights, especially in the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It was particularly important to meet the needs of least developed countries and small island developing States. Recognizing the valuable contribution of the mechanism in promoting the enjoyment of human rights across the globe, many speakers described the universal periodic review as a success story given its approach of dialogue, cooperation and constructive engagement and the high level of participation of Member States in the review process. Referring to the principles of objectivity, impartiality, transparency and non-selectivity, some delegations stated that the technical assistance and capacity-building offered under the voluntary funds should be provided in consultation with and with the consent of the State concerned.

33. Speakers from the core group of sponsors of Human Rights Council resolution 51/30 noted that the establishment of the Group of Friends of the Universal Periodic Review contributed towards the goal of continuing and further enhancing institutional memory, and towards efforts to strengthen and optimize the review process.

34. Many delegations underscored the essential role played by the two voluntary funds since their establishment in ensuring that all States, particularly least developed countries and small island developing States, could benefit from support for the implementation of accepted recommendations and for participation during the universal periodic review. Several speakers welcomed the many tangible results in specific projects that had been achieved in many countries throughout the world with support from the two voluntary funds.

35. Some participants, particularly those speaking as past beneficiaries of the voluntary funds, expressed appreciation for the fact that, over the past 15 years, the voluntary funds had demonstrated their effectiveness in enabling the development of good practices in all regions across the world. Those participants expressed thanks for the support received with respect to participation and implementation projects. Many speakers also offered their own practical experience, providing details of specific projects and activities implemented thanks to the funding, such as justice for Indigenous peoples, the establishment of the National Recommendations Tracking Database and the fruitful participation of delegates in sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review. Reflecting on the spirit of inclusiveness, many delegations expressed appreciation for the support provided from the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review for the participation of delegates from least developed countries and small island developing States in the sessions of the Working Group.

36. Many State representatives called for further and strengthened financial support for the two voluntary funds. Many speakers stressed that, with the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review having commenced in November 2022, it was now even more important to extend greater political and financial support to the voluntary funds and to optimize them to better facilitate concrete and positive policies and human rights at the national level, especially in the challenging global environment. Speakers emphasized the need to continue to build on the work of the voluntary funds in the light of the ongoing financial and other constraints faced by least developed countries and small island developing States, in the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the financial crisis and given the impact of

climate change. One delegation requested more information on the various conditions to be met and procedures to be undertaken in order to benefit from the two voluntary funds.

37. Some speakers enquired as to how the voluntary funds could be further strengthened, as more resources would be required for implementation in the fourth cycle and the voluntary funds served as key instruments of international solidarity for the protection and promotion of human rights. Several other speakers asked the panellists questions on various topics, such as how to optimize support for the voluntary funds and, more generally, how to further strengthen the universal periodic review mechanism.

38. Commenting on institutional dimensions, several speakers welcomed the upscaling of the capacity dedicated to the universal periodic review mechanism through the creation of new focal points for the universal periodic review in all OHCHR regional offices, expressing strong support for that new enhancement. Some speakers positively commented on the voluntary practice of midterm reporting, recalling their own voluntary reports in the past cycle.

39. With respect to the role of civil society, several speakers noted the importance of the inclusion of civil society in the review process. They stressed that while the universal periodic review was a State-driven peer-review mechanism, it could greatly benefit from the inclusion of civil society, as more inclusive results could be obtained by integrating their views and including their representatives in national delegations. Turning to the panellists, several representatives enquired as to what could be done in order to strengthen the participation of civil society stakeholders in the universal periodic review process, especially in the implementation of recommendations at the national level. Another question explored the possibility of including civil society in the framework and projects of the voluntary funds for the universal periodic review.

40. Recalling that least developed countries and small island developing States remained at the forefront of many global challenges, such as inequality, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple speakers stressed that the active participation of those States through effective multilateral systems, including the universal periodic review, was key to tackling such global challenges. Pointing to recent challenges to human rights, global conflicts, climate change and the global pandemic, some speakers noted that increased funding was required under the human rights pillar of the United Nations to advance important work, to address the global challenges of development and peace and security and to support each other through international cooperation and solidarity.

41. A representative of one delegation, speaking on behalf of small island developing States, focused on climate change in the context of the universal periodic review, noting that 250 recommendations on climate change had been made in the third cycle. The representative urged States to take concrete action to tackle the climate crisis, and noted that the universal periodic review was one of the most efficient problem-solving tools encountered to draw attention to climate change and to the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Lastly, the speaker asked the panellists for examples of concrete ways in which the mechanism could be used to address the climate emergency.

42. Reflecting upon various gender dimensions, one speaker noted with appreciation the gender balance in participating delegations and in the shared responsibilities among the delegates in the context of the universal periodic review, while another participant shared examples of how the universal periodic review made a difference in a range of areas, including on issues such as gender-based violence.

43. One representative suggested that the session of the Human Rights Council and its general debate under the agenda item 6 could be used as a platform to continue to share good practices.

44. Several speakers recognized that, despite many achievements, challenges persisted in the peer-review mechanism, particularly the gap in technical capacity, the gap in implementation and the lack of sustainable funding for the voluntary funds. In that regard, one representative encouraged exploration of new ways to attract more pledges and alternative avenues for funding, including the possibility of financing by the private sector.

E. Statements by United Nations entities

45. One United Nations entity, UNDP, took the floor during the interactive dialogue of the high-level panel discussion.

46. Pointing out that human rights and sustainable development were two sides of the same coin, the representative of UNDP stated that the universal periodic review was an invaluable instrument in both areas. UNDP, the Development Coordination Office and OHCHR had been working together on good practices across the United Nations system in maximizing engagement with the universal periodic review. In 2022, that collaboration had resulted in the collation of more than 60 different examples of United Nations engagement and the curation of 18 specific examples in a repository of good practices with regard to the universal periodic review, illustrating the mechanism's impact on implementation on the ground. The representative listed specific examples of how the universal periodic review had made a difference in a range of areas, including on issues such as gender-based violence and sustainable development. Specifically, the speaker highlighted the example of Armenia, where, following its universal periodic review, legislation had been amended to prevent torture, including through the use by the police of improved techniques for investigation, supported through training and the development of standard operating procedures.

47. Regarding the remaining challenges, the representative of UNDP noted that, despite the high potential of the universal periodic review, improvements were needed to address the gap in technical cooperation. The representative stressed that recommendations from the universal periodic review could be leveraged to deliver more timely and targeted support for development and to ensure the principle of leaving no one behind. However, the representative remarked that States wishing to take action on the recommendations required further support and needed to continue to work on integrating human rights into the national development policy and into the Sustainable Development Goals framework.

F. Statements by other stakeholders

48. One non-governmental organization, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education, took the floor during the interactive dialogue of the high-level panel discussion.

49. The civil society representative explained that the organization had been actively engaged in the universal periodic review process over the past 10 years, also supporting various national civil society stakeholders to engage in their respective national processes. The civil society representative stated that the process of reviewing all human rights obligations and commitments during the universal periodic review was a concrete step towards recognizing human rights as indivisible, interrelated and interdependent, particularly with respect to human rights with an intersectional character, such as bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

50. The civil society representative further noted that, over the years of working in the review process, the organization had appreciated the importance of the two voluntary funds in terms of achieving a constructive and collaborative process. However, in that context, the civil society representative expressed concern regarding the decreasing trends in contributions to the voluntary funds. Thanking the panellists for their statements, the civil society representative asked them to provide further ideas about innovative ways in which the voluntary funds could further strengthen ongoing collaboration on the universal periodic review between Governments and civil society at the national level.

G. Responses and concluding remarks by the panellists

51. Mr. Villegas opened the final segment of the high-level panel discussion, thanking participants for their insightful comments. He stated that the universal periodic review mechanism was a diamond that had been polished over the past 15 years. However, despite many achievements, there was room for further improvement in the next cycle.

52. Responding to statements delivered during the interactive dialogue, he proposed that many aspects raised were potential focus areas for the newly established Group of Friends of the Universal Periodic Review. On behalf of the Group of Friends – currently composed of Argentina, Armenia, Fiji, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa – he invited other States to join and bring their diverse experiences. With respect to further improvement of the process and new possibilities for funding, he stressed the importance of thinking creatively. He maintained that civil society had to be involved in all phases of the universal periodic review – before, during and after the review – and noted innovative ways of generating public interest around the process, such as the recent example of the universal periodic review of India, during which more than 1,000 civil society organizations of India followed the process online.

53. On the connection between human rights mechanisms and development efforts, he noted that the universal periodic review could lead to inclusive and sustainable development, incorporating human rights perspectives in a creative and innovative manner. With respect to funding, he remarked that while resources were limited, the Group of Friends would strive to mobilize funding for the mechanism and the voluntary funds. In that context, he encouraged a broader approach to the matter, including exploration of projects not clearly marked as human rights projects, such as those addressing water and sanitation or malnutrition, mobilization of resources connected to accepted recommendations.

54. Ms. Moorehead, summarizing the main takeaways from the high-level panel discussion, noted with appreciation that the universal periodic review process was strongly endorsed by all stakeholders. At the same time, she emphasized the need to implement the recommendations from the review, and OECD would explore the possibility of providing funding to support such implementation. Second, she referred to the crucial importance of small island developing States and the availability of resources that they needed to implement the changes on the ground, which was also a top priority for members of the Development Assistance Committee pursuant to their declaration on aligning official development assistance with the Paris Agreement. She underlined the need for dedicated dialogue with small island developing States and strong equipment to get more official development assistance into low-income countries, upholding the principle of leaving no one behind.

55. Reflecting on the intersectional nature of human rights in the context of the intensifying climate crisis and conflicts and scarce resources, Ms. Moorehead emphasized that those challenges could be perceived also as an opportunity to mainstream human rights protection and the implementation of recommendations from the universal periodic review across various silos, including on issues such as gender equality, violence against women and girls, sexual exploitation, and abuse and harassment in the development and humanitarian sector. Lastly, she noted that civil society had a critical role to play in the universal periodic review process, as it represented diverse voices that were otherwise not heard. In closing, she thanked all participants for an inspiring discussion.

56. Ms. M'Bikay welcomed the establishment of the Group of Friends of the Universal Periodic Review, expressing her hopes for future collaboration. Responding to various questions on civil society engagement, she explained that civil society stakeholders continued to be key actors in the universal periodic review process, in different roles that went beyond simple reporting. She noted in particular such roles as advocating human rights, providing education on human rights and holding Governments accountable.

57. Addressing several questions on optimization of the universal periodic review process, Ms. M'Bikay noted that it was of an utmost importance to foster ownership of the process and take a whole-of-Government and whole-of-society approach to it and to the implementation of recommendations, in order to mainstream the process and effectively link it to development efforts. In that context, she encouraged all States to develop a human rights action plan, and to include all line ministries, civil society and national human rights institutions, in order to strengthen the legal framework, institutions and human rights education and to ensure free civil society space.

58. Answering a question regarding the role of the private sector, she affirmed that the private sector could potentially play a significant role in the process. With respect to climate change, she agreed that the universal periodic review had a significant role in advancing

progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, including elements affecting climate change. In closing, she thanked States for their active engagement in the universal periodic review mechanism, strongly encouraging States to support the voluntary funds, and thanked other organizations working to support the implementation of the recommendations, recalling that the mechanism was producing real results. Lastly, she emphasized that a whole-of-society approach could induce real change and better protect the rights of all segments of society.

59. Following the concluding remarks of the panellists, the President of the Human Rights Council thanked all participants and closed the high-level panel discussion.

IV. Outcomes of the high-level panel discussion

60. The first outcome of the high-level panel discussion was the creation of the Group of Friends of the Universal Periodic Review, led by Argentina – and chaired by the former President of the Human Rights Council – with the initial support of Armenia, Fiji, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa, representing the core group of States sponsoring Human Rights Council resolution 51/30. During the high-level panel discussion, the core group invited other States to join the newly formed Group of Friends and to collaborate on enhancing and strengthening the universal periodic review mechanism in the fourth cycle.

61. With respect to the voluntary funds, many beneficiary States – including the Bahamas (on behalf of other countries, including Barbados, Dominica, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), Bahrain, the Gambia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Paraguay and Viet Nam – acknowledged the positive and direct impact of the voluntary funds at the national level. They highlighted the financial and technical assistance received to strengthen national mechanisms for implementation, reporting and follow-up, to develop databases for tracking recommendations, to improve implementation of recommendations, and to support a consultation process towards developing a national action plan for the implementation of recommendations.

62. With regard to the future of the voluntary funds and their optimization in the fourth cycle, delegations made several recommendations during the high-level panel discussion. A number of States reaffirmed their support for the two voluntary funds and invited all States to contribute financially to the voluntary funds to enable the meaningful participation of least developed countries and small island developing States. They also encouraged support for strengthened implementation of accepted recommendations at the country level, in consultation with and with consent of the State concerned, and in connection with the Sustainable Development Goals. In that context, Belgium announced its decision to contribute 50,000 euros to the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review.

63. Many delegations agreed on the need for support for the important role that civil society and national human rights institutions had to play throughout the universal periodic review process, including in advocacy and implementation, and for exploration of new and innovative avenues for the voluntary funds and civil society participation.

64. Many participants recommended that stronger links be leveraged between development cooperation actors, the United Nations system at the country level, and human rights actors, through the entry points generated by the universal periodic review, especially as States were expected to request more assistance during the fourth cycle to implement recommendations on human rights, the Sustainable Development Goals and climate change. Reflecting on the close connections between human rights and development efforts, the panel discussed how peer reviews by the Development Assistance Committee might encourage States' development cooperation entities to follow up on accepted recommendations from the universal periodic review that were a priority for their official development assistance programmes.

65. Lastly, reflecting on the complex state of multilateralism, multifaceted threats to human rights around the world and global challenges such as climate change, States reaffirmed their continued support for the work of the universal periodic review mechanism

and committed to its further strengthening in the fourth cycle, noting that the universal periodic review was an impactful human rights mechanism resulting in real improvements to human rights situation on the ground and bringing together various stakeholders in an inclusive manner.

V. Conclusions

66. The universal periodic review is an effective way to domesticate international human rights norms and to translate them into consistent legislation and practices in a multi-stakeholder process, involving the different branches of Government, especially parliament, and multiple other national stakeholders, including local and regional government, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations. Accepted recommendations from the universal periodic review, because they have been vetted by the State at the highest level, offer entry points for engagement by the United Nations and bilateral actors or through forms of North-South and South-South cooperation. Reflecting its complementarity and synergy with human rights mechanisms, the universal periodic review includes the outcomes of the treaty bodies and special procedures. As a result of the third cycle and in preparation for the fourth cycle, diverse tools and targeted guidance have been developed to support the various stakeholders in the universal periodic review process.

67. The universal periodic review is uniquely situated to promote human rights as part of development efforts and to advance the Sustainable Development Goals. Review recommendations are increasingly becoming part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, and various United Nations entities are taking responsibility for recommendations that fall within their mandate and integrating them into their planning and programming processes.

68. To ensure improved support for States that request assistance to implement recommendations, OHCHR is significantly strengthening capacity dedicated to the universal periodic review in the regional offices and in Geneva, pursuant to the Human Rights Council resolution 51/30, adding dedicated staff within the OHCHR regional offices. With the continuing support of States and strong partnerships with the United Nations system, OHCHR will be better placed to contribute to closing the gap in technical cooperation and implementation and to promote the consistent use of the universal periodic review as a problem-solving tool, including to address emergent human rights issues, which will be fundamental for the future of humanity.
