



UNFPA ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

A CASE STUDY ON TRIANGULAR
COOPERATION ON THE UNIVERSAL
PERIODIC REVIEW

SUMMARY

This brief provides an overview of the process and emerging results from a triangular cooperation between the UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office (APRO), UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO), and the UNFPA Representation Office in Geneva in 2020/2021 on the engagement with international Human Rights Mechanisms, particularly the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), to advance and drive development cooperation efforts on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). This partnership offers reflections on leadership of the two Regional Offices and Geneva Office to develop resources and tools that can be used by different regions and adapted to virtual and hybrid formats. It shows how the collaboration builds on and strengthens, country capacities to engage meaningfully with the UPR and other human rights mechanisms to implement the commitments made by governments during the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, and support States in achieving more equitable and sustainable progress in the realisation of human rights.

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This publication would not be possible without the efforts of UNFPA country offices in East and Southern Africa and the Asia-Pacific in engaging with human rights mechanisms to advance SRHR and gender equality in their countries.

SUPPORT FOR THE UPR PROCESS FROM UNFPA HEADQUARTERS

The potential of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for advancing the ICPD agenda has long been recognized by civil society organizations promoting SRHR. At the global level, prior to the review sessions of the Human Rights Council, civil society organizations started carrying out advocacy efforts with the permanent missions of Member States in Geneva to ensure that SRHR issues were articulated in the States' recommendations during the review session. UNFPA's Technical Division in Headquarters was also quick to seize the opportunity that the UPR provided and initiated a concerted effort to strengthen engagement by the UNFPA country offices with this mechanism. As a first step, the Technical Division carried out an analysis of the extent to which SRHR issues were addressed in the first cycle of the UPR (2008-2012). The analysis highlighted that SRHR was one of the most frequently cited issues in the UPR process. Of the 21,956 recommendations made in the first cycle, 5,720 (26 per cent) pertained to SRHR and gender equality. Of these, 77 per cent were formally accepted by Member States.

In 2016, UNFPA carried out another review of the UPR, this time looking not only at the extent to which SRHR issues were covered but also at trends between the first and second cycles and the extent to which recommendations from the first cycle were implemented. The findings showed that more than 10,000 SRHR-related recommendations were made in the second cycle, which made up over a quarter of all recommendations. Of these recommendations, 76 per cent were accepted by States. However, the analysis also found stark differences in the attention given to different SRHR issues. For instance, there were far more recommendations on broader issues such as gender equality and violence against women (receiving more than 4,000 recommendations), while only one in ten of all recommendations addressed other SRHR issues such as comprehensive sexuality education, early pregnancy, and contraception, which received only 23, 35, and 48 recommendations, respectively. Based on these findings, UNFPA was able to engage more strategically with Member States and civil society to promote broader and more specific recommendations on SRHR to inform the third cycle of the UPR.

To leverage the opportunity provided by this mechanism for policy dialogue, advocacy, and accountability in countries, UNFPA's Technical Division initiated a series of initiatives to support and guide country offices in their own engagements on the UPR. The Technical Division began carrying out a detailed analysis of the recommendations related to SRHR for each country where UNFPA had a field office and identified entry points for follow-up. This direct technical assistance to countries has helped country offices to develop strategies to maximize the opportunity presented by the UPR. In particular, it has encouraged UNFPA to draw on the UPR as a platform for dialogue, particularly on sensitive issues that otherwise could be too challenging to raise directly, and between State actors and a wide range of civil society groups, including those that are often marginalized from national policy processes, such as youth groups.

In 2015, UNFPA's Technical Division developed a learning package on UNFPA's engagement with the UPR, which was subsequently rolled out together with regional offices. This package served as a basis for ESARO to develop in 2020, in partnership with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a virtual training package for multi-stakeholders from governments, civil society organizations, national human rights institutions, and United Nations agencies on how to strengthen the engagement on the UPR process and how to integrate SRHR and gender equality throughout the process. By 2018, UNFPA regional and country offices had been sensitised on and had become more engaged with the UPR process. UNFPA's Technical Division, encouraged the regional offices to lead in-country support for the UPR while the Technical Division focused on advocacy for promoting engagement with the UPR in inter-agency United Nations fora, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Group; developing global training materials on human rights, including on the UPR process; and ensuring that the engagement with the UPR and the other international human rights mechanisms continues to be recognised as a central part of efforts to advance the ICPD in UNFPA's successive strategic plans.

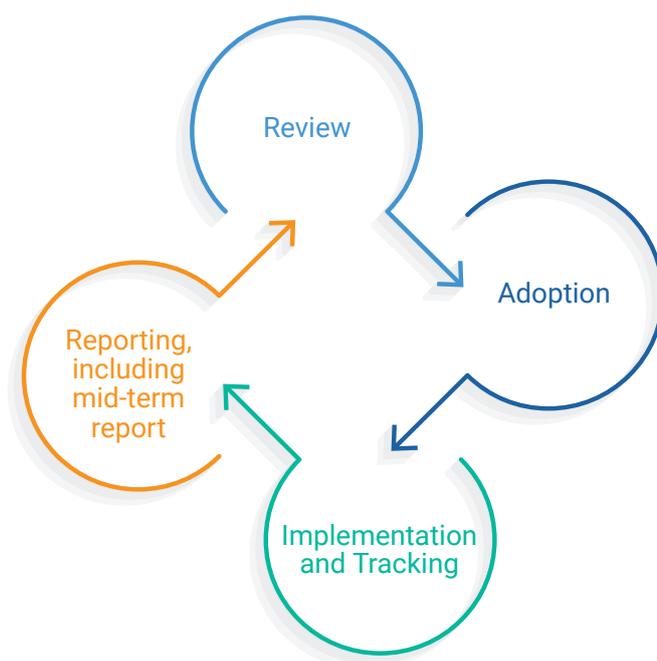
1. BACKGROUND ON THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW



The [Universal Periodic Review \(UPR\)](#) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2006. The first UPR cycle started in 2008 under the auspices of the Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva as a peer-review process among its 193 Member States. It constitutes a relatively new entity in the range of international human rights mechanisms. While United Nations Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures mandate-holders are expert bodies, the UPR is an intergovernmental body of a political nature. The UPR is not replacing but rather complementing the work done by Treaty Bodies, e.g. the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which monitor the implementation of human rights obligations and standards by the States parties' to the respective treaties.

The UPR is [truly universal](#) as all 193 Member States are subject to review by other Member States on the full range of human rights irrespective of whether they have ratified a particular human rights treaty or not. The complete cycle of the reviews takes 4.5 years. This comprehensive scope provides a valuable opportunity to review sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – which encompass a diverse set of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights – in an integrated way. This also helps to prevent SRHR being siloed and helps overcome fragmentation of SRHR across different treaties. Furthermore, it provides the possibility to engage in a constructive dialogue among Governments in order to drive cooperation efforts towards the realisation of human rights. The UPR also serves as a mechanism to strengthen treaty ratification and as an accountability mechanism to follow-up the implementation of human rights-related international commitments, such as those contained in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For all these reasons, the UPR represents a valuable mechanism for UNFPA to engage with in order to support the application of a human rights-based approach in development efforts geared towards the achievement of gender equality and the realisation of SRHR.

All 193 Member States were reviewed during the first (2008–2011) and second (2012–2016) UPR cycles. The third UPR cycle was concluded in July 2022, with its fourth cycle starting in November 2022. The UPR is carried out in four distinct but related stages: (1) Review; (2) Adoption; (3) Implementation and Tracking; and (4) Reporting, including a voluntary mid-term report.



2. ANALYSIS OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS ISSUES WITHIN THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW



A global UNFPA [analysis of the second-cycle \(2012–2016\) UPR recommendations highlights stark differences in attention to different SRHR issues by reviewing States](#).

It is important to note that the vast majority of the recommendations globally on SRHR in the second cycle were related to gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices, maternal health, and gender equality. Other elements of SRHR, such as contraception, family planning, adolescent SRHR, teenage pregnancy, and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) did not receive a similar level of attention.

The same analysis shows that Africa is the region that received the highest number of SRHR-related recommendations overall. The analysis showed that of the total number of recommendations received by African Member States, 26 per cent, were on gender equality, 22 per cent on GBV, and 18 per cent on harmful practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. In terms of recommendations made by African Member States, 33 per cent were related to gender equality and 16 per cent to GBV.

The Asia-Pacific region received the second highest number of recommendations. The top three received recommendations in the region made by Member States pertained to (1) ratification of human rights international instruments, 31 per cent; (2) gender equality, 28 per cent; and (3) violence against women/GBV, 21 per cent. The top two recommendations made by the Asia-Pacific States were gender equality with 34 per cent, while 24 per cent were related to women's rights. The Asia-Pacific was the only region where recommendations to ratify international human rights instruments topped the list (31 per cent); this may be due to the higher number of countries within the region, but also particularly to the low levels of ratification of such instruments among the Pacific island States.

During the third cycle of the UPR, the level of attention to previously neglected SRHR issues has increased significantly globally as well as in the African and Asia-Pacific regions. This can be attributed to the capacity-building investment by UNFPA's regional offices in bridging the knowledge gap of UNFPA's country offices on the UPR mechanism and its functioning; the increasing engagement of UNFPA country offices in providing more specific information in their UPR submissions and the work of the Geneva Office in ensuring that this information is made available to Permanent Missions in a timely fashion. This has included the dissemination by the Geneva Office of human rights-related information drawn from commitments made by States at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25. An analysis of [accepted UPR recommendations since January 2020](#) shows that, on average, at least 44 per cent of UPR recommendations are directly related to the Nairobi Summit and the ICPD agenda.¹ This creates a unique opportunity for regional and country offices to support the follow-up to the Nairobi Summit agenda in national human rights implementation, monitoring, and reporting processes.

The high level of attention given to critical SRHR dimensions in the UPR process contributes greatly to reinforcing the message that SRHR are enforceable human rights. In order to continue the strategic engagement of UNFPA with the UPR, it is critical to ensure seamless coordination between the country office's involvement in the national reporting, implementation, and monitoring; the tailored national support and the cross-regional South–South knowledge-sharing work of regional offices; and the outreach and dissemination efforts of the Geneva Office.

¹ From the thirty-fifth UPR session held in January 2020 to the fortieth session in January 2022, out of a total number of 13,509 recommendations issued by the mechanism at least 5,950 recommendations were directly related to the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25

3. TRIANGULAR COOPERATION TO STRENGTHEN UNFPA CAPACITIES ON ENGAGING WITH HUMAN RIGHTS PROCESSES AND WORKING IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT



In 2020, both the Asia and the Pacific Regional Office (APRO) and the East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) scaled up their engagements with human rights mechanisms with the support of the UNFPA Representation Office in Geneva. ESARO led the process of strengthening staff and partner capacities on UPR engagement through the development of a series of training packages on the UPR, while APRO established a country office system of human rights focal points to strengthen internal capacities.

With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, ESARO decided to pivot and adapt rapidly to the new normal way of working. It led a partnership with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) ESARO in 2020 to [develop virtual training packages for multi-stakeholders](#) from governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), and United Nations agencies on how to strengthen engagement on the UPR process, including how to integrate SRHR and gender equality throughout the UPR. In response to requests from Government representatives from Seychelles and Eswatini for capacity building on UPR engagement, UNFPA's and OHCHR's East and Southern Africa Regional Offices – together with the Geneva Office and OHCHR headquarters – rolled out these training packages in a hybrid format. The facilitation team from ESARO and Geneva ran the training virtually with the participants gathering together in the country. The virtual training went very well and received good feedback.

In parallel to the development of the multi-stakeholder UPR training package, ESARO partnered with the Geneva Office to supplement the training package with an additional advocacy module to position relevant information on SRHR and gender equality in the UPR process – a longer and internal version for UNFPA staff and another one for interested partners. The module was built on the basis of the standard operating procedures (SOPs) developed by the Geneva Office in 2018, and also drew on regional products developed by ESARO. The SOPs developed by the Geneva Office served to strengthen the link between the national information provided by country offices in the UPR submissions prepared by United Nations Country Teams and the positioning of SMART² recommendations prior to the review process taking place in Geneva. These outreach and dissemination efforts culminated with the preparation and delivery of oral statements by Country and Sub-Regional Offices at the Human Rights Council to commend governments on the adoption of their respective UPR outcome reports and to offer support for the national implementation of those recommendations related to UNFPA's mandate.

² Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

In that same time period, APRO requested all countries to appoint a human rights focal point to enable greater focus on human rights in programming, and to facilitate collaboration between the Human Rights Adviser in APRO and the country offices. In response to the country offices' requests, APRO and the Geneva Office rolled out a streamlined virtual training based on the module developed by ESARO and the Geneva Office, in order to enhance the understanding on what the UPR is, the main entry points for policy engagement and how to strengthen the capacity of human rights focal points to engage more strategically in different phases of the UPR process.

The training was very well received and led to five additional sessions, including one with the CO management (Representatives, Deputy Representatives and Assistant Representatives) and the human rights focal points. These sessions were interactive and explored issues such as the following: (1) how the UPR can contribute to promote, protect, and advance the ICPD agenda; (2) the challenges and opportunities in engaging with the UPR; (3) how to position the ICPD agenda throughout the entire UPR process; (4) the use of the UPR recommendations as a tool for policy engagement and its application, and how to leverage the UPR to strengthen synergies and complementarities between different review processes (ICPD and SDG reviews, Treaty Bodies), including the follow-up to Nairobi Summit commitments; and (5) learning about the available tools containing country-based human rights information and recommendations, and making a practical use of different databases to assist in engaging more strategically with the UPR and other international human rights mechanisms. All the sessions were developed and facilitated in collaboration with the Geneva Office.

In line with the new Strategic Plan that emphasises the importance of scaling up South–South and triangular cooperation within UNFPA, APRO, ESARO, and the Geneva Office initiated a triangular South–South knowledge-sharing and exchange process. This collaborative work put in place in 2020 laid the foundation for the strengthened triangular cooperation between the offices in 2021. The three offices decided to do a joint APRO-ESARO-Geneva offices UPR Advocacy Session for countries reporting in 2021 and 2022. This enabled and encouraged Country Offices (COs) to strategically engage with each other across regions for the same UPR working group sessions.

The joint UPR Advocacy Session targeted eight countries from East and Southern Africa and five countries from the Asia-Pacific region that were presenting their UPR reports at the UPR working sessions in 2021/2022. The ESARO countries were Eswatini, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The APRO countries were Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Thailand, and Timor-Leste. The three offices used the outreach and dissemination module along with the regional offices' tools to develop a tailored and targeted training to engage strategically in the UPR process and to ensure that SRHR work could be advanced through the UPR.

4. EMERGING INITIAL RESULTS



Emerging results from the triangular cooperation between APRO, ESARO and the Geneva Office in 2020 and 2021 can be summarised as follow:



a. Stronger UNFPA engagement contributes to significant legal, policy, and institutional changes for the achievement of gender equality and the realisation of SRHR

The triangular cooperation seeks to strengthen how country offices are increasingly using the UPR process to support governments and other actors engaging in national dialogue to advance real change on human rights in their countries. While it is still too early to assess the full impact of this form of triangular cooperation on the ground, some important legal, policy, and institutional changes can already be seen. For instance, the National Human Rights Institution of Malaysia has been empowered through its engagement with the UPR to visualise female genital mutilation as a national problem and seek accountability. In Malawi, the engagement of UNFPA with the Government, the National Human Rights Commission and other national actors between the UPR review and adoption phases opened opportunities for dialogue that resulted in the final acceptance of SRHR recommendations, thus creating the chance to engage donor countries in driving their development cooperation efforts in that direction. Building on prior work, the UPR has also been used to advance national dialogue in Fiji on the implementation of CSE in the school curriculum and to pass laws against domestic violence in some East and Southern Africa countries (Eswatini and Seychelles). These are a few examples of the strategic use of the UPR to advance the SRHR and the gender equality agendas in countries.

b. Strengthened country engagement in UPR processes

Across the Asia-Pacific and East and Southern Africa regions, country office engagement in the UPR process has strengthened considerably and outreach to the regional offices for support has also increased in 2020/2021. This has led to stronger SRHR inclusion in United Nations Country Team submissions (e.g. Mongolia and Rwanda); strategic engagement with Government and NGO partners during the reporting, review, and implementation phases (e.g. Mozambique and Nepal); interest in using UPR recommendations to support implementation of the Nairobi Summit commitments and the ICPD agenda in countries, such as in Rwanda and Maldives where the Government plans to integrate the Nairobi Summit commitments into the National Recommendations Tracking Database (NRTD), an application offered by OHCHR to assist State officials in recording, tracking, and reporting on the implementation of human rights recommendations; and leveraging integration of SRHR in UPR and other international human rights mechanisms to advance integration in Voluntary National Review (VNR) Reports on SDGs (e.g. Fiji and Ethiopia³). There is also greater interest at an inter-agency level in documenting successful case studies of UNFPA engagement with the UPR process.

³ Alfonso Barragues, "Accountability for sexual and reproductive health and rights in development practice: building synergies", *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 2020; vol 28 No. 1: (10 December 2020).

c. UNFPA leverages Universal Periodic Review engagement for stronger inter-agency collaboration on human rights

Engagement of UNFPA with the UPR, which is widely seen as a United Nations system-wide form of engagement,⁴ has positioned UNFPA as a lead actor and convenor among United Nations agencies on gender and human rights. UNFPA is a trusted supporter of the United Nations Resident Coordinator system. A recent example of how UNFPA works with other United Nations agencies on the UPR process is when the Rwanda Country Office provided the United Nations Resident Coordinator with the slot reserved for UNFPA [to deliver a statement](#) at the adoption of the UPR outcome report of Rwanda in July 2021, in which SRHR and gender equality featured as top cooperation priorities.

d. Scaled up and seamless internal cooperation between country offices, regional offices and the Geneva Office

The triangular cooperation has helped strengthen seamless cooperation between regional and country offices and the Geneva Office throughout critical entry points of the UPR process. The Geneva Office supports primarily country offices' engagement with the UPR review and adoption phases. During this period, the Geneva Office works closely with country offices to draw relevant information from their submissions to the UPR as well as from the commitments made by the State under review at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 in order to make all that information more accessible in a timely manner to interested Permanent Missions prior to the UPR Working Group session. By the time the UPR outcome report is adopted at the Human Rights Council, the Geneva Office works closely with country offices and regional offices to prepare statements welcoming the UPR outcome reports and signaling the main areas of cooperation with the governments in supporting the implementation of recommendations related to the mandate of UNFPA. In addition, the Geneva Office prepares sets of infographics and analytical tools on linkages between UPR recommendations with Nairobi Summit commitments in order to support integrated approaches to national implementation and follow-up.

The regional offices have developed additional tools such as a comprehensive mapping of UPR recommendations against the ICPD agenda developed by ESARO for advocacy and resource mobilisation purposes. APRO is also in the process of developing analytical tools to help integrate UPR recommendations into national programmes and plans on SRHR, gender equality, and population dynamics. The integration of these tools into the UPR learning package are proving to be a useful resource for country offices to leverage national follow-up to Nairobi Summit commitments through government-led mechanisms to plan and monitor the implementation of UPR recommendations and contribute to targeted resource mobilisation efforts.

⁴ Policy Committee decision of the United Nations Secretary General on the United Nations Support to Implementation of UPR Recommendations, 2018/35.

5. PROMISING PRACTICES AND FUTURE WAYS OF WORKING



This triangular cooperation between APRO, ESARO, and the Geneva Office offers several lessons learned and promising practices on human rights, regional leadership on global processes, strategic position in Geneva and building cooperation within and between regions. Consequently, this form of cooperation offers several insights into future ways of working in line with the Strategic Plan (2022–2025).

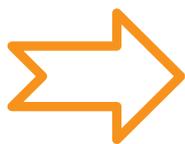
The partnership has shown that targeted UPR support and capacity-building for UNFPA staff and partners strengthen other aspects of the work of UNFPA including collaboration with the government and its partners, CSOs and allies around SRHR integration in a broad range of human rights engagement processes, as well as in the VNR process on the SDGs. It charts a way forward for the engagement of UNFPA with human rights instruments to strengthen accountability and implementation of the ICPD agenda and Nairobi Summit commitments in countries.

Promising practices emerging from this partnership include:

- Tailored and coordinated policy engagement in Geneva and at the regional and national levels is critical to ensure integration of SRHR in UPR and other human rights mechanisms as well as to follow up the implementation of Nairobi Summit commitments and the broader ICPD agenda.
- Targeted training for UNFPA and partners engaging in the UPR, tailored to the different phases of the UPR process in which they are reporting, reviewing, and national implementation is more useful than generalised blanket training on UPR. A participating UNFPA Representative from APRO concluded that *“these trainings help our Representatives, Deputy Representatives, and relevant national programme officers and regional advisers understand the process and the opportunities to intervene and influence country reactions to the UPR reports and subsequent follow-ups.”*
- Such capacity-building initiatives offer an opportunity to bring a diverse set of partners, including critical youth partners, around the table to advocate for inclusion of SRHR issues and Nairobi Summit commitments⁵ in UPR reporting, review, and implementation stages, which also helps strengthen partnerships of UNFPA with a diverse range of stakeholders.
- These initiatives strengthen internal coordination and ally building at the governmental and United Nations levels on a broad spectrum of SRHR issues within the broader human rights and sustainable development cooperation frameworks.
- Virtual formats offer the opportunity of bringing together participants across different regions and time zones, such as in the 2021 APRO-ESARO-Geneva Office training that had participants from the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and East and Southern Africa, with minimal cost implications. This provides lessons for future ways of working in which virtual outreach will continue to be vital to build cross regional collaboration even as we revert to face-to-face options. Ideally, the two will be combined in the future.

⁵ On this point it is worth noting that at least 52 per cent of Nairobi Summit government commitments are related to youth rights. Source: UNFPA’s presentation at HRC Intersessional Seminar on Youth and Human Rights, 12 April 2021.

6. WAY FORWARD



Given the initial successes of the triangular cooperation, the APRO, ESARO, and Geneva Office teams are exploring future collaborative efforts. These include:

- Building on the emerging promising practices to strengthen critical engagement of UNFPA in different entry points of the UPR and other human rights mechanisms, to advocate for and implement real changes at the country level;
- Strengthen visibility of the work done by UNFPA on UPR engagement by showcasing emerging results from triangular cooperation at various strategic events in Geneva and at regional and country levels;
- Enhance cross-regional cooperation by extending collaboration on UPR capacity building, advocacy, and engagement to other interested regions as a participatory method of engagement;
- Further strengthen staff capacities on engagement with human rights mechanisms across the organisation through cross-regional training of trainers to develop an internal roster of UNFPA staff with expertise in human rights engagement in all regions, with the capacity to provide ongoing support to country offices at their request;
- Create a community of practice of colleagues from across the organisation who are interested and involved in advancing SRHR through human rights processes;
- Document country good practices and case studies to integrate into UPR training packages and to serve as illustrative examples for other country offices;
- Strengthen and institutionalise the work on human rights at UNFPA by integrating the work into global, regional, and national strategies and plans, including by investing in scaling up dedicated capacities and resources for policy engagement and outreach at the Geneva Office, and for technical support at regional offices to sustain and scale up the work on strategic engagement, resource development, and tailored support to country offices. Both APRO and ESARO have explicitly incorporated work on engaging with international human rights mechanisms, particularly the UPR, in their regional strategic plans. In addition, APRO is currently developing a human rights work plan for the region with the active engagement of the country offices' human rights focal points, where the UPR and other international human rights mechanisms are one pillar of the work plan and are considered critical for the institutionalisation of human rights for APRO.

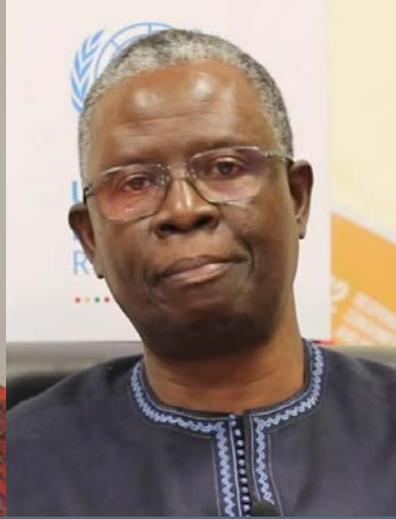
This triangular cooperation has yielded promising practices that APRO, ESARO, and the Geneva Office plan to build on and expand further in collaboration with other interested regions and colleagues. The work of UNFPA on human rights is fundamental to the organisation's vision to achieve the three transformative results (zero maternal deaths, zero GBV and harmful practices, and zero unmet need for family planning) and is critical in the progress towards meeting the SDGs and leaving no one behind by 2030.



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**Sub-regional and country representatives
from APRO and ESARO delivering
statements at the Human Rights Council
for the adoption of the UPR outcome
reports of their respective countries**



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