

From the Chair

As we mark the 20th anniversary of the Voluntary Principles Initiative (VPI), the COVID-19 pandemic is our most pressing challenge. As countries around the world continue to adapt and respond to the pandemic, we are acutely aware of the impact COVID-19 continues to have on communities, companies and economies. Of relevance to the VPI, the pandemic is exacerbating societal inequities, reducing employment opportunities and changing the role of security providers. At this challenging time, we are reminded of the core commitment enshrined in the Voluntary Principles (VPs) – to ensure respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of communities while maintaining the security of extractive site operations.

It is appropriate that in this 20th anniversary year, we draw on the experience and collective learning of our members to respond to COVID-19 and other emerging challenges. We are rightly prioritising our efforts on what will have the greatest positive impact in our current environment and the years immediately ahead. Better addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups, focusing our attention on conflict prevention and offering greater support to localised, country-level VP processes are very much on our agenda.

We will soon embark on a major effort to support the strengthening of gender equality through the VPs. The associated project will identify the specific ways project-related security activities can heighten risks to women and girls, and the appropriate strategies companies can draw on to minimise these risks.

We will also progress work to develop a VPs conflict analysis tool. The tool will assist companies in undertaking deeper analysis on the drivers of conflict in their operating environments. This will build on existing VPI guidance on human rights risk assessment for companies.

A third planned outcome for our 20th anniversary year is better support country-level VP processes. Building on the guide “From Commitment to Impact: Experiences from Local Working Groups on Business, Security and Human Rights” published by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance and Fund for Peace earlier this year, the VPI will enhance its support of country-level VPI working groups, in particular, the critical role they play as the fora for on-the-ground problem-solving between local authorities, companies and community groups.

Two decades ago, the VPI became a pioneer amongst multi-stakeholder initiatives in the business and human rights field. At its essence, it sought to protect rights, safeguard communities and save lives. In this core endeavour it is as relevant and important as ever.

As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates, though, it is essential that the Initiative continues to draw on its foundations to respond to changing needs consistent with our core mandate. In this way, we can best serve our communities and industries.

Happy 20th Birthday VPI.