2020 Annual Report
Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights

A-B. *Commitment*

PAX joined the Voluntary Principles in January 2003 and continues to be fully committed to its purpose. We regard the VPs as a useful tool for companies to promote and protect human rights when securing their staff and their assets, as part of a wider goal to contribute to fundamental global public goods, justice, peace and democratic values.

In 2020, in addition to irregular meetings and consultations with individual government, corporate, and NGO members, we served in the

- ✓ Steering Committee of the VPI, the
- ✓ Board of Directors of the VPA, and the
- ✓ Working Group on Conflict Risk Assessment, and actively participated in the
- ✓ NGO Pillar, and the
- ✓ virtual 2020 Plenary.

Strongly committed to enhancing the relevance, impact and credibility of the VPI, we took the initiative to establish the Working Group on Conflict Risk Assessment in order to realise the conflict prevention commitment of the Initiative's Strategy.

C. *Promotion*

Nothing much to report.

D. *Country Implementation*

The VPSHR are presently not particularly relevant for our work in high-risk environments, i.e. DRC, South Sudan and Colombia. The mining industry plays an crucial role in DRC's corrupted political system, but VPSHR implementation efforts do not directly target the underlying issues that drive the country's conflict dynamics. In South Sudan, the oil sector is the only substantial source of Government income and it shaped the way the civil war has been fought. Rather than preventing or mitigating adverse impacts, the oil companies that operate in South Sudan have effectively taken sides in the conflict and sponsored abusive militia's. Implementation of the VPSHR could make a huge difference, but neither the industry nor the Government show interest in the values that underlie the VPSHR. In Colombia, the end of the civil war as we know it seems to transform violence rather than ending it. The VPSHR currently has no substantial added value for the kind of reconciliation and peacebuilding processes that we are involved in.

E. *Lessons and Issues*

Twenty years after the Voluntary Principles were adopted, the international human rights system has become openly challenged by powerful governments, including two permanent members of the Security Council. If commitment to human rights may ever have seemed to be politically neutral, it does no more in our day. Economic actors cannot hide their colours. By committing to the VPSHR, major business enterprises assert that their interest lies with justice, peace and democratic values. The core mission of the VPI is to maximise the impacts of their stance.

The Voluntary Principles are part of the global governance agenda of advancing a coherent set of values, without which a free global market place can all too easily lead to international public disorder. They acknowledge that human rights risks cannot be dealt with in isolation from the political and social issues that drive them and their stated common goal is the "promotion and protection of human rights", not simply respect them. The VPSHR therefore recognize that companies can have a role to play in mitigating potential for conflict, in security sector reform and in the strengthening of the rule of law. Their narrow goal – "maintaining safety and security within an operating framework that ensures respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" - is embedded in a higher mission of contributing to the fundamental global public goods of justice and peace and democratic values. This makes them highly relevant for today's major global challenges.

Over the past 20 years, the Voluntary Principles Initiative did not directly address its wider goal. Members focussed more on operational challenges than on underlying issues and people at risk. Little attention was given to the Principles' wider objectives to have "a positive impact on local governance, peace and stability", [1] "strengthen state institutions to ensure accountability"[2], "contribute to security sector reform"[3], or "strengthen of the rule of law". The value of the VPI lies in achieving collectively what individual companies cannot achieve on their own, but very few determined collective efforts have been made to engage with host governments.

The Working Group on Conflict Risk Assessment will start to fill this gap. Its work is based on the current VPI Strategy that embraces the Initiative's wider goal by acknowledging that "Violent conflict is a major driver of security-related human rights violations" and that the creation of an enabling environment for human rights requires that the underlying causes of violent conflict are addressed. Consequently, the members of VPI recognize that tackling "underlying conflict drivers such as political, social and economic exclusion and lack of opportunity, the absence of the rule of law, insufficient civic space and ability to dialogue, repression, persecution of human right defenders, and poor human security are essential for effective implementation." The VPI approach to conflict is in line with the UN Working Group on business and human rights report *Business, human rights and conflict-affected regions: towards heightened action* and the UN/World Bank conflict prevention policy *Pathways for Peace*.

The litmus test for the relevance of the VPI in our day will be to deliver on its new strategy.

[1] Voluntary Principles Initiative, "Guidance on Roles and Responsibilities of Companies".
[2] Voluntary Principles.
[3] Idem.