



2022 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 2022, in addition to irregular meetings and consultations with individual government, corporate, and NGO members, we served in the Board of Directors of the VPA and contributed to the 2022 Strategic Retreat.

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 target the underlying issues that drive the country's conflict dynamics. There seems to be ample space for improvement in this regard.

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, sponsored abusive militia's, arguably contributing to insecurity and human rights abuses. 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 peace process has transformed conflict drivers, not eliminated them and justice remains elusive for the majority of victims of human rights violations. The VPSHR currently has no substantial added value for the kind of reconciliation, justice and peacebuilding processes that we are involved in.

E. Lessons and Issues

The Voluntary Principles are part of the global governance agenda of advancing a coherent set of rules and values, without which a free global market place can all too easily lead to international public disorder. Twenty years after the Voluntary Principles were adopted, the international human rights system is come under direct attack from powerful governments, including two permanent members of the Security Council. If commitment to human rights has ever been believed to be politically neutral, it clearly no longer is today. The consequences of the Russian attack of Ukraine show that the costs of partnering with governments that reject fundamental international norms and their underlying values can be colossal and are not merely reputational. Business enterprises that commit to human rights assert that their interest lies with justice, peace and democratic values because they are the values underpinning human rights. The private sector cannot but show its colours.

Members of the VPI 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 respecting them. The VPSHR therefore recognize that companies can have a role to play in the strengthening of the rule of law and in mitigating potential for conflict. 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. The core mission of the VPI today is to maximise the contribution of its collective membership to prevention of violent conflict and upholding democratic values.

Over the past 22 years, the Voluntary Principles Initiative did not directly address its wider goal. Most members focussed on operational challenges, comfortably ignoring underlying issues and people at risk. The 2019-2022 Strategy promised to fill this gap by confirming the position of the members 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, notably “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...”. The Conflict Assessment Tool was developed to assist member in putting this in practice.

Human Rights Due Diligence is increasingly becoming mandatory and enhanced due diligence in conflict-affected areas is the prevailing norm, as confirmed by its inclusion in the updated OECD Guidelines. The VPI is well uniquely well positioned to develop international guidelines human rights due diligence in security provision.

The rules based international order is faltering and the private sector must do its bit to shore it up, together with governments and civil society. The litmus test for the relevance of the VPI in our time is whether it contributes to peace, justice and the rule of law. If it fails the test, its time has passed.