

2025 Annual Report Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights

A Most Urgent Concern

The VPI's core mission—to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms—faces unprecedented pressure from international political actors seeking to erode the rules-based order that underpins the initiative, including the international human-rights system. This threatens our members' ability to achieve our joint objectives. No matter how intolerably deficient the international rule of law is, there is no alternative to preventing and mitigating violent conflict and gross injustice.

Violent conflict is a primary driver of security-related human-rights violations. Our current strategy recognises that underlying drivers—political, social and economic exclusion; lack of opportunity; weak rule of law; restricted civic space; repression; persecution of human-rights defenders; and poor human security—create conditions that heighten conflict risk. Creating an enabling environment for the realisation of human rights must therefore be integral to VPI implementation. Yet the draft strategy no longer addresses these realities.

Apathy is no option. The VPI and its members must confront the decline of the international rule of law head-on. Corporate members are under mounting pressure to dilute or conceal their human-rights commitments. While some corporations resist this trend, others are reducing the size and seniority of their SDG staff. At the same time, the largest government member, the USA, has set aside the global governance agenda that the VPSHR exemplifies.

The certainty that members live up to their commitments has decreased. This poses serious risks in terms of impact and reputation. How will the Initiative respond if a member government targets human rights defenders? How if a host government targets an NGO member and the corporate members' response is absent or futile? What if the VPI becomes a source of legitimacy to governments or corporates with dubious human rights records? What if government and corporate members fail to tackle the absence of free space for civil society members to play their role? These questions have become urgent and essential to the survival of the VPI.

The erosion of the international rule of law also affects the VPI itself. Its government members no longer see eye to eye on international human rights system; some corporate members are deprioritizing human rights; and NGOs are losing their funding and their freedom. **The current draft strategy reads like working the garden while a wrecking ball is working the house. That is not good enough. Twenty-five years ago the VPI tackled the challenges of its era; now we must confront the challenges of ours.**

A. Commitment

PAX joined the Voluntary Principles Initiative 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.

We participated in NGO-pillar meetings, the Plenary meeting, the 2025 Strategic Retreat in Houston, and have had several bilateral engagements with members of the government and corporate pillars about a variety of issues. In addition, we served on the Board of the Voluntary Principles Association.

B. Procedures

Nothing to report.

C. Promotion

We have since 2010 repeatedly invited the prospective corporate member OMV AG to engage in a dialogue about human rights due diligence. This has been flatly rejected. During the application process for the VPI, we have explained that international crimes are the worst crimes known to mankind and the most salient human rights issues imaginable. Credible allegations of direct linkage to such crimes require urgent and sincere Human Rights Due Diligence, including meaningful dialogue with victims of such violations. Such is even more expected, if, in the case of OMV, a full criminal investigation has revealed that a company may have contributed to the systematic commission of war crimes. Unfortunately, OMV continues its failure to address this grave issue in accordance with the prevailing international standards - the UNGP or OECD Guidelines - with which the VPSHR are aligned.

Attached is the statement by PAX about the decision to vote OMV in as an engaged member.

D. Country Implementation

PAX is active in conflict-affected areas in Europe, Latin-America, Africa and the Middle-East, working to protect civilians against acts of war, ending armed conflict and contributing to peaceful and inclusive societies. Our programs include advocacy for the strengthening of the rule of law and engagement with the public security sector to promote the protection of civilians and of human rights. We also work on corporate accountability and support victims of corporate human rights abuses in their struggle for justice and remedy. For example, we work with victims of human rights abuses in the Colombian mining region César, to hold to account the international mining companies that contributed to and profited from these abuses during the civil war. Amongst these companies is a VPI member.

In general, there is little connection between our in-country work and the VPSHR, as PAX focusses on underlying conflict drivers and protecting and strengthening international human rights norms. Unfortunately, VPI implementation often does not look beyond project-level security issues and therefore misses opportunities to promote respect for human rights.

D. Lessons and issues

1. See the Most Urgent Concern above.
2. An essential part of accountability is transparency about how the best practices and guidelines that have adopted by the VPI are used by its members. Some members do, others do it partly, and yet others do not at all report meaningfully whether or how they apply the adopted guidance and best practices. Consequently, the VPI is not half as credible as it could be. The outside world cannot assess the meaning and the impact of VPI membership as the VPI provides no assurance that members “ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”, “create an enabling environment for the realisation of human rights”, and have “a positive impact on local governance, peace and stability and play a proactive role in preventing conflict”.
3. It is a stated ambition of the VPI to promote its principles and best practices. This requires advocacy for and engagement with e.g. decision makers working on mandatory due diligence legislation with a purpose that the principles and best practices regarding human rights due diligence on security and conflict that have been adopted by the VPs are reflected in implementation guidance documents for emerging laws and regulations. The activities of the VPI is not commensurate to the importance of its ambition in this respect. We expect that the issue will be taken up with vigour in 2026 and that the staffing of the VPI will be adjusted accordingly.

E. Future

Not unlike many other NGOs, PAX is faced with brutal budget cuts. Both institutional and governmental donors are drastically scaling down, including most member government’s support for peace and human rights, especially through civil society organisations. Consequently, PAX has reduced its workforce with 2/3 and can no longer commit any substantial staff time to the VPI.



London, 21 March 2025

Statement by PAX regarding the engaged membership of OMV to the VPI

We would like to formally state that PAX voted against the application for membership of the company OMV to the VPI. Although the vote is finalized, PAX' vote of objection stands registered and we would like to shortly explain this vote of objection.

OMV was active in a consortium that operated in Sudan in the period 1997-2003. During this period, severe war crimes were committed by government forces and allied militias in their quest to secure the consortium's oil operations. Former executives of OMV's consortium partner Lundin are currently tried in a Swedish court for knowingly supporting the government's actions and thereby aiding and abetting these war crimes. However, we believe the full consortium bears responsibility and last year, a criminal complaint was filed in Austria against OMV senior executives.

12.000 people were killed, 160.000 people were forcibly displaced, the area was left utterly destroyed and has not recovered until today. None of the survivors and affected communities have seen any form of remedy. None of the involved companies has ever agreed to the affected communities' request to enter into dialogue.

We expect that OMV's newly gained status of engaged member of the VPI will have them take up their basic responsibility to conduct human rights due diligence. On all impacts, not only those in the future, but also those in the past. Not only to learn from what went wrong, but to actually address these wrongs. Because for the victims, these impacts are not 'in the past': they are felt every day. Talk to the victims, listen to their story and take responsibility for your part in that story. There is no moving forward without dealing with the past.

We also expect and look forward to working with the VPI members of all three pillars to be strongly engaged and committed to this matter.

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