




MEMORANDUM

To: All Resident Representatives **Date:** 19 November 2002

From: Zéphirin Diabré 

Subject: Peer Review Process for National Human Development Reports

Following the meeting of the Executive Team of 17 October, and further to the proposal of the HDRO/NHDR Unit, I would like to advise colleagues that effective immediately, all national and regional Human Development Reports should undergo a formal process of peer review.

This recommendation builds upon the Corporate Policy on NHDRs, which lists peer reviews as one important mechanism to contribute to high quality reports. Peer reviews are a common practice in the academic and scientific communities to ensure objectivity and assure quality in research and publications. The attached Peer Review system is based on the existing experience of many NHDRs, where reviews are already being conducted on an ad hoc basis, and on discussions over the RRNet on this issue, as well as on discussions held during the June 2000 Beirut Retreat.

In order for a review to be constructive and make valuable, concrete recommendations to raise the Report's quality, it must be done by reviewers sensitive to the country context, and should not interfere with the key objective of national ownership. Therefore, the fundamental principle of this peer review system is that it is the responsibility of the UNDP Country Office to conduct them, and of the national team to evaluate and adopt, as relevant, recommendations contained in the reviews. The attached document outlines the principal characteristics of the process, including the timing, selection of reviewers and content.

The NHDR Unit is building a roster of potential reviewers by geographic and sectoral expertise, and has made available online Peer Reviewer TOR's as samples for others to use. (see http://hdr.undp.org/reports/intranet/country_docs.cfm#2)

For more information on this issue, please contact Ms Sarah Burd-Sharps, Chief of the NHDR Unit in HDRO at sarah.burd-sharps@undp.org

cc: Regional Bureau Directors
Mr. Shoji Nishimoto, Director, BDP
Ms. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Director, HDRO
Ms. Sarah Burd-Sharps, Chief, NHDR Unit/HDRO



Peer Review System

National Human Development Reports

October 2002

National Human Development Report Unit
Human Development Report Office, UNDP
304 E 45th Street, 12th floor
New York, NY 10017

What is a Peer Review?

Peer Reviews are a common practice in the academic and scientific communities as a process to *ensure objectivity* and *assure quality* in research and publications. In many cases, they are also valuable to ensure consistency within the field of research or publication and to contribute to greater prestige.

Within the context of UNDP's work as a policy advisory institution, and given the value of NHDRs as tools to engage national counterparts in policy dialogue, it is increasingly important that these NHDRs become credible and influential publications. UNDP's Corporate Policy on NHDRs, approved by the Executive Team in March 2000, calls for more effective support within UNDP and the UN in general to raise the quality of NHDRs. In light of all the above, the establishment of a mandatory Peer Review system is one critical mechanism in these efforts.

The following NHDR Peer Review System whereby Country Offices circulate each NHDR for comments and feedback prior to finalization, is external to the preparation process, and as such, does not replace the managerial and supervisory functions of the process. It is simply a review at the final stages of the process, conducted by 'peers', equivalent in competence and expertise to members of the national team.

The NHDR Peer Review process is based on the existing experience of many NHDRs, where reviews are already being conducted. Some examples include: (i) RBEC whereby a process of quality control is carried out through the Regional HD Adviser, (ii) RBLAC and RBA which draw on the expertise of NHDR teams to help teams in other countries, (iii) the global NHDR SURF Network where comments to informal submission of drafts are made, and other existing mechanisms. This Peer Review Process is also based largely on consultations and discussions over the last year on the RRNet, during the June 2000 Beirut Retreat, and among BDP and Regional Bureaux NHDR focal points at HQ and the HDRO Director.

Principal Characteristics of a Peer Review Process

I. COUNTRY OFFICE RESPONSIBILITY

It is ultimately the responsibility of the UNDP Country Office, under the leadership of the Resident Representative, to conduct peer reviews. It is up to each office to determine the role played by the NHDR team in the process. However, since ultimately the responsibility for the NHDR content is that of the national editorial team, they should be given flexibility to participate in the choice and briefing of reviewers. By definition, NHDRs must be nationally owned and undertaken through a nationally driven process. A peer review should not interfere with this key objective of ownership. "Peers" should be those who will support this process. At the same time, since NHDRs are an important part of UNDP's corporate identity, UNDP Country Offices must take steps to exercise quality control. The fine line between independence and quality control should be navigated with care and with the best of intentions. It is in everyone's interest to produce a high quality report.

II. COUNTRY SPECIFICITY

In order to ensure maximum usefulness of the Peer Review System, **the process must be systematic, but allow maximum flexibility** in order to accommodate differing country contexts. In discussions on the value of a peer review, many concerns have arisen, especially regarding cases where the team is not convinced of the utility of the comments, or the reviewer was not fully sensitive to the country context. The overall purpose of these reviews is to contribute to improving the quality of the final product. An excellent review by a well-chosen reviewer can bring a fresh and objective point of view and make valuable, concrete recommendations to raise the Report's quality. Ultimately, the responsibility of evaluating and adopting the recommendations falls to the national team. In order to contribute to the success of the peer review, the reviewer must be furnished with the NHDR Corporate Policy, Terms of Reference for the NDHR, information on the report's intended target audience and any other information that will result in a review that contributes to a high quality NHDR.

III. TIMING

Timing of a peer review is crucial. At the early stages, it is useful to circulate outlines and early drafts among those with expertise in specific areas, for inputs on a voluntary basis. But at this early stage, while the comments may be useful to set the NHDR on the right path, the report as a whole is not yet in a position to be reviewed by an external reviewer. Reviewing just prior to publication is also not useful, as the review may call for changes that cannot be accommodated in time.

Therefore, **the peer review process must be carried out at the stage when a draft of the entire Report is available**, approximately 1-2 months before it is to be printed. This allows sufficient time for incorporating relevant recommendations into the report.

IV. SELECTION OF REVIEWERS:

A peer review must include 2-3 reviewers, with at least one reviewer not a UNDP staff member, and at least one reviewer being from outside the country of the NHDR. (In the case of a regional report, this does not apply.) Reviewers cannot include those who have authored or been main contributors to the NHDR. Reviewers must be carefully selected for their expertise and understanding of the country context, and invited to review as part of a small, select group that the team is depending on to contribute to the quality of the Report.

Reviewers could be drawn from a wide range of sources, including but not restricted to: the academic community, research institutes, BDP Policy Advisers, NHDR team members from other countries, Regional Bureau officers, civil society organisations, Human Development Report Office specialists, United Nations experts and government officials.

While the selection of reviewers is up to the Country Office, the ability of this process to work on a systematic basis will depend on cooperation and direct help from many parts of UNDP. The NHDR Unit is preparing of a Roster of Consultants/Peer Reviewers, organised along geographic and thematic areas of expertise. This will soon be available to all NHDR teams and will include curriculum vitae's and contact information for references from previous reviews undertaken. Teams can also solicit voluntary reviewers through the SURF NHDR Network, with whom they can then formalize an arrangement. An extensive set of sample Terms of Reference has been collected by the NHDR Unit and is now available at http://hdr.undp.org/reports/intranet/country_docs.cfm

NHDR teams from one country can be optimal “peers” for national teams in the same region due to their familiarity with the language and the regional context. Widening the pool of those contributing to NHDRs can have many other benefits as well. It can contribute to greater exchange of human development knowledge across regions, to building greater capacity in the long run for policy analysis and can build wider ownership for mobilization of human development policy actions. For UNDP staff, it will strengthen their capacity to provide advisory services.

V. CONTENT

Peer reviews should be based on the six NHDR corporate principles. These six principles (national ownership, independence of analysis, quality of analysis, participatory and transparent preparation process, creative presentation and sustained follow up), drawn from the UNDP Corporate Policy on NHDRs, were designed on the basis of the experiences of over 340 NHDRs. These principles address overall quality of the analysis contained in the reports, whether it is based on objective research, the relevance of that analysis to the country and region, and the effectiveness of the NHDR as an advocacy document. When considering the sixth corporate principles on “sustained follow-up”, it is important for reviewers to assess the impacts of *previous* NHDRs. External reviewers can bring added value in terms of some or all of those areas.

In addition to the Corporate Policy (available in E/F/S/A/R at <http://hdr.undp.org/aboutus/nhdr/policy.cfm>), there are several other pieces of information that should be provided to reviewers. Since not all NHDRs serve the same purpose, the reviewer should be provided the Terms of Reference of the NHDR process, information on the context of preparation (capacity at the national level, involvement of the UNDP office, availability of statistics, involvement of the government, etc) and the intended audience.

VI. INCENTIVES

NHDR production is a complex process requiring political and operational support at all levels. **Optimally, a peer review should be a voluntary system of exchanges.** However, at present, the built-in incentives are not sufficiently strong, either within or outside of UNDP, for a smoothly working system of reviews. Much of this support still needs to be negotiated, and the NHDR Unit is committed to assisting in this process.

BDP specialists are available to respond to requests for support from Country Offices and Regional Bureaux as part of their technical backstopping role. Their contribution to NHDR reviews should be rewarded in their performance assessment.

For other **UNDP Programme Officers and specialists**, this type of policy advice is in line with UNDP’s core business, where these skills are increasingly valued and participation in knowledge networks and across offices and regions is being encouraged to build this capacity. In addition, staff members’ RCA should reflect this contribution.

For **NHDR Team Members in other countries**, reviews can contribute to their exchanges of knowledge and best practices and can bring prestige to the expertise of their own team. Regional Bureaux may also wish to consider building support through reviews of other NHDRs in the region into the TOR of team members at the outset.

For **outsider reviewers**, one incentive could be the prestige of contributing to these reports. In some cases, a nominal fee may need to be made available through the Country Office, the NHDR project at country level or possibly a regional NHDR project.

In order for NHDRs to fulfil their potential to be key instruments for policy analysis and advocacy, teams require greater resources, increased cross country and regional exchanges and feedback from qualified specialists. One main responsibility of the NHDR Unit is to contribute to creating and negotiating this support throughout UNDP and outside in order to systematically translate the NHDR Corporate Policy into practice.

The NHDR Unit and the Regional Bureaux will provide support to country offices and national teams throughout the Peer Review process. They will also assess the impact of the process, and identify means of ensuring that this process is conducted effectively. Through a systematic approach to peer reviews, NHDRs can fulfil their promise to be what the UNDP Administrator calls an “extraordinary country-level movement for global change”.

Matrix of Principal Characteristics

Characteristic	Description	Responsibility
I. Country Office Responsibility	It is ultimately the responsibility of the UNDP Country Office to conduct peer reviews as a mechanism of quality control	Country Office, under leadership of Resident Representative
II. Country Specificity	Arrangements must be systematic but allow maximum flexibility in order to accommodate differing country contexts	National Team
III. Timing	Reviews must be carried out when a complete draft is available, to consider the report in its entirety.	Country Office
IV. Selection of Reviewers	A peer review is comprised of 2-3 reviewers, including one from outside of the country, and no more than 2 reviewers from within the UNDP system.	Country Office. CO may choose to delegate to National Team
V. Content	The basis of the reviews is the 6 principles contained in the UNDP Corporate Policy on NHDRs. Reviewers must also be provided with the TOR for the NHDR process, intended audience for the TOR and any useful country context.	Reviewers
VI. Incentives	Optimally, a peer review should be a voluntary system of exchanges. Reviewers must be given to understand their critical role in quality control, and that the team is depending on this work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NHDR Unit ▪ UNDP staff (Built into staff performance assessments)

For more information on the NHDR Peer Review System, contact sarah.burd-sharps@undp.org