

Getting the Most out of Feedback: Peer Review Guidelines



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Contributors

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Introduction

Peer review is an integral part of the process of preparing drafts for publication. It provides substantive feedback to the authors from experts in the field who were not directly involved with the work from inception. Peer reviewing not only adds credibility and objectivity to the process, it also improves or validates the quality of the final product.

Having said this, how can the review process be easier and more helpful? To what extent should reviewers be critical or suggestion-oriented? How can you increase the likelihood of getting in-depth and pertinent feedback from a peer reviewer who is working with you for the first time?

There are various facets to take into account, apart from the technical content, such as the structure, methodology and style of the work. The checklists here may assist the reviewer in preparing feedback to improve the quality of the document, while providing useful inputs to the authors. There is also an overall final section on administrative feedback for reviewers to offer advice on the next steps for taking the document forward.

These guidelines can be used by UNDP Country Offices for most drafts of papers, studies, background research, reports and other knowledge products intended for publication. They are particularly helpful in the development of Human Development Reports and MDG Reports. For feedback and comments on this tool please contact the Human Development Report Unit through our email asiapacific.hdru@undp.org.

Constructive Role

The peer reviewer's aim should be to provide systematic and constructive input to ensure the clarity, objectivity and substantive validity of arguments advanced by the draft document under review. The more specific and constructive reviewers are, the more useful the writer will find their inputs for the next draft. The [Peer Reviewer Roles Checklist](#) can help reviewers clarify their role and the expectations that are placed upon them. The checklist also points out ways to save time. For example, it is not necessary to spend a lot of time proofreading, say, for spelling mistakes (one or two illustrative examples will suffice to alert the author) as the document will undergo editing after feedback has been incorporated.

In [Table 1](#), the left-hand column presents examples of frequently observed pitfalls that can waste a reviewer's time and take away time from more critical inputs or slow down progress for those they are trying to assist. The examples are loosely based on actual peer reviews. The right-hand column presents ways to avoid the common mistakes.

Table 1: Save Your Time

<i>What Wastes Time?</i>	<i>What Saves Time?</i>
<p>If the reviewer points out a problem without offering a solution. e.g.) The paper is entirely gender insensitive or gender neutral and does not provide any insight into the connection between information technology and gender.</p>	<p>If the reviewer phrases his/her feedback in a suggestion-oriented way and offers a possible solution. e.g.) It is important that the paper discuss the connection between information technology and gender. For example, women working as telemarketers in Asia could be explored as well as those working in more high tech jobs. Also, using 'she/he' in hypothetical situations, instead of 'he' would make the paper more gender sensitive.</p>
<p>When the peer reviewer offers suggestions, but they are not specific. e.g.) The conclusion should be strengthened with even a total overhaul.</p>	<p>When the reviewer offers very specific suggestions. e.g.) An account of policy measures for judiciaries, human rights commissions and civil society groups could be given (i.e. this could be achieved by delving into a more complete account of the technical assistance measures that have been identified and tested by the UN in the field, e.g. UNAMA).</p>
<p>A Terms of Reference document for the peer reviewer that is unclear or ambiguous.</p>	<p>A Terms of Reference document that clearly indicates what is required of the reviewer.</p>

Peer Reviewer Roles Checklist



- The role of the peer reviewer is to assist writers in expressing, refining and validating their ideas. A peer reviewer should not get caught up in providing critical evaluations and extensive re-writing.
- Read as a reader, rather than as a critic. Describe how *you* react to the piece. Point out where something doesn't read well and offer specific and practical suggestions for improvement. Be constructive and offer a way forward. Having said that, a peer reviewer should also be aware of the primary audience for any work.
- Your role is not primarily as a proof-reader. Hence, if you notice a recurring error, do point it out, but don't spend your time repeatedly correcting typos and individual spelling, grammar, or punctuation problems.
- If parts of the draft seem successful as it is, do say so. There is no need to feel duty-bound to find something to criticize.

Overall Content and Structure

There are a plethora of issues and angles to think of during the review, itself. It is essential to read a paper at least two times for a clear and useful review. Certainly, one read of the document should focus on the overall impression, content and structure. If time allows, it may also be useful to space out readings in order to let the mind of the reviewer duly ‘digest’ the issues facing the paper and to offer well thought out alternatives. Sometimes after good reading, it may be necessary to read only parts of the paper again, rather than reading it in its entirety.

Table 2 presents common errors peer reviewers can make when not taking into account the bigger picture. The examples are loosely based on actual peer reviews. The right-hand column presents ways to hone in on key content and structural components.

The Overall Content and Structure Checklist presents some questions that may help provide constructive critiques in as non-contentious a manner as possible. It also points out material which would help the publication support an advocacy strategy (e.g. a clear main point, message or concrete recommendations). Of course, specifics will vary across publications.

Table 2: Speed Progress	
<i>What Slows Progress?</i>	<i>What Speeds Progress?</i>
The reviewer focusing nearly exclusively on small details without also looking at the greater point of the document and what makes it new.	When the reviewer adds a comment. e.g.) The paper should build on its mention of a judicial system with integrity that commands the confidence of the people and offer fresh insights into the age-old problem: “who will guard the guardians?”
The reviewer does not look at important structural components that could be merged, shifted or added.	The peer reviewer provides suggestions on additional components that would be useful. e.g.) A box on high-level corruption exposed by the media in the region would be of considerable utility to us. A box on the limits of the press in the fight against corruption would also be useful (e.g. the absence/existence of FOI legislation, the absence/existence of whistleblowers legislation in a country etc).
The reviewer gives feedback a little bit at a time or over a relatively long period.	Depending upon the content of the paper, the reviewer provides all the feedback at once.

Overall Content and Structure Checklist



- Can the reviewer easily identify the main idea(s) and argument(s)? A good test is whether the reviewer would feel confident explaining the argument and ideas of the piece to others.
- Does the writer end with a synthesis and conclusion which address all issues brought up in the piece, bringing them to a logical end?
- Does the work add innovation or something new to the issue which the reviewer was not aware of prior to reading?
- Are any parts of the draft unclear or counterintuitive? Do arguments repeat without just cause?
- Does the paper's structure allow evidence and information to be presented in a logical and convincing manner?
- Do some points need to be more thoroughly illustrated or dropped due to lack of relevance?
- Do annex tables (if there are any) add to the paper? Do they support the argument in the paper? Are they necessary?
- Is some information too detailed?
- Are concrete solutions or recommendations evident and offered with specific reference to empirical support from the body of the piece?
- How can the author improve upon any of the points raised above? In other words, what are some helpful suggestions for them?

Style

Readers can cast aside even the most logical methodology and compelling point if they are buried in a confusing style. Therefore, ensuring a crisp, consistent and reasonable flow is vital. So is a mode of writing which is tailored to the primary audience, whether they are policy makers, academics, or civil society groups. If a reviewer finds that he or she does not have the capacity to understand technical information for a specific audience, it could be flagged for consultation with the author. This and other components are included in the [Style Checklist](#).

In the case of documents that need to have references for sources, applying a complete and consistent style to referencing is essential, yet often eclipsed by content issues. Accurate referencing takes time; the more careful an author is, the easier it becomes for the intended audience. To help streamline the process of finalising the publication, peer reviewers can point out major gaps or frequent inconsistencies in citations that authors can fix.

[Table 3](#) shows ways peer reviewers can often lose time when critiquing style. The examples are based on actual peer reviews, while the changes the peer reviewer made are marked in red. The right-hand column presents ways to hone in on key content and structural components.

Table 3: What Eases the Process	
<i>What makes it more difficult?</i>	<i>What makes it easier?</i>
<p>If the writer ubiquitously shows incorrect comma usage and the peer reviewer edits each instance. e.g.) Regional actors, governments and businesses should consider a different policy – one which meets the needs of poor and the economy, as well.</p>	<p>If the writer ubiquitously has incorrect comma usage and the peer reviewer simply comments. e.g.) Regional actors/governments and businesses should consider a different policy, one which meets the needs of poor and the economy as well.</p> <p>[Comment: Writer could check and correct comma usage throughout the document]</p>
<p>When the peer reviewer re-writes the paper. e.g.) Regional actors, governments and businesses should consider a policy which goes beyond immediate economic gains and meets the needs of the poor, as well.</p>	<p>When the peer reviewer simply gives the suggestion.</p> <p>[Comment: Improve flow of sentences throughout, such as the one found on page 3, para 2, line 2.]</p>



Style Checklist

- Do the style, diction, and point of view seem appropriate to; (a) the kind of idea that is being considered, and (b) the expected audience?
- Is the writing and layout clear and unambiguous? (If not, give specific guidance for rewriting).
- Does the writing flow easily? Does the reviewer feel lost at any point, if so where?
- Is the data presented easily understood and visually appealing (e.g. through tables, figures, graphs)?
- Does the reviewer see any recurring language which is too formal, informal or incorrect?
- Are there any recurring errors you notice in terms of punctuation, grammar or run-on sentences?
- Does the style conform to UNDP standards/guidelines?
- Are font, sub-section and graphic styles consistent?
- Do the big messages of the paper come out clearly?

Methodology

Sound methodology is pivotal to the credibility of a given document and the UNDP as a whole. The [Methodology Checklist](#) can help reviewers cover the various aspects of sources and other methodological components.



Methodology Checklist

- Is the quantitative or qualitative methodology thoroughly explained?
- Have the writers used a logical methodological model? If so, have they followed it well?
- Have the writers given an accurate and objective interpretation of the literature or data?
- Have the writers used enough sources? Are they up-to-date?
- Have the writers used sources that cover the breadth of the specific subject being discussed? Are there any archetypal writers or theories which the writer must take into account for credibility issues?
- Are the sources relevant to the topic being discussed?
- Have the authors used an appropriate degree of qualitative and quantitative methods?
- Have sources of error been accounted for/explained clearly, especially in a second peer review?
- Do data and analysis highlight issues affecting economically, politically and socially excluded groups, depending on the paper?
- How consistently is the methodology used throughout the paper?

Administrative Feedback

Three options are suggested when giving administrative feedback. Reviewers may give a final conclusion from one of the following:

- 1) The document should be accepted, no revisions are necessary.
- 2) The document should be accepted with revisions as indicated.
- 3) The document should not be accepted. If the reviewer feels the draft should not be accepted as it now stands, please state what changes might be required to make it acceptable. Please be specific and constructive.

Annexure I

UNDP Peer Review System for National Human Development Reports¹

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.

¹ From UNDP. 2002. Peer Review System. Available online [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/peer_review_system.pdf]. Last accessed on 5 February 2008.

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.

Regional Centres and BDP specialists are available to respond to requests for support from Country Offices 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 fulfill 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 Bureau 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 fulfill 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)