

25

*years as the catalyst
for a sustainable future*
1997-2022

The 27th of September 2022 marks a quarter of a century since the founding of GRI. From that spark of an idea 25 years ago, GRI's ambition has continued to burn brighter – underpinned by the belief that transparency is the gateway to dialogue about impacts, which instigate organizations to embrace sustainability.

The early days

GRI's origin story dates back to the 1990's, and the public outcry from the environmental damage caused by the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989. Bob Massie, President of CERES (the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies), and Allen White (Tellus Institute) then started work on a 'universal environmental reporting framework', with the aim of creating the world's first accountability mechanism to ensure companies adhere to responsible environmental conduct principles.

In September 1997, this led to the Global Reporting Initiative being founded in Boston, USA, by CERES and Tellus with involvement of the UN Environment Programme. After a decision to broaden the focus beyond the environment to include social, economic and governance issues, an exposure draft of the 'GRI Guidelines' were made available in 1999. Right from the beginning, GRI's multi-stakeholder approach was evident – with extensive consultation and a pilot phase involving 31 companies, prior to the first GRI Guidelines launching in 2000.

GRI was inaugurated as an independent organization at a ceremony at the UN headquarters in New York in 2002, and later that year set up its permanent secretariat in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, with a staff of ten. By this early stage, around 100 major companies around the world were using the new GRI Guidelines for reporting – a number set to rise dramatically in the years to come.



The second edition of the GRI Guidelines (2002)

Rapid global growth

New versions of the Guidelines were quick to follow, with G2 (2002) then G3 (2006), each freely provided as a public good and expanding the scope of subjects covered and the relevance of the framework for organizations and stakeholders alike. This phase also saw GRI ramp up its engagement with key partners, including in 2003 the launch of the Organizational Stakeholders Program (precursor to the [GRI Community](#)) and establishment of the [Stakeholder Council](#) as an advisory forum.

As the practice of sustainability reporting continued to spread around the world, GRI expanded its global reach, with regional offices established in strategic locations. The first was [Brazil](#) (2007), followed by [Greater China](#) (2009, Beijing before moving to Hong Kong in 2019), [South Asia](#) (2010, New Delhi), [North America](#) (2011, New York), [Africa](#) (2013, Johannesburg), [Hispanic America](#) (2014, Bogota) – and, most recently, [ASEAN](#) (2019, based in Singapore).



GRI's regional network

Rapid global growth continued...

Over the years, GRI has introduced new training and services options, such as the Certified Training Partners (2008) and Certified Software & Tools (since 2010). Meanwhile, GRI events – in-person and, increasingly, online – have provided opportunities for sustainability practitioners to share experiences and access thought leadership.

GRI was also an early adaptor of sustainability reporting e-learning, and has provided courses for over ten years. In 2020, GRI launched the world's leading online training portal for impact reporting, the [GRI Academy](#), which since 2021 has included the Professional Certification Program.

Analysis in 2009 revealed that 1,350 companies globally were reporting their impacts using the GRI Guidelines. By 2015, the number of GRI reporters passed 5,000 – and since 2020, more than 10,000 organizations in over 100 countries report each year with the GRI standards.

Sustainable development moves up the agenda

In 2012, the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development saw many countries raise their ambition in support of sustainability. Brazil, Denmark, France and South Africa formed the [Group of Friends of Paragraph 47](#) to advance corporate sustainability reporting, with GRI and UNEP as its secretariat.

This moment was an important precursor to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) launch in 2015, laying the ground for [SDG 12.6](#) – the target to encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices and integrate sustainability reporting.

In 2017, GRI and UN Global Compact launched a series of SDG reporting resources, positioning GRI reporting as a central reference point when it comes to how business account for their SDG impacts. To this day, GRI continues to develop and offer [SDG reporting](#) tools, guidance and leadership forums.

The advent of standards

In 2013, GRI held a global conference in Amsterdam that saw the roll-out of G4. This was a significant move towards more standardized and comparable sustainability reporting, clarifying principles and disclosures for organization to adhere to. This process deepened significantly in 2016, as GRI transitioned to be a global standard-setter.

The launch of the [GRI Standards](#), for the first time, provided internationally accepted sustainability reporting standards, with a modular structure that has continued to be regularly updated. This moment also saw GRI's governance structure adapt to reflect that of financial standards – creating the [Global Sustainability Standards Board](#) and adhering to a defined due process – all the while staying true the unique multi-stakeholder ethos.

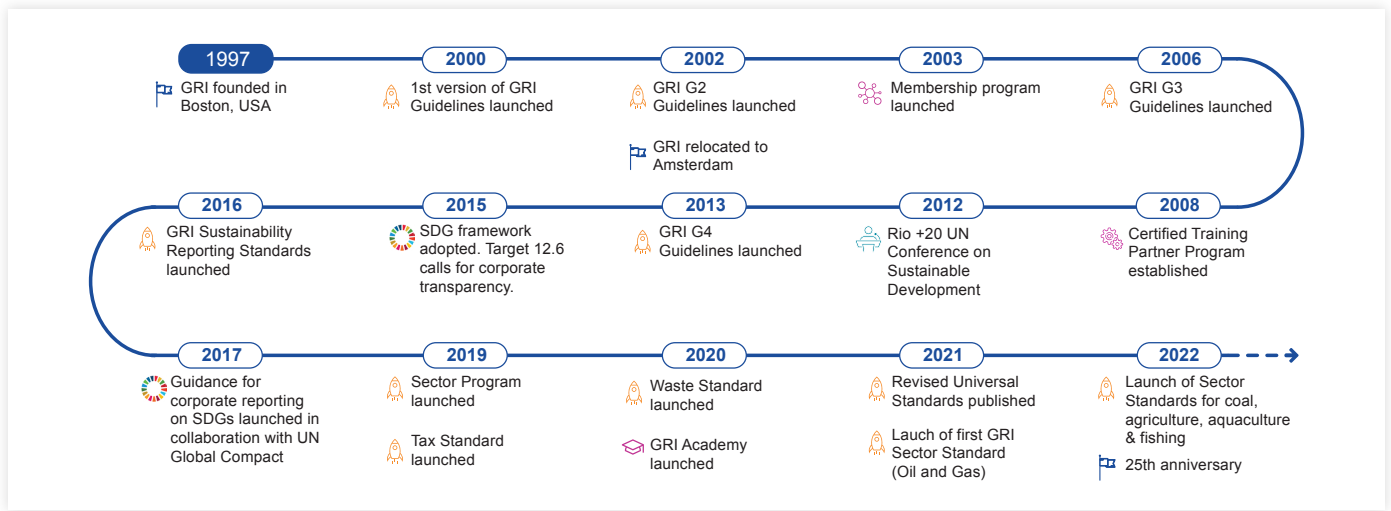


GRI suite of standards: universal, sector and topic

[New or revised topics](#), like tax (2019) and waste (2020), have since been added to the Standards, while a [Sector Program](#) commenced in 2019, leading to Sector Standards covering oil, gas, coal, agriculture, aquaculture and fishing. This will expand to at least 40 sectors over the next few years.

A significant revision to the [Universal Standards](#) took place in 2021, which strengthened the very foundations of all reporting through GRI. Importantly, this update meant GRI became the first and only organization to set reporting standards that fully reflect due diligence expectations for sustainability impacts, including on human rights, as set out in intergovernmental instruments by the UN and OECD.





Influencing policy and regulation

Integration of GRI’s Guidelines and then Standards into policies, as set by governments, regulators and stock exchanges, has mirrored the global growth in GRI reporting. By 2015, GRI was referred to in policies in 23 markets – and fast forward to 2022, there are 168 policies across 67 countries and regions that reference or require the use of the GRI Standards.

Since 2018, the EU Non-Financial Reporting Directive saw mandatory disclosure for larger European companies – and by 2020, more than 50% of EU businesses required to comply with the Directive said they used GRI to do so.

In 2021, GRI and the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG) **entered into an agreement** by which GRI provided technical input to the development of the new European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), a central component of the incoming Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive.

Hot on the heels of GRI’s work with EFRAG, in early 2022 GRI and the newly formed International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB, under the IFRS Foundation) **started a collaboration** to align standard setting activities in recognition of a ‘two pillar’ sustainability disclosure system – with both financial and impact reporting on an equal footing.

Where next for GRI?



In reaching this 25-year milestone, GRI can be permitted to look back with some pride on how far we have come. In 1999, just one-in-three of the largest companies produced a sustainability report. By 2020, **96% of the G250 do so** – with 73% using the GRI Standards. It’s clear that GRI has had a big part to play in this progress. Yet our journey and our mission is far from over. The consistency of sustainability reporting around the world remains patchy, while ‘greenwashing’ concerns persist. And there is more to do to ensure that reflection on impacts, by organizations and their stakeholders, translates into meaningful action and change.

The emergence of new sustainability disclosure standards, from the EU and ISSB, signals changes in the reporting landscape. Looking ahead, I am convinced that GRI has a crucial role to play, utilizing our expertise to ensure that impact reporting, as enabled by the GRI Standards, delivers the accountability needed to secure a sustainable future. I am excited and optimistic about what our next 25 years will bring.

Eelco van der Enden, CEO of GRI