

The United Nations: An Introduction for Students

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The United Nations officially came into existence on 24 October 1945, when the UN Charter had been ratified by a majority of the original 51 Member States. The day is now celebrated each year around the world as United Nations Day.

The purpose of the United Nations is to bring all nations of the world together to work for peace and development, based on the principles of justice, human dignity and the well-being of all people. It affords the opportunity for countries to balance global interdependence and national interests when addressing international problems.

There are currently 192 Members of the United Nations. They meet in the General Assembly, which is the closest thing to a world parliament. Each country, large or small, rich or poor, has a single vote, however, none of the decisions taken by the Assembly are binding. Nevertheless, the Assembly's decisions become resolutions that carry the weight of world governmental opinion.



The United Nations Headquarters is in New York City but the land and buildings are international territory. The United Nations has its own flag, its own post office and its own postage stamps. Six official languages are used at the United Nations - Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. The UN European Headquarters is in the Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland. It has offices in Vienna, Austria and Economic Commissions in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Amman in Jordan, Bangkok in Thailand and Santiago in Chile. The senior officer of the United Nations Secretariat is the Secretary-General.

The Aims of the United Nations:

- To keep peace throughout the world.
- To develop friendly relations between nations.
- To work together to help people live better lives, to eliminate poverty, disease and illiteracy in the world, to stop environmental destruction and to encourage respect for each other's rights and freedoms.
- To be a centre for helping nations achieve these aims.

The Principles of the United Nations:

- All Member States have sovereign equality.
- All Member States must obey the Charter.
- Countries must try to settle their differences by peaceful means.
- Countries must avoid using force or threatening to use force.
- The UN may not interfere in the domestic affairs of any country.
- Countries should try to assist the United Nations.

The predecessor: The League of Nations

The League of Nations was founded immediately after the First World War. It originally consisted of 42 countries, 26 of which were non-European. At its largest, 57 countries were members of the League. The League was created because a number of people in France, South Africa, the UK and the US believed that a world organization of nations could keep the peace and prevent a repetition of the horrors of the 1914-18 war in Europe. An effective world body now seemed possible because communications were so much better and there was increasing experience of working together in international organizations. Coordination and cooperation for economic and social progress were becoming important.

The League had two basic aims. Firstly, it sought to preserve the peace through collective action. Disputes would be referred to the League's Council for arbitration and conciliation. If necessary, economic and then military

sanctions could be used. In other words, members undertook to defend other members from aggression. Secondly, the League aimed to promote international cooperation in economic and social affairs.

The Covenant of the League of Nations begins...

"In order to promote international cooperation and to achieve international peace and security by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war, by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations, by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another, Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations."

The end of the League

As the Second World War unfolded, it became clear that the League had failed in its chief aim of keeping the peace. The League had no military power of its own. It depended on its members' contributions; and its members were not willing to use sanctions, economic or military. Moral authority was insufficient.

Several Big Powers failed to support the League: the United States crucially never joined; Germany was a member for only seven years from 1926 and the USSR for only five years from 1934; Japan and Italy both withdrew in the 30s. The League then depended mainly on Britain and France, who were understandably hesitant to act forcefully. It was indeed difficult for governments long accustomed to operating independently to work through this new organization.

The UN Charter

Even as the Second World War raged, the leaders of Britain, China, the US and the USSR, under intense pressure from the press and public, discussed the details of a post-war organization. In 1944 representatives of China, the UK, the US and the USSR meeting at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, prepared a blueprint for an international organization. Towards the end of the war representatives of 50 countries gathered in San Francisco between April and June 1945 to hammer out the final text that would lay the foundations of international cooperation. This was the Charter of the United Nations, signed on 26 June by 50 countries. Poland, the 51st country, was not able to send a representative to the San Francisco conference but is considered an original member.

Although the League was abandoned, most of its ideals and some of its structure were kept by the United Nations and outlined in its Charter. The ideals of peace and social and economic progress remained the basic goals of the new world organization. However, these were developed to fit the new and more complex post-war world.

The League's Council was transformed into the Security Council consisting of the five victors of the war as permanent members and ten other countries serving two year terms. The five permanent members - China, France, the UK, the USSR, and the US were also given veto power, which means that decisions taken by the Security Council can be blocked by any of the five permanent members. This is significant firstly because the Security Council is the principle UN organ responsible for ensuring peace, and, secondly, because it is the only body whose decisions are binding on all Member States. Since the creation of the UN the balance of Big Powers has changed and over one hundred new Member States, mainly non-Western, have joined. With these changes have come increasing demands to reform the Security Council.

The brief provision for Social Activities in the League's Covenant was turned into a comprehensive prescription for international economic and social cooperation, with the aim of achieving conditions of stability and well-being recognised as essential for peaceful relations among nations. Under the aegis of a new organ, the Economic and Social Council, the work of existing and anticipated Specialized Agencies in the fields of labour, education, health, agriculture, development and many others would be coordinated within the UN system. Racism and repression demanded that another, new, people's element should enter emphatically into the Charter, that of rights. Many sorts of rights, from

the right to self-determination, which encouraged the independence of colonized peoples, to general human rights, which aimed to protect individuals, are enshrined in the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and two Covenants which have become major, standard-setting additions to international law.

The UN System

The basic structure of the United Nations is outlined in an organizational chart. What the structure does not show is that decision-making within the UN system is not as easy as in many other organizations. The UN is not an independent, homogeneous organization; it is made up of sovereign states, so actions by the UN depend on the will of Member States, to accept, fund or carry them out. Especially in matters of peace-keeping and international politics, it requires a complex, often slow, process of consensus-building that must take into account national sovereignty as well as global needs.

The Specialized Agencies, while part of the UN system, are separate, autonomous intergovernmental organizations which work with the UN and with each other. The agencies carry out work relating to specific fields such as trade, communications, air and maritime transport, agriculture and development. Although they have more autonomy, their work within a country or between countries is always carried out in partnership with those countries. They also depend on funds from Member States to achieve their goals.

Recently, international conferences organised by the UN have gained significance. UN conferences have been held since the 1960s, but with the Conference on Environment and Development, known as the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, they turned into real fora for deciding on national and international policy regarding issues that affect everyone such as the environment, human rights and economic development. Since the Earth Summit, UN conferences have turned into forums in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can voice their concerns alongside those of governments. Such conferences focus world attention on these issues and place them squarely on the global agenda. Yet, once the international agreements produced by these conferences are signed, it is still up to each individual country to carry them out. With the moral weight of international conferences and the pressures of media and NGOs, Member States are more likely to endorse the agreements and put them into effect.