

The United Nations: An Introduction for Students



The United Nations officially came into existence on October, 24 1945, when the UN Charter was 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 provides the opportunity for countries to balance global interdependence and national interests when addressing international problems.

There are currently 193 Members of the United Nations. They meet in the General Assembly, the largest organ or part, of the United Nations. The General Assembly 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. This means countries are not forced to follow the decisions. Nevertheless, the Assembly's decisions become resolutions, written decisions that carry the weight of world 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, Ethiopia; Amman, Jordan; Bangkok, Thailand and Santiago, Chile. The senior officer of the United Nations is the Secretary-General.

THE PREDECESSOR: THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Before the United Nations, there was the League of Nations. The League 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 repeat of the horrors of World War I. 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 were referred to the League's Council for mediation and resolution. If necessary, economic and then military sanctions could be used. In other words, members agreed to defend other members from acts of aggression. Secondly, the League aimed to promote cooperation in economic and social affairs.

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 not enough.

Several Big Powers failed to support the League: the United States crucially never joined; Germany was a member for only seven years and the USSR for only five years; Japan and Italy both withdrew in the 1930s. The League then depended mainly on Britain and France, who were understandably hesitant to act forcefully. It was difficult for governments that were used 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 met in Washington, DC, and prepared a blueprint for an international organization. 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 June 26, 1945 by 50 countries.

Although the League of Nations 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, an organ 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. That means all countries are required to follow the decisions of the Security Council.

The Social Activities part of the League was turned into an organization for international economic and social cooperation, with the aim of achieving conditions of stability and well-being recognized as essential for peaceful relations among nations. Under the direction of a new organ, the Economic and Social Council, the work of existing and anticipated Specialized Agencies in the fields of labor, education, health, agriculture, development and many others are coordinated within the UN system.

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, independent intergovernmental organizations which work with the UN and with each other. The agencies carry out work relating to specific fields such as trade, communications, transportation, agriculture and development. Although they have more independence, 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. The UN is funded, in part, by dues from member countries. When the UN decides to carry out actions above and beyond their usual budget, countries may choose to contribute towards those projects.