

Structure, Functions and Powers of the UN and Its Main Organs

Main Organs

The main organs of the UN are the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the UN Secretariat. All were established in 1945 when the UN was founded.

General Assembly

The General Assembly is the main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the UN. All 193 Member States of the UN are represented in the General Assembly, making it the only UN body with universal representation. Each year, in September, the full UN membership meets in the General Assembly Hall in New York for the annual General Assembly session, and general debate, which many heads of state attend and address. Decisions on important questions, such as those on peace and security, admission of new members and budgetary matters, require a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly. Decisions on other questions are by simple majority. The General Assembly, each year, elects a GA President to serve a one-year term of office.

Security Council

The Security Council has primary responsibility, under the UN Charter, for the maintenance of international peace and security. It has 15 Members (5 permanent and 10 non-permanent members). Each Member has one vote. Under the Charter, all Member States are obligated to comply with Council decisions. The Security Council takes the lead in determining the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression. It calls upon the parties to a dispute to settle it by peaceful means and recommends methods of adjustment or terms of settlement. In some cases, the Security Council can resort to imposing sanctions or even authorize the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security. The Security Council has a Presidency, which rotates, and changes, every month.

- Daily programme of work of the Security Council
- Subsidiary organs of the Security Council

Economic and Social Council

The Economic and Social Council is the principal body for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and recommendations on economic, social and environmental issues, as well as implementation of internationally agreed development goals. It serves as the central mechanism for activities of the UN system and its specialized agencies in the economic, social and environmental fields, supervising subsidiary and expert bodies. It has 54 Members, elected by the General Assembly for overlapping three-year terms. It is the United Nations' central platform for reflection, debate, and innovative thinking on sustainable development.

Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council was established in 1945 by the UN Charter, under Chapter XIII, to provide international supervision for 11 Trust Territories that had been placed under the administration of seven Member States, and ensure that adequate steps were taken to prepare the Territories for self-government

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and independence. By 1994, all Trust Territories had attained self-government or independence. The Trusteeship Council suspended operation on 1 November 1994. By a resolution adopted on 25 May 1994, the Council amended its rules of procedure to drop the obligation to meet annually and agreed to meet as occasion required -- by its decision or the decision of its President, or at the request of a majority of its members or the General Assembly or the Security Council.

International Court of Justice

The International Court of Justice is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. Its seat is at the Peace Palace in The Hague (Netherlands). It is the only one of the six principal organs of the United Nations not located in New York (United States of America). The Court's role is to settle, in accordance with international law, legal disputes submitted to it by States and to give advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by authorized United Nations organs and specialized agencies.

Secretariat

The Secretariat comprises the Secretary-General and tens of thousands of international UN staff members who carry out the day-to-day work of the UN as mandated by the General Assembly and the Organization's other principal organs. The Secretary-General is chief administrative officer of the Organization, appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for a five-year, renewable term. UN staff members are recruited internationally and locally, and work in duty stations and on peacekeeping missions all around the world. But serving the cause of peace in a violent world is a dangerous occupation. Since the founding of the United Nations, hundreds of brave men and women have given their lives in its service.

Forum for multilateral negotiation

Established in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the United Nations. Comprising all 192 Members of the United Nations, it provides a unique forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter.

It also plays a significant role in the process of standard-setting and the codification of international law. The Assembly meets in regular session intensively from September to December each year, and thereafter as required.

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Functions and Powers of the General Assembly

According to the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly may:

- Consider and make recommendations on the general principles of cooperation for maintaining international peace and security, including disarmament;
- Discuss any question relating to international peace and security and, except where a dispute or situation is currently being discussed by the Security Council, make recommendations on it;
- Discuss, with the same exception, and make recommendations on any questions within the scope of the Charter or affecting the powers and functions of any organ of the United Nations;
- Initiate studies and make recommendations to promote international political cooperation, the development and codification of international law, the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and international collaboration in the economic, social, humanitarian, cultural, educational and health fields;
- Make recommendations for the peaceful settlement of any situation that might impair friendly relations among nations;
- Receive and consider reports from the Security Council and other United Nations organs;
- Consider and approve the United Nations budget and establish the financial assessments of Member States;
- Elect the non-permanent members of the Security Council and the members of other United Nations councils and organs and, on the recommendation of the Security Council, appoint the Secretary-General.

Pursuant to its “Uniting for Peace” resolution of November 1950 (resolution 377 (V)), the Assembly may also take action if the Security Council fails to act, owing to the negative vote of a permanent member, in a case where there appears to be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression. The Assembly can consider the matter immediately with a view to making recommendations to Members for collective measures to maintain or restore international peace and security.

While the Assembly is empowered to make only non-binding recommendations to States on international issues within its competence, it has, nonetheless, initiated actions—political, economic, humanitarian, social and legal—which have affected the lives of millions of people throughout the world.

The landmark Millennium Declaration, adopted in 2000, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document reflect the commitment of Member States to reach specific goals to attain peace, security and disarmament along with development and poverty eradication; safeguard human rights and promote the rule of law; protect our common environment; meet the special needs of Africa; and strengthen the United Nations.

The search for consensus

Each Member State in the Assembly has one vote. Votes taken on designated important issues, such as recommendations on peace and security and the election of Security Council members, require a two-thirds majority of Member States, but other questions are decided by simple majority.

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Functions and Powers of the Security Council

Under the United Nations Charter, the functions and powers of the Security Council are:

- to maintain international peace and security in accordance with the principles and purposes of the United Nations;
- to investigate any dispute or situation which might lead to international friction;
- to recommend methods of adjusting such disputes or the terms of settlement;
- to formulate plans for the establishment of a system to regulate armaments;
- to determine the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression and to recommend what action should be taken;
- to call on Members to apply economic sanctions and other measures not involving the use of force to prevent or stop aggression;
- to take military action against an aggressor;
- to recommend the admission of new Members;
- to exercise the trusteeship functions of the United Nations in "strategic areas";
- to recommend to the General Assembly the appointment of the Secretary-General and, together with the Assembly, to elect the Judges of the International Court of Justice.