

About the UN

The General Assembly

The General Assembly is the main deliberative body of the UN. As opposed to the Security Council, which is exclusive and grants unique veto rights to five nations, all 192 UN member nations have membership and equal voting rights in the General Assembly.

The General Assembly approves the admission of new UN members and elects members to other UN organs. Over the years, it has become the primary platform for the dialogue between developed and developing states. Among its duties are:

- Reviewing reports from the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council;
- Making recommendations on international political cooperation;
- Developing and systematizing international collaboration in economic, social, cultural, educational, and health fields;
- Counseling and encouraging peaceful settlement of hostile situations amongst nations; and
- Appointing the Secretary-General in conjunction with the Security Council and electing non-permanent members of the Security Council, judges of the International Court of Justice, and members of the Economic and Social Council.

Membership and Sessions

All 192 member states of the United Nations have a vote in the General Assembly. Additionally, several entities, like the Vatican, have non-voting observer status that allows them to participate in debate but not vote on resolutions or declarations. Recommendations on peace and security, the election of members to organs, the admission, suspension, and expulsion of members, and budgetary matters require a two-thirds majority of those present and voting to pass. Resolutions on other matters only require a simple majority. Aside from budgetary matters, resolutions are non-binding on member states.

The General Assembly sessions commence annually in September with two weeks of open debate in which many world leaders take the opportunity to address the body directly. The session typically suspends in late December and reconvenes as needed throughout the following year.

The General Assembly can also be called into emergency and special session at the request of the UN Security Council or a majority of Member States. Memorable extra sessions include an emergency session that was held in 1950 on the issue of North and South Korea and two recent special sessions that were held to adopt the Millennium Development Declaration in 2000 and to set a UN reform agenda in 2005.

Structure

The General Assembly has six main committees: Disarmament and International Security; Economic and Financial; Social, Cultural and Humanitarian; Special Political and Decolonization; Administrative and Budgetary; and Legal. There are seven commissions, including the International Law Commission and the new Peacebuilding Commission. There are also councils and panels, such as the Human Rights Council and other committees that cover a broad range of topics, from the Committee on the Rights of the

Child to the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. Finally, there are also a number of working groups.

The General Assembly is headed by a President who is elected prior to the opening session each year. The current President for the General Assembly is Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann of Nicaragua.

History and Relevance

Although General Assembly resolutions are non-binding on member states, they often have a dramatic and lasting effect. Perhaps the most famous General Assembly Declaration is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Passed in 1948, largely due to the efforts of former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, this document has become the guidebook for human rights. Another important action included the United for Peace Resolution passed in 1950 that allowed for police action to protect South Korea from North Korean aggression.

More recently, the General Assembly adopted a Millennium Development Declaration calling for improvements in poverty, illiteracy, health, and the environment by 2015. In 2005, the General Assembly passed a resolution for comprehensive reform to make the organization more efficient, transparent, and accountable.