

An Introduction to the UN System and Its Role in International Peace and Security



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Major General (Retired) Robert Gordon

SERIES EDITOR

Harvey J. Langholtz, Ph.D.



Peace Operations Training Institute

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Shailesh Tinaikar, Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), visits Rokon in the Central Equatorial region of South Sudan. 5 March 2021. UN Photo by Gregorio Cunha.

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An Introduction to the UN System and Its Role in International Peace and Security

Table of Contents

Method of Study.....	ix
Preface.....	x
Lesson 1 Framework for a Global Organization.....	12
Section 1.1 The Founding of the United Nations and the Enactment of Its Charter.....	13
Section 1.2 Purposes and Principles of the United Nations.....	16
Section 1.3 Legal Framework and Authority	18
Section 1.4 The United Nations System.....	22
Lesson 2 The Financial Principles and Budget of the United Nations.....	29
Section 2.1 Types of UN Budgets.....	30
Section 2.2 Donor Management.....	34
Section 2.3 Structures Governing UN Financial Administration.....	35
Section 2.4 Results-based Budgeting.....	36
Lesson 3 The Principal Organs of the United Nations.....	39
Section 3.1 The General Assembly.....	41

Section 3.2	The Security Council.....	43
Section 3.3	The Economic and Social Council.....	45
Section 3.4	The Secretariat	47
Section 3.5	The Role and Functions of the Secretary-General.....	50
Section 3.6	The International Court of Justice.....	51
Lesson 4	The Role of the United Nations in Global Peace and Security.....	56
Section 4.1	Preventive Diplomacy and Peacemaking.....	58
Section 4.2	The Development of UN Field Missions.....	59
Section 4.3	The Guiding Principles of UN Peace Interventions.....	63
Section 4.4	Principal Categories of UN Interventions	66
Section 4.5	The 2018 UN Reforms.....	69
Lesson 5	Planning Principles for UN Peace Operations.....	75
Section 5.1	Integrated Assessment and Planning (IAP)	78
Section 5.2	UN Planning Realities	78
Section 5.3	Towards a Mission Plan	81
Lesson 6	Structure of UN Field Missions.....	85
Section 6.1	An Integrated Multidimensional Mission.....	86
Section 6.2	Authority, Command, and Control.....	87
Section 6.3	The Main Substantive Civilian Components and Functions.....	89
Section 6.4	UN Uniformed Components and Roles in the Field.....	96
Section 6.5	Mission Support	100
Section 6.6	UN Leadership, Integration, and Control Structures	102
Section 6.7	Internal Integrating Structures.....	104

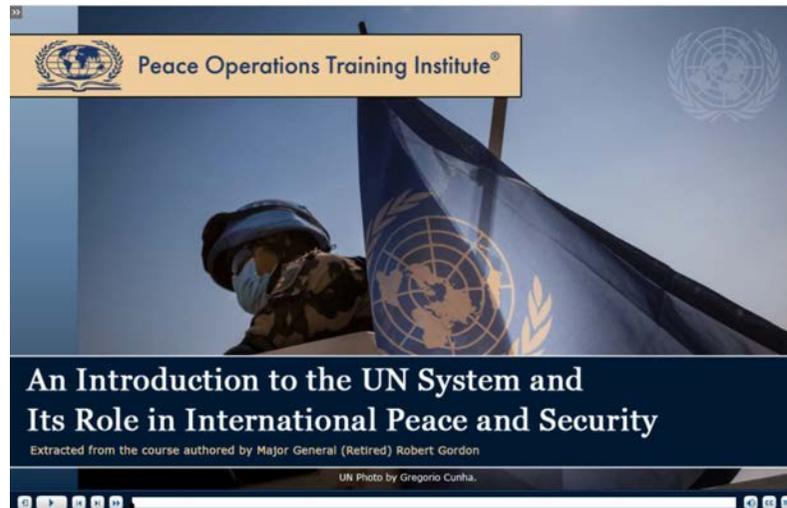
Lesson 7	The Role of the United Nations in Global Development and Humanitarian Action.....	109
Section 7.1	Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace.....	110
Section 7.2	The Peacebuilding Commission	114
Section 7.3	The Interface Between Disaster Relief and Development.....	115
Section 7.4	Humanitarian Principles and Imperatives	116
Section 7.5	The Roles of OCHA and Other UN Agencies in Promoting the Humanitarian Principles and Imperatives	117
Section 7.6	Principles of International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law.....	118
Section 7.7	Human Rights as a Priority for the United Nations and All Its Personnel	119
Section 7.8	Women, Peace, and Security in Field Missions.....	122
Section 7.9	Climate Change, Conflict, and the Environment.....	124
Lesson 8	Responsibilities of UN Personnel in the Field.....	129
Section 8.1	Ethics.....	130
Section 8.2	Safety and Security.....	133
Section 8.3	Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse within the Conduct and Discipline Framework.....	137
Section 8.4	Mission Cultural Environment.....	140
Section 8.5	Stress in the Field.....	143
Lesson 9	Global Partners for Development and Peace.....	151
Section 9.1	Offices Away from Headquarters and Regional Commissions.....	153
Section 9.2	UN Agencies, Funds, and Programmes	155

Section 9.3	The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.....	159
Section 9.4	UN Specialized Agencies.....	161
Section 9.5	Organizational Partnerships in the Field	162
Section 9.6	Non-Governmental Organizations.....	165
Appendix A:	List of Acronyms.....	172
About the Author:	Major General (Retired) Robert Gordon.....	178
Instructions for the	End-of-Course Examination.....	179

Course Interactive Module »

An interactive module is now available for *An Introduction to the UN System and Its Role in International Peace and Security*. The interactive module is a course supplement that is a dynamic, engaging resource for reviewing the course. Students are encouraged to complete the module to review the most important themes and topics covered in the course.

The interactive module can be accessed from within the online Classroom. Click the “Start Interactive Module” button to begin.



Method of Study

This self-paced course aims to give students flexibility in their approach to learning. The following steps are meant to provide motivation and guidance about some possible strategies and minimum expectations for completing this course successfully:

- Before you begin studying, first browse through the entire course. Notice the lesson and section titles to get an overall idea of what will be involved as you proceed.
 - The material is meant to be relevant and practical. Instead of memorizing individual details, strive to understand concepts and overall perspectives in regard to the United Nations system.
 - Set personal guidelines and benchmarks regarding how you want to schedule your time.
 - Study the lesson content and the learning objectives. At the beginning of each lesson, orient yourself to the main points. If possible, read the material twice to ensure maximum understanding and retention, and let time elapse between readings.
 - At the end of each lesson, take the End-of-Lesson Quiz. Clarify any missed questions by rereading the appropriate sections, and focus on retaining the correct information.
 - After you complete all of the lessons, prepare for the End-of-Course Examination by taking time to review the main points of each lesson. Then, when ready, log into your online student classroom and take the End-of-Course Examination in one sitting.
- » ***Access your online classroom at***
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from virtually anywhere in the world.
- Your exam will be scored electronically. If you achieve a passing grade of 75 per cent or higher on the exam, you will be awarded a Certificate of Completion. If you score below 75 per cent, you will be given one opportunity to take a second version of the End-of-Course Examination.
 - A note about language: This course uses English spelling according to the standards of the Oxford English Dictionary (United Kingdom) and the United Nations Editorial Manual.

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- A secure testing environment in which to complete your training;
- Access to additional training resources, including multimedia course supplements; and
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Preface

Welcome to this course, which will introduce you to the United Nations and its role in international peace and security.

The previous version of this course was written by Mr Julian Harston, a senior UN leader who describes himself as having spent most of his working life in the business of peace and security and diplomacy. He set a benchmark for this programme that has been invaluable to a generation of aspiring peacekeepers, and by so doing, brought his wisdom and considerable experience to the wide canvas of how the UN system operates in the field. Inevitably, the United Nations has had to adapt to the changing dynamics of international peace and security, not least to the changing nature of conflict and its drivers. Threats posed by non-State actors, transnational criminal networks, and violent extremist groups; the effects of climate change; conflict over natural resources; massive population shifts and urbanization; and the rapid spread and unforeseen impacts of new technologies all point to the need for the continued evolution of field missions in the next decade.

Those in the international community who work within and alongside the UN and who continue to believe in its role as a force for good in the world have striven to ensure it remains relevant, adaptive, and responsive to these changes. Thus, since its original drafting, much of this course has been adjusted to reflect the evolution of the contribution of the UN to international peace and security. However, the basis of the course is still very much as designed by Julian Harston, for which the Peace Operations Training Institute owes him many thanks.

This course, therefore, is a primer for those wanting to know more about the United Nations and those wanting to work with it. The United Nations system is a large and complex organization made up of many independent parts, which are expected to work together in the integrated operations that now form a large part of its work. All parts have their own practices and cultures, which even seasoned practitioners sometimes struggle to define and understand. What is unchanging is that the United Nations continues to need good people, both civilian and military, to work in the field in ever-challenging environments. Such people, civilian and military, should understand the United Nations, how it has been shaped, and how it has developed its practices in the field in response to the many global challenges. This primer tries to highlight and briefly describe the main areas of focus for these United Nations interventions. Like all primers, it cannot be definitive but indicates where to find more information at appropriate points. Fortunately, in the years since this course was originally designed, the UN Secretariat has put considerable effort and resources into capturing its doctrine and best practice, most of which is now available online.

The strongest message the course can give is that in the field, success will only be achieved by all the many components working together towards a shared vision and common purpose. This requires thorough planning and an integration of effort that avoids thinking and acting in silos of competencies. To achieve this level of integration, it is necessary to understand the many components that contribute to success, derived from good interpersonal skills and coordination, cooperation, consensus-building, and communication. This course is designed to lead the aspirant UN practitioner in this direction. To be a good leader, it is not necessary to master every skill, but one should have a sufficient understanding of how these skills can work together to improve the whole. Readers of this course are starting a journey that in time will enable them to take their place among the many thousands of UN practitioners dedicated to international peace and security.

Major General (Retired) Robert Gordon

2022



Above: Major General (Retired) Robert Gordon

LESSON

1

Framework for a Global Organization



UN Photo by Loey Felipe.

The United Nations was established in the shadow of two global conflicts with the major purpose of preventing a repeat of such tragedies.

In this lesson »

- Section 1.1 The Founding of the United Nations and the Enactment of Its Charter
- Section 1.2 Purposes and Principles of the United Nations
- Section 1.3 Legal Framework and Authority
- Section 1.4 The United Nations System

Lesson Objectives »

- Explore the genesis of the UN.
- Understand the purposes and principles of the UN.
- Recognize the contents of the Charter of the United Nations, its founding document.
- Be aware of the legal framework for peace operations and their basic financial guidelines.
- Identify the principal organs of the UN system.
- Consider the extensive impact of the UN on global development, both historically and in the present.



Sir A. Ramaswami Mudaliar, Supply Member of the Governor-General's Executive Council, Leader of the delegation from India, signing the UN Charter at a ceremony held at the Veterans' War Memorial Building. 26 June 1945. UN Photo by Rosenberg.

Section 1.1 The Founding of the United Nations and the Enactment of Its Charter

The United Nations was established in the shadow of two global conflicts with the major purpose of preventing a repeat of such tragedies. The Preamble of the Charter, starting with “We the Peoples of the United Nations”, establishes the pillars of the organization. Among these are “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, ... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and... to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”. These security, human rights, and development ideals have guided the United Nations since its founding in 1945 and carry it forward to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The League of Nations, the predecessor to the UN, was established in the aftermath of the First World War. Its primary goals included preventing future wars and settling disputes through collective security, disarmament, and diplomacy, negotiation, and arbitration. However, the League suffered from its rigid rules of unanimity in decision-making and a lack of universality. In the 1930s, it failed to prevent several hostile acts such as Japanese invasions of China, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), and German rearmament. Germany, Italy, and Japan withdrew from the League, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was expelled, and the United States never joined. Ultimately, the League failed to prevent the Second World War. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the peoples of the vast areas of the Global South under colonial rule were unrepresented in the League.

The United Nations was brought into being through successive meetings and conferences among the Allied States — the victors of the Second World War — and the other States that signed the “Declaration by United Nations” in 1942. Between 1941 and 1944, a series of international conferences outlined the framework for an international organization to maintain international peace and security. The Charter of the United Nations was drafted at the San Francisco Conference in 1945. Fifty-one States became the original members of the organization when the Charter came into force on 24 October 1945. The Charter was ratified by the present five permanent members of the Security Council and by a majority of the signatory Member States.

The Charter established six principal organs: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Secretariat, and the International Court of Justice. The Statute of the Court is annexed to the Charter. The principal allied powers of the Second World War — China, France, the United Kingdom, the USSR, and the United States — were assigned permanent seats on the Security Council, which holds primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

The Charter

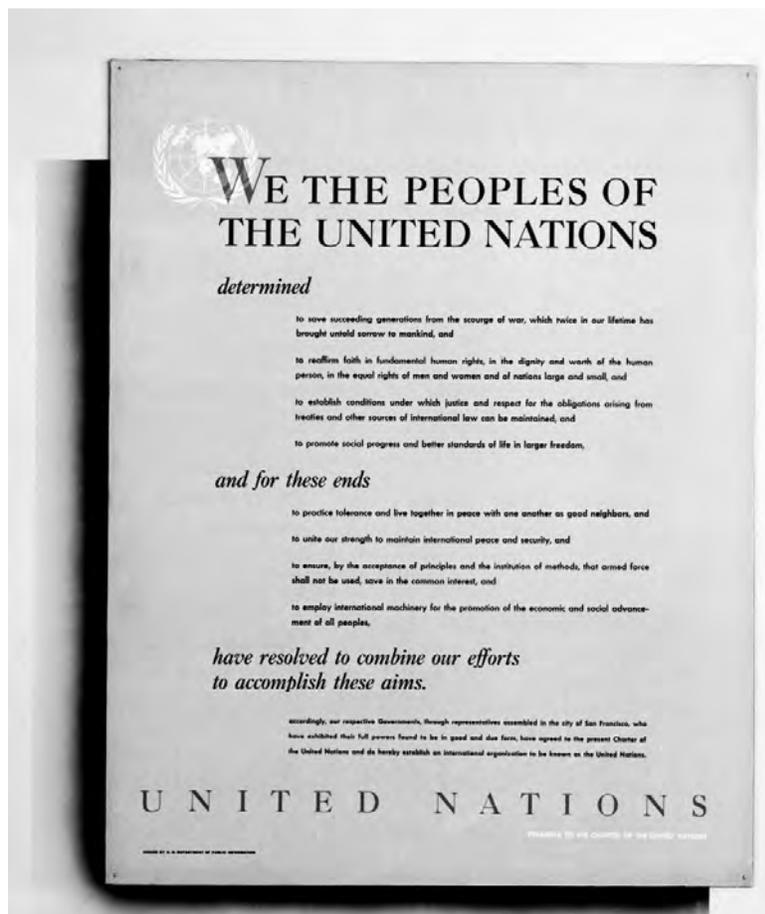
The Charter of the United Nations was and still is a bold prescription for maintaining international peace and security and promoting economic and social development.

Among the key differences between the Charter and the Covenant of the League of Nations are:

- Consideration of collective security: The Charter of the United Nations maintains that Member States place armed forces at the disposal of the Security Council towards the task of preventing war and suppressing acts of aggression, as stated in Article 43.
- Treatment of non-self-governing territories: Chapter XI, the “Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories”, highlights the interests of peoples living in colonial and other non-self-governing territories. A significant proportion of current UN Member States achieved their independence after 1945, which makes the UN far more universally representative of the world’s peoples than the League.
- Regional arrangements: Chapter VIII of the Charter envisions relationships between the UN and regional organizations, particularly with regard to the maintenance of international peace and security.

The Preamble is followed by 19 chapters that address four major areas: peace and security, economic and social issues, the trusteeship system, and judicial organs. The articles describe the functions, rules, and procedures of the six principal organs, of which the General Assembly can be considered the principal legislative organ and the Secretariat the executive body. The Charter ends with provisional rules (among others, the privileges and immunities of United Nations officials), transitional arrangements (needed at the end of the Second World War), amendments, and ratification and signature.

Knowledge of the Charter is a pre-requisite for understanding decision-making in international affairs, the interrelationship between Member States and the United Nations, and the relations between the organization's various entities. The United Nations family of organizations — known as the UN system — is complex, as it tries to address almost all areas of political, economic, and social activity globally. The system consists of six principal organs and their subsidiary bodies; programmes and funds; research and training institutes; functional and regional commissions; expert and ad hoc bodies; as well as 15 specialized agencies, trust funds, treaty bodies, and other related organizations. The Charter also provides for relationships with international and national non-governmental organizations.



Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations that was signed in San Francisco. 26 June 1945. Photo by UN Photo.



To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, Volkan Bozkır, President of the seventy-fifth session of the United Nations General Assembly, invited all Member and Observer States to sign the Preamble of the UN Charter as a symbolic gesture of recommitment to its principles. 22 October 2016. UN Photo by Manuel Elías.

Section 1.2 Purposes and Principles of the United Nations

According to the Charter, the UN has four purposes:

- To maintain international peace and security;
- To develop friendly relations among nations;
- To cooperate in solving international problems and in promoting respect for human rights; and
- To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations.

Article 1 sets out the primary purposes of the United Nations by authorizing the organization to maintain international peace and security by the following actions:

“To take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.”

The Article also mandates the organization to:

- Develop friendly relations among nations;
- Achieve international cooperation in addressing economic, social, and cultural matters; and
- Address fundamental rights issues concerning groups and individuals.

The United Nations aims to bring the family of nations together to achieve these common ends.

According to the Charter, the UN has seven principles:

- Sovereign equality of all Member States;
- Fulfilment of obligations in accordance with the Charter by all Member States;
- Peaceful settlement of international disputes by all Member States;
- Restraint from threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State shown by all Member States;
- All Member States shall assist the UN in any action taken in accordance with the Charter and decline to assist States against which the organization is taking action;
- Ensure that non-Member States act in accordance with the Charter's principles in relation to the maintenance of international peace and security; and
- Avoidance of interference in internal affairs by the United Nations, without prejudice to the application of enforcement measures.

Article 2 stipulates the principles behind the actions of the United Nations and its Member States in pursuit of the purposes of Article 1. However, it should be stressed that the Charter also enshrines the principles of sovereignty and non-interference or non-intervention in domestic affairs, while excluding actions that may be necessary when enforcement measures are being applied. Under Chapter VII, the Security Council may call for a range of actions, including the use of force, with respect to “threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression.” The Council has, over the years, identified many situations within State borders threatening international peace and security. These cases have often been intensely debated.

Prompted by tragedies in Rwanda, Timor-Leste, and the province of Kosovo in the 1990s, the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) took hold. R2P is the principle that being a sovereign State obliges that State to protect its population, but if it cannot or will not, the international community becomes obliged to use diplomatic, humanitarian, and other approaches to protect them. Accordingly, heads of State and government at the 2005 UN World Summit recognized both their obligation to protect their own people from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity and their collective responsibility to help other peoples to be protected. They also affirmed their preparedness to take timely and decisive action when States fail to protect their own people, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and working with relevant regional organizations.

Section 1.3 Legal Framework and Authority

The UN is an international body subject to international laws, treaties, and conventions. It is capable of possessing international rights and duties, and it has the capacity to maintain its rights by bringing international claims. The development of conventions, treaties, and standards within the area of international law, which play a crucial role in economic and social development, human rights, international peacekeeping, and security, represents some of the most impressive achievements of the UN.

Legal framework for peacekeeping and other similar operations

Peacekeeping was not foreseen by the founders of the UN and was, therefore, neither mentioned nor provided for in the Charter. However, Article 29 of the Charter of the United Nations authorizes the Security Council to “establish such subsidiary organs as it deems necessary for the performance of its functions.”¹ Therefore, it has been concluded and generally accepted that the Security Council and the General Assembly are legally justified in creating and mandating peacekeeping forces — and other similar entities — as additional mechanisms towards fulfilling the UN’s task of maintaining international peace and security. These peacekeeping forces have historically operated under Chapter VI of the Charter covering the Pacific Settlement of Disputes. Such was the genesis of “traditional” peacekeeping operations. It should be noted, however, that as peacekeeping operations have become multidimensional and have been mandated to protect civilians, the Security Council has increasingly called upon Chapter VII to allow peacekeepers to use force to protect civilians (see Section 4.3 for the principle of non-use of force except in self-defence and in defence of the mandate).

As peacekeeping increasingly becomes a normative mechanism in maintaining peace and security, it should be remembered that the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international humanitarian law are the guiding principles of all peacekeeping operations. While performing peacekeeping duties, the United Nations must adhere to its Charter and to the recognition of human rights as a fundamental means of promoting peace and security. International humanitarian law, or the law of armed conflict as it is also known, provides additional protection to those who do not participate in hostilities, known as “non-combatants”.

Some additional legal relationships must be established in order to facilitate relations between the United Nations and the host country (i.e., the country where the operation is taking place), and also between the United Nations and the troop-contributing countries (those countries offering military forces to an operation, known as TCCs). These status of forces agreements (SOFAs) for peacekeeping missions and status of mission agreements (SOMAs) for special political missions (SPMs) concern the way a mission or operation conducts itself legally and bureaucratically. The SOFA or SOMA regulates jurisdiction, taxation, the status of UN personnel, freedom of movement, use of facilities, and so on. UN Police must follow the rules and regulations stipulated by the United Nations Criminal Law and Justice Branch in their assigned duties.

1) United Nations Security Council. “Subsidiary Organs Overview”. <http://www.un.org/en/sc/repertoire/subsidiary_organs/overview.shtml>.



Peacekeepers serving with the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) monitor the buffer zone situation. 17 June 2021. UN Photo by Luboš Podhorský.

A memorandum of understanding is a similar agreement between the UN and a TCC. It addresses the TCC's responsibilities to the United Nations, such as the size, type, and duration of the contingents to be used, equipment, liability, claim and compensation, administrative and budgetary matters, and so on.

Both the Charter and the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations define and provide the privileges and immunities deemed necessary for personnel working in connection with the organization. The 1944 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel serves as the legal instrument for protection and outlines duties to ensure safety and security, the release and return of detained personnel, the criminalization of offences against UN personnel, and the exercise of jurisdiction.

Privileges and immunities of the United Nations

The Charter of the United Nations provides in Article 105 that the United Nations enjoys in the territory of each of its Member States such privileges and immunities as are necessary for the fulfilment of its purposes. This general principle was further elaborated in the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations (the "General Convention") adopted by the General Assembly in 1946.

Pursuant to the Charter and the General Convention, the UN and its offices, programmes, and funds enjoy immunity from every form of legal process. Its property and assets are immune from any form of interference, whether by executive, administrative, judicial, or legislative action. It can freely transfer its funds from one country to another or within any country. It is exempt from prohibitions and restrictions on imports and exports of items for its official use.

In addition, its staff members and other personnel designated as “experts on mission” enjoy immunity from legal process in what they do or say in their official capacity. UN staff members from the level of P5 and higher enjoy diplomatic immunity.² Staff members are also exempt from national service obligations, immigration restrictions, identity numbers for non-citizens together with their spouses and dependents, and taxation on the salaries and emoluments paid to them by the organization (unless they are citizens of the United States of America [USA], who must pay tax but are reimbursed by the UN).

The privileges and immunities of the United Nations, its funds and programmes, and the other entities forming part of the organization will often be further specified in bilateral agreements with host countries. For example, under its Headquarters Agreement with the USA, UN personnel of all kinds must be allowed to enter the USA to work at or travel on official business to UN Headquarters in New York. In addition, staff members can be accorded certain other privileges and facilities under such bilateral agreements.

Many people work for the United Nations as contractors or in other roles without being considered staff. These individuals are not subject to the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations. Such non-staff personnel require separate consideration. Some will enjoy privileges and immunities under the General Convention if they are designated as “experts on mission”. Others will be accorded privileges and immunities on the basis of additional agreements to which host countries are party.

Privileges and immunities are not extended to UN personnel for personal convenience but to facilitate the independent exercise of their functions and the work of the organization. Generally, privileges and immunities do not release UN personnel of their obligation to respect and follow the national and local laws of the host country. However, should these laws interfere with the exercise of official functions or otherwise be incompatible with privileges and immunities to be accorded to the United Nations and its personnel, the United Nations will assert its relevant privileges and immunities as appropriate.

It is solely for the Secretary-General to determine whether immunity applies and, if so, whether it should be waived in any particular case. The Office of Legal Affairs is responsible for advising on the scope and application of the General Convention, which includes advising on immunity and waivers thereof, and for making determinations on such matters for the Secretary-General. Questions concerning privileges and immunities should be referred to the Office of Legal Affairs.

Bilateral agreements

The organization enters into various bilateral agreements with Member States that govern its activities within the country. Different UN entities may have separate bilateral agreements in place within the same host country. For example, the United Nations Development Programme has standard basic assistance agreements in multiple countries. Furthermore, other funds and programmes sign basic cooperation agreements, peacekeeping missions have SOFAs in place, and SPMs have SOMAs. In addition, the organization enters into host country agreements with Member States for its offices and the holding of conferences, seminars, and workshops in their respective territories.

2) United Nations staff members fall into various categories, including General Service (G) staff, who usually act in administrative, support and technical functions and are mostly locally recruited, and Professional (P) and higher staff, who are specialized in their fields and are mostly internationally recruited. The categories are subdivided by level, ranging from, for example, G1 and P1 as the lowest levels in their categories and G7 and P7 (also known as D2) as the highest.



A wide view of the meeting with Secretary-General António Guterres and the Foreign Ministers of the five permanent members of the Security Council. 22 September 2021. UN Photo by Eskinder Debebe.

These agreements contain provisions on privileges and immunities for the UN entity and its personnel that typically reflect the General Convention and can include additional privileges, immunities, and facilities beyond the General Convention. Such agreements also set out provisions intended to facilitate UN operational activities and assistance to be provided by the government in this context.

Peace operations established by the UN require it to conclude agreements with the relevant parties to ensure the orderly deployment and functioning of the mission in accordance with the rules, policies, and practices of the organization. The General Assembly adopted a model SOFA in 1990 (A/45/594) intended to regulate the status, privileges, and immunities, among other matters, of a UN peacekeeping mission with its host country. This model was also intended to serve as a basis for a SOMA for a UN SPM. The model agreement continues to serve as the basis for SOFAs and SOMAs concluded by the UN, with adjustments to reflect mission-specific requirements and current operational practice.

Both agreements incorporate by reference the General Convention and adapt the immunity provisions of the Convention to the characteristics and requirements of peacekeeping and SPMs. Notably, a SOFA establishes specific procedures for cooperation between the peacekeeping mission and the host country, including national legal proceedings, arrest, and detention of a mission member. It also provides for the exclusive jurisdiction of the TCC for criminal offences that may be committed by its troops deployed as part of the mission. A SOMA omits provisions in the model agreement concerning military matters and is adapted to the functions and composition of each mission.



Jayathma Wickramanayake, the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, visits a vocational training centre in Torit during her visit to South Sudan. The Torit Vocational Training Centre, supported by UNDP and the Netherlands, trains young people in tailoring, construction, and engineering and currently has about 420 people enrolled. 29 January 2020. UN Photo by Nektarios Markogiannis.

Section 1.4 The United Nations System

The six principal organs of the United Nations, including the General Assembly and Security Council, are relatively well known. Though these entities have general oversight of the array of global activities of the United Nations, the UN system goes well beyond them. The work of the organization is controlled and divided among many specialized entities known as funds, programmes, commissions, and agencies. This section describes the main actors, including the principal organs that make up the UN system, and focuses on four main categories. Because of the complexity and comprehensiveness of the system, a number of entities are not listed in this section.

The coordinating body of these entities is the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. It is chaired by the Secretary-General and meets twice a year.

The principal organs

As described in Section 1.1, the principal organs of the United Nations as provided for in the Charter are the General Assembly, the Security Council, ECOSOC, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat. These six organs form the core of the United Nations system. The principal organs are mainly located at UN Headquarters in New York, except for the International Court of Justice, which is located in The Hague, Netherlands. The United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Vienna, and Geneva — the latter located in the same building as the former League of Nations — are also considered part of United Nations Headquarters.

The Charter also provides for the establishment of such subsidiary bodies as the principal organs may find necessary (e.g., various commissions, committees, temporarily constituted peacekeeping operations, and a variety of observer and verification missions).

Reporting to ECOSOC and operating under the authority of the Secretary-General are the five economic and social regional commissions (as defined in Article 68 of the Charter). The basic mandate of these commissions is to facilitate the promotion of the economic and social development of each region and to strengthen the economic relations of the countries in that region, both with one another and with other countries. The five commissions, with their own structures and secretariats, are as follows: the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in Bangkok, Thailand; the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in Geneva, Switzerland; the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in Santiago, Chile; and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in Beirut, Lebanon. These organs, offices, and commissions are financed through the United Nations regular budget.

Programmes, funds, and bodies of the United Nations

The core of the United Nations includes various programmes and funds that are generally responsible for operational development in programme countries. These funds and programmes include:

- The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF);
- The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP);
 - The United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)
 - United Nations Volunteers (UNV)
- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA);
- The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); and
- The World Food Programme (WFP).

Although these programmes and offices are effectively autonomous, they all report through ECOSOC to the General Assembly. They have their own governing bodies, set their own standards, and provide their own guidance. Their budgets are largely funded through voluntary contributions from governments and the private sector through extrabudgetary resources.

In addition, there are a number of related programmes, such as the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). Other entities include the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations University (UNU), and the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), among others.

Specialized agencies

Specialized agencies provide support and assistance to the development programmes. They are all autonomous and work at the intergovernmental level through ECOSOC and at the inter-secretarial level through the Chief Executives Board.

The major specialized agencies and the Bretton Woods Institutions were separately established and have their own constitutions, budgets, governing boards, and secretariats.



Flag-raising ceremony at UNECA Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. 24 October 2006. UN Photo by Rick Bajornas.

One group of specialized agencies comprises the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and the World Health Organization (WHO). These organizations have all been brought into relationship with the United Nations and are formally recognized under the Charter. Their budgets are raised by assessment from their Member States but not as part of the United Nations regular budget.

The Bretton Woods Institutions, founded at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, consist of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group. The World Bank lends commercially raised capital for development projects, while the IMF, among other things, promotes monetary cooperation and the expansion of international trade. The World Bank Group encompasses the main commercial-rate International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the soft-loan International Development Association, the International Finance Corporation, the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, and the International Centre for Settlements of Investment Disputes. Their budgets are raised through the usual capital market procedures. The IMF and the World Bank have adopted a voting system where voting is weighted according to the members' shares.

The third group of specialized agencies includes the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Conference on Disarmament (CD). IFAD has a separate legal status within the system. In 1995, the WTO replaced the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) as the mechanism to help trade flow as freely as possible. The WTO does not fall under the Charter as a specialized agency but has cooperative arrangements with the United Nations. The International Trade Centre (ITC) is a technical cooperation agency with a joint mandate with the WTO and the UN via the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The CD is the single global negotiating forum and was established under the General Assembly's tenth special session. The CD has a special relationship with the United Nations since it reports to the General Assembly and is funded from the regular budget.

Technical specialized agencies

The technical specialized agencies are some of the most important technical organizations in the world. All of these agencies had predecessors under the former League of Nations except the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) were established more than a century ago. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) existed before the Second World War. After the war, they were restructured into the organizations they are today.

These agencies work in close cooperation with the United Nations. For example, the IAEA, the technical specialized UN agency that facilitates cooperation among governments on issues of technology and nuclear policy by operating as an intergovernmental forum, submits its reports to the General Assembly, Security Council, and other UN entities. However, it exists as a separate and independent organization.

Outside organizations linked to the system

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have an important role in United Nations activities. In order to avoid a political dependency and maintain impartiality, NGOs operate independently of governments. Their experience and technical knowledge are of great value to the UN, and therefore approximately 2,100 NGOs have some consultative status with ECOSOC. They are divided into three categories:

1. NGOs concerned with most ECOSOC activities;
2. NGOs with specific knowledge in specific areas; and
3. NGOs for ad hoc consultations.



Students at the St. Esprit National Education Centre in Grand Chemin, Haiti, during the visit of the ECOSOC Ad Hoc Advisory Group (AHAG). The ECOSOC-AHAG visited Haiti from 22–24 May to assess the country's socioeconomic situation, discuss development priorities with national authorities, and reinforce the partnership towards sustainable development. 23 May 2019. UN Photo by Leonora Baumann.

An eminent member among NGOs is the International Committee of the Red Cross, which, in recognition of its formal mandate under the Geneva Conventions, is invited to participate in the work of the General Assembly.

The Committee of Non-Governmental Organizations is responsible for examining and reporting on the consultative relationship that ECOSOC should accord to NGOs.

Additionally, there are a number of regional organizations involved in peacebuilding, security, and social and economic development. Some of them have entered into a framework agreement with the United Nations, some are seeking observer status, and some have neither formal nor informal UN status. Their links to the United Nations may fall under Article 52 of the Charter, which states that:

“Nothing in the present Charter precludes the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with such matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action provided that such arrangements or agencies and their activities are consistent with the Purposes and Principles of the United Nations.”³

Examples of regional organizations include the African Union (AU), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), among others.

Summary

The United Nations system comprises a wide range of actors, spans a vast array of competencies, and is governed by the UN Charter, which came into effect on 24 October 1945. The six principal organs of the UN are the General Assembly, the Security Council, ECOSOC, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat, forming the core of the United Nations system.

The UN also encompasses programmes, funds, bodies, and specialized agencies; some of these pre-date the organization itself, and all are vital to international cooperation. In addition to the composite actors of the UN system, the organization works alongside NGOs and regional intergovernmental bodies toward shared aims.

A well-defined legal framework governs the relations between the United Nations and its Member States. Furthermore, other legal agreements — such as SOFAs, SOMAs, and MOUs — outline each party's responsibilities in the operation of a peacekeeping mission or SPM. Though peacekeeping was not specifically provided for under the UN Charter, peacekeeping forces have historically operated under Chapter VI covering the Pacific Settlement of Disputes. However, as peacekeeping operations have become multidimensional, the Security Council has increasingly called upon Chapter VII to allow peacekeepers to use force to protect civilians.

3) United Nations, "United Nations Charter". Available from: <<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>>.

End-of-Lesson Quiz »

1. **The founding of the United Nations followed which world event?**
 - A. The Great Depression
 - B. The Second World War
 - C. The Cold War
 - D. The Israel-Palestine Conflict

2. **The _____ was in many ways a predecessor to the United Nations.**
 - A. United States
 - B. World Court
 - C. League of Nations
 - D. Organization of American States

3. **Which Member State is NOT a permanent member of the Security Council?**
 - A. China
 - B. France
 - C. Nigeria
 - D. The Russian Federation

4. **Name the four purposes for the founding of the United Nations.**

5. **Which of the following is one of the principles of the United Nations?**
 - A. Interference in internal affairs
 - B. Use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state
 - C. Sovereignty removed from all Member States
 - D. Non-interference in internal affairs

6. **The African Union and European Union are examples of _____.**
 - A. regional organizations
 - B. national entities
 - C. non-governmental organizations
 - D. specialized technical agencies

7. **How many principal organs does the UN system contain?**
 - A. 1
 - B. 4
 - C. 6
 - D. 193

8. **Prompted by tragedies in Rwanda, East Timor, and the province of Kosovo in the 1990s, the concept of (the) _____ took hold.**
 - A. United Nations
 - B. Responsibility to Protect (R2P)
 - C. international humanitarian law
 - D. special political missions

9. **The United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) are examples of _____.**
 - A. national organizations
 - B. intergovernmental organizations
 - C. programmes and funds of the United Nations
 - D. Bretton Woods Institutions

10. **TRUE or FALSE: Privileges and immunities are not extended to UN personnel for personal convenience but to facilitate the independent exercise of their functions and the work of the organization.**
 - A. True
 - B. False

Answer Key provided on the next page.

End-of-Lesson Quiz »

Answer Key

1. B
2. C
3. C
4. To maintain international peace and security; to develop friendly relations among nations; to cooperate in solving international problems and in promoting respect for human rights; to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations.
5. D
6. A
7. C
8. B
9. C
10. A. True