

Global agencies: the work of the United Nations

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Synopsis

The United Nations works to promote growth and stability.

After the end of the Second World War, a global drive for peace and prosperity led to the creation of a number of intergovernmental organisations in order to develop global laws and regulate institutions. As perhaps the largest and most important of these, the United Nations forms the backbone of a system of global governance that attempts to promote growth and stability yet has, at times, also exacerbated inequalities and injustices.

Key terms

Global governance, growth, inequalities, injustice, intergovernmental organisations, stability, United Nations

Learning objectives

By studying this **Geofile** you will learn about:

- How the United Nations has emerged to develop global laws and institutions.
- The role of the United Nations in providing a system of global governance.
- The work of the United Nations to promote growth and stability.
- The role of the United Nations in exacerbating inequalities and injustices.

Links

Exam Board	Link to specification
AQA	Component 2: Human geography, 3.2.1: Global systems and global governance, 3.2.1.4 Global governance, see page 21 Click here
Edexcel	Area of study 2: Dynamic places, Topic 3: Globalisation, see pages 24–27 Click here
OCR	Component 2, Geographical debates, Topic 2.2: Global connections, see pages 22–29 Click here
Eduqas	Component 2, Global systems and global governance, Global governance of the Earth's oceans, see pages 44–49 Click here
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The United Nations – striving for peace and a decent life for all

In September 2017 President Donald Trump was due to make a speech at the 72nd Annual General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly. This was a pivotal time for the role of the United Nations, as global geopolitics were thrust to the fore, with the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran threatening to alter the balance of global stability.

The United Nations (UN) is an **intergovernmental organisation (IGO)** and officially came into existence on 24 October 1945 as part of the post-Second World War vision of a more unified world. Representatives of 50 countries met in San Francisco to draw up the United Nations Charter, based on a proposal worked out by China, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States at Dumbarton Oaks, United States in August–

October 1944. The key role of the UN was to ensure that the world would never again fall into another devastating global conflict. Today, the UN is made up of 193 member states guided by the purposes and principles contained in its founding Charter to maintain peace and international security, and respect for human rights. The UN has worked to bring nation states closer together, to work in co-operation and to foster a growing sense of global cohesion.

Trump, however, sees a different future emerging, one in which the world is organised into proud, sovereign nation states. He commented on Twitter that the UN had great potential, but that: ‘Right

now it is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time.’ Trump promoted an America-first national policy and highlighted the threats of a rogue Iran and the fight against so-called Islamic State (IS) in his first speech at the UN General Assembly. He went on to state that a 21st century world should be built around nations ‘protecting their sovereignty taking ownership of their futures’. He called for ‘a great reawakening of nations, for the revival of their spirits, their pride, their people, and their patriotism’. A far cry from the guiding principles set out in the formation of the UN over 70 years ago.

Intergovernmental organisation (IGO)

A regional or global organisation that consists of members who are sovereign nation states. They are established by a treaty or other agreement that sets a charter for the group. They uphold treaties and international law and co-operate on issues such as economic policy, human rights, trade, military operations and conservation.

Name	Year Established	Membership	Purpose
World Bank	1944	The World Bank is like a cooperative, made up of 189 member countries.	To promote global investment and provide development loans to countries for specific development projects. Encourages a free-market model.
International Monetary Fund (IMF)	1944	An organisation made up of 189 countries.	To foster global monetary cooperation, secure financial stability and provide loans to governments to ensure that they do not go bankrupt. Loans are dependent on the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which can force governments to privatise assets.
World Trade Organization (WTO)	1993	164 members. Any state or customs territory having full autonomy in the conduct of its trade policies may join.	To cut trade barriers (subsidies, tariffs and quotas) that can stop countries trading freely with each other. Sets the conditions under which trading can occur.
World Economic Forum (WEF)	1974	1,000 leading global companies	A non-profit organisation that promotes globalisation and free trade. It has an annual meeting held at Davos-Klosters, which brings together the global business and political elite.

Figure 1 Key intergovernmental organisations (IGOs)

Global governance

The term 'governance' refers to the notion of guiding rather than direct forms of control more often associated with 'government'. Global governance, therefore, is a more of a movement towards political cooperation from a range of nation states and IGOs with the aim to negotiate responses to problems that affect more than one state or region, such as global trade or environmental concerns.

The structure of the United Nations

The UN is organised through the General Assembly, which is the main deliberative, policymaking and representative body made up of voting representatives of all 193 member states. In September each year the full membership of the UN meets at the General Assembly Hall in New York for the annual General Assembly session which is attended by many heads of state. The General Assembly also elects a GA President to serve a one-year term of office. Decisions on important questions, such as 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.

At any time, a smaller number of states are represented – some

permanently, others in rotation on the other principal organs of the UN:

- The Security Council has responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. There are 15 members (five permanent and 10 non-permanent members) and each member has one vote. All member states are required to comply with Council decisions. The Security Council has the power to impose sanctions or even authorise the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security.
- The Economic and Social Council makes recommendations on economic, social and environmental issues, and has responsibility for implementing internationally agreed development goals. It has 54 members that are elected

by the General Assembly for three-year terms.

- The International Court of Justice is based at the Peace Palace in the Hague (Netherlands) and is the main judicial organ of the UN. It is responsible for settling international legal disputes.
- The Secretariat carries out the day-to-day work of the UN as mandated by the General Assembly and the organisation's other principal organs.

The UN also encompasses the work of both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which although set up in 1944, have been recognised as independent specialised agencies of the UN since 1945.

The work of the United Nations

Today, the UN encompasses a wide range of global agencies (Figure 1) agreements and treaties as it strives towards a system of global governance. The UN has been responsible for the establishment of many important global conventions including:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948.
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979.
- The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990.
- The Conference on Environment and Development (the 'Earth Summit') in 1992 and subsequent conferences.
- The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), followed by the

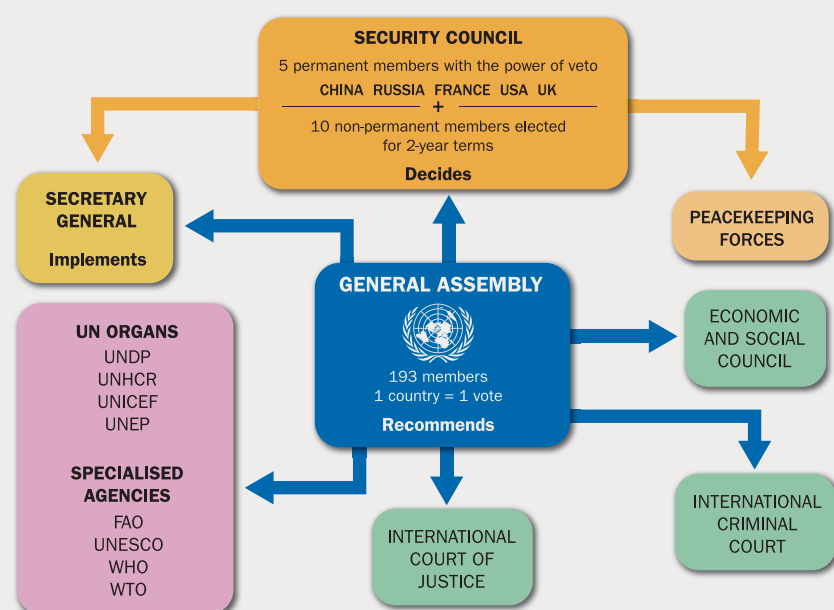


Figure 2 Organisational Structure of the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.

Promoting growth and stability through global governance

The UN has played a significant part since 1945 in protecting human rights, maintaining international peace and security, and upholding international law. Perhaps the biggest success of the UN is in maintaining global peace. Despite many regional and local conflicts, the world has not had another global conflict on the scale of the Second World War. In fact, the number of people dying in conflicts has declined rapidly since 1945 – worldwide, fewer people died in conflict in the first decade of the 21st century than in any decade of the 20th. The UN has also had considerable success in promoting growth and stability through, for example, its Food Aid Programme, the work of international Peacekeepers and the Millennium Development Goals.

Food aid programme

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has been one of its most successful programmes and has made an enormous impact on the global community. Established in 1961, it is the world's largest humanitarian organisation tackling hunger and promoting food security, providing aid in the form of food assistance to around 104 million people in over 80 countries each year. It takes on the challenge of feeding people in war zones, natural disasters, health emergencies and some of the world's poorest countries.

Following the devastating earthquakes in Haiti (2010) and Japan (2011), the WFP stepped in to provide residents with aid in the form of food supplies and other necessities, reducing the humanitarian impact and ensuring that a long-term food crisis was prevented. More recently in

Somalia, food security remains under threat (following the widespread famine of 2011). A worsening drought over the summer of 2017, with poor rainfall and low river water levels, has resulted in rural areas suffering from near total crop failures, reduced rural employment opportunities, a widespread shortage of water and pasture, and consequent increases in livestock deaths. Local food prices rose sharply and by September 2017 more than 3 million people could not meet their daily food requirements and 800,000 were on the brink of famine. The WFP stepped in, raising over \$1bn to provide food assistance and nutrition addressing basic food needs, strengthening coping mechanisms and supporting efforts to achieve food security.

The WFP runs programmes ranging from emergency relief to activities designed to build resilience to future natural disasters, such as floods and drought. It provides assistance using a combination of cash and food rations, as well as supporting communities with development projects that will

strengthen their livelihoods and ability to withstand crises.

Resolving conflict

The UN has achieved an impressive record of resolving international conflicts. Since 1945, UN peacekeepers have undertaken over 60 field missions and managed to negotiate 172 peaceful settlements to end regional conflicts. Currently, the UN has 16 active peacekeeping missions around the world, attempting to save lives and prevent conflict from erupting.

Sierra Leone suffered from a catastrophic civil war which began in 1991. In 1998 The UN established the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to monitor the military and security situation there. It worked to disarm and demobilise former soldiers, and in 1999 the UN Security Council deployed a specific peacekeeping force to the region to help implement a peace agreement between the different parties. This lasted until 2014, when the UN declared that the intervention in Sierra Leone had been successful in bringing peace to the country, after a decade of warfare. The UN



Figure 3 UN peacekeeper on patrol in Lebanon

Source: Sadik Gulec / Shutterstock.com

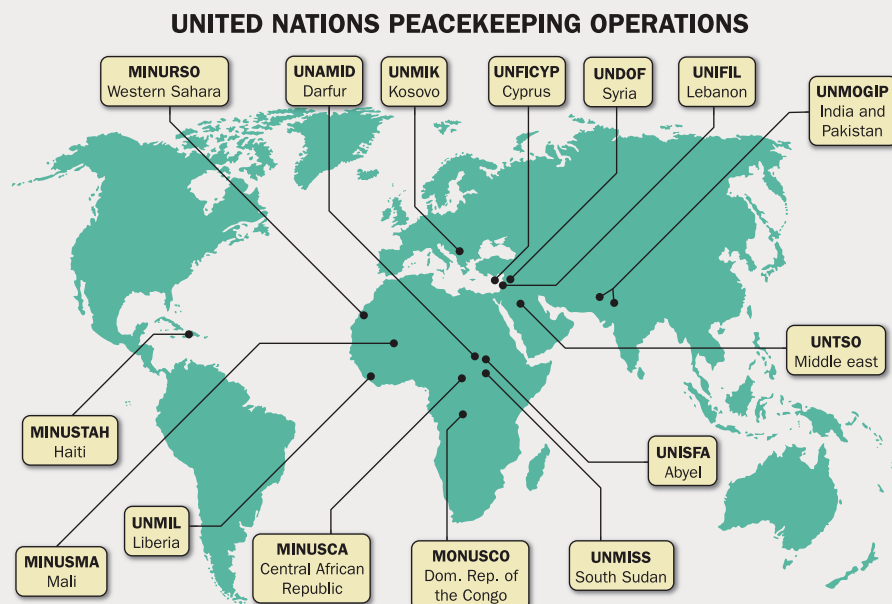


Figure 4 Map of UN Peacekeeping Missions (August 2017)

peacekeepers were responsible for disarming more than 75,000 ex-fighters (including hundreds of child soldiers) and destroyed more than 42,000 weapons and 1.2 million rounds of ammunition.

The contribution that the UN has given to global peace is undeniable, and its peacekeeping activities should be regarded as one of the most successful tasks the UN has undertaken.

The Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals

The UN made significant progress since 2000 towards meeting the eight Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets:

- A reduction in people living in extreme poverty saw the number of people living on less than \$1.25 reduced from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015.
- The number of new HIV infections fell by around 40% between 2000 and 2013.
- The child mortality rate was reduced by more than half, falling from 90 to 43 deaths per 1,000 live births.

- Primary school enrolment figures have dramatically improved, with the enrolment rate increasing from 83% in 2000 to 91% in 2015.
- Some 2.6 billion people gained access to improved drinking water since 1990, with the target of halving the proportion of people without access to improved sources of water achieved five years ahead of schedule in 2010.

Despite these successes, progress towards the MDGs was uneven, often failing to help the global poorest and most disadvantaged.

In 2015 the UN set 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to enhance social, environmental and economic progress by 2030. The aim of the SDGs is to build on the success of the MDGs to tackle the root cause of poverty and to improve life, in a sustainable way, for future generations.

Global governance – the United Nations and the future

Despite the many successes of the UN, there remain many critics who say that it is in fact exacerbating inequalities and injustices, and some have argued that it turns a blind eye to genocide and terrorism, and that only 75 members are free democracies.

There is growing criticism that the UN has become unfit for the challenges the world faces. There is beginning to be a sense of stagnation, disillusionment, and failure, against the backdrop of success throughout the 20th century. The UN will need to adopt new global strategies and solutions, as well as more concerted, robust, and inclusive multilateralism, in order to face the challenges of sustainable development and climate change, a rising tide of nationalism, and the threat of rogue states.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Figure 5 The UN Sustainable Development Goals

Focus questions

- 1** Explain the purpose of intergovernmental organisations.
- 2** To what extent does the United Nations regulate global systems and enforce global governance?
- 3** Assess the extent to which intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations have been successful at promoting peace and stability since 1945.

Learning checkpoint

When reading through this unit you should consider the following questions:

- 1.** Why did intergovernmental organisations form in the aftermath of the Second World War?
- 2.** What is meant by the idea of 'global governance'?
- 3.** Describe the principal organs of the United Nations and the roles they play.
- 4.** Explain how the United Nations has been successful in:
 - a.** reducing global hunger
 - b.** promoting peace
 - c.** reducing poverty.
- 5.** How has the United Nations exacerbated inequalities?
- 6.** Research examples of where the United Nations could be seen to have failed at promoting peace and stability.
- 7.** What role do you think that the United Nations has to play in promoting peace and stability in the 21st century?