



Committee History and Structure
General Assembly Second Committee¹

September 19, 2011

The United Nations General Assembly (GA) was established in 1945 by the Charter of the United Nations.² Each member state has a permanent seat on this committee. Thus the GA is the congress or parliament of the United Nations. It “occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations.”³

In the GA, each UN member state has one vote. No matter how different in military or economic power, all are equal. Thus the United States’ vote counts the same as Egypt’s, and Bolivia has the same voice as China. This is opposed to some other UN committees, such as the Security Council, which have limited membership or special voting rules. This feature gives the General Assembly a great deal of legitimacy on the world stage. It is a place where world public opinion can be expressed.

The GA covers all issues of global importance. Article 14 of the United Nations Charter gives the GA the power to “recommend measures for the peaceable adjustment of any situation, regardless of origin, which it deems likely to impair the general welfare or friendly relations among nations.” According to the Charter, the GA “may discuss any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs” except “any matters relative to the maintenance of international peace and security which are being dealt with by the Security Council.”⁴

The majority of GA resolutions originate in one of the GA’s many subcommittees, such as GA-1 (disarmament and security), GA-2 (economic and financial), GA-3 (social, humanitarian, and cultural), and ECOSOC (economic and social). Thus, the relationship between the GA and its subcommittees is akin to that between the US Senate and its subcommittees. Resolutions passed by subcommittees are simply working papers. Only when the GA passes a resolution does it go into effect.

Resolutions passed by the GA are recommendations to member states.⁵ Unlike Security Council resolutions, they are not binding. Nevertheless, GA resolutions are an expression of world public opinion. Moreover, they often inspire treaties and conventions that are binding on the states that sign them.⁶

¹ This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, faculty advisor, with contributions from Emily Tutvedt (2008), Samantha Stephens (2010), and Brianna Sefcak (2011). Copyright 2011 by Karen Ruth Adams.

² “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV, available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter>.

³ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly,” United Nations General Assembly website, <http://www.un.org/ga/about/background.shtml>. This quotation is from the General Assembly’s 2000 Millennium Declaration, Resolution A/res/55/2, Chapter VIII, Article 30, available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.

⁴ “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV.

⁵ “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV.

⁶ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview, 2007), p. 33.

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The GA-2 is a forum for UN member states to discuss and improve their national economies, the world economy, and the international financial system.⁷ Like the other main committees of the GA, the GA-2 was established in 1947.⁸ The GA-2 meets each fall at UN headquarters in New York, as well as in special sessions as deemed necessary.

Economic development, trade, and finance are important to all member states. States need economic growth and development to foster domestic political and social stability. International trade can contribute to these goals. When states specialize in the production of certain goods and trade those goods for others, the total number of goods produced in the world rises, and prices to consumers fall.

International trade requires a strong international financial system to create confidence in the currencies used to pay for traded goods. A strong international financial system also enables individuals and firms to invest in various countries, and allows developed countries to provide aid and loans to assist less-developed states.

Trade as a percentage of each state's gross domestic product (GDP) has risen dramatically since World War II.⁹ In addition, national currencies and financial instruments such as stocks and bonds are now traded globally. As a result, an economic and financial crisis in one country or region can affect people and states all over the world. By working together at the GA-2, states can maximize the positive effects and minimize the negative effects of international trade and finance.

Membership, Voting, and Leadership

The membership of the GA-2 includes all 193 UN member states. In addition, non-member states and other entities recognized by the UN as permanent observers may attend and participate in meetings, but they cannot vote. At present, permanent observers include Palestine and the Holy See (Vatican City), as well as a number of international organizations.¹⁰

Each UN member state has one vote. Resolutions and reports pass the committee and go on for General Assembly consideration if approved by a simple majority of member states.

Regional blocs and other alliances play an important role in building consensus. Blocs consist of both countries in the same region and countries from different regions that face similar problems. For example, the Group of 77 is a group of less-developed countries that often vote together.¹¹

The Chair of the GA-2 chairs the meetings and corrects any procedural mistakes. The chairs of the GA-2 and other five main GA committees are elected annually by the members of their committees, with one chair from

⁷ UN General Assembly Second Committee website, <http://www.un.org/ga/second/index.shtml>.

⁸ UN General Assembly, "Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly," A/520, 2 December 1947, Rule 90, page 17, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F520&Lang=E.

⁹ Alan Heston & Robert Summers & Bettina Atten, "Penn World Table 6.2," University of Toronto, available at <http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca/pwt/alphacountries.html>.

¹⁰ United Nations, "Permanent Observers: Non-Member States and Entities," available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/nonmembers.shtml> and "Permanent Observers: International Organizations," available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/intergovorg.shtml>.

¹¹ "The Group of 77 at the United Nations," available at <http://www.g77.org/>. For more information on voting blocs, see Soo Yeon Kim and Bruce Russett, "The new politics of voting alignments in the United Nations General Assembly," *International Organization*, Vol. 50, No 4 (1996), pp. 629-652.

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each world region. Elections are held at least three months before the beginning of the annual session. The other officers of the GA-2 (three vice chairs and a rapporteur) are elected at the beginning of each annual session.¹²

History and Challenges

In 1945, the founding members of the UN expressed their goals for the organization in Article I of the UN Charter. The third of these goals is:

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.¹³

The GA-2 and ECOSOC take the lead in drafting resolutions on the economic aspects of these matters.

In 2005, in response to suggestions from then-secretary general Kofi Annan, the GA as a whole began the process of streamlining its procedures to increase its effectiveness. Since then, one of the major initiatives of the GA-2 has been to establish categories for the topics it addresses and to rotate consideration of those categories every other year. It is hoped this will enable the committee to focus on the most important issues, relate subsidiary issues to major topics, and create the opportunity for greater progress and implementation over time.¹⁴

The GA-2 faces three obstacles to resolving global economic problems. First, the new agenda categories (such as “globalization and interdependence”) are very broad. Because they encompass a variety of issues, they are subject to competing interpretations.

Second, as in all UN committees, the direction of debate and the content of resolutions in the GA-2 depends on the competing interests of Member States. Often, there is a kind of “lowest common denominator” approach, which means that the committee focuses on easier issues at the expense of more difficult ones. In recent decades, economic rights such as the right to work and the right to shelter have been among the issues pushed aside. Today, political and civil rights such as voting and freedom of the press receive much more attention than economic, social, and cultural rights. Yet all of these rights were articulated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and many states have signed and ratified the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which entered into force in 1976.¹⁵

Third, there is a tendency for the states with the largest and most developed economies to try to address economic and financial issues in the organizations they dominate. Thus for decades the Group of 7 largest Western economies (the United States, Britain, France, Canada, Italy, Germany and Japan) have held separate discussions on vital international economic matters such as currency stabilization. In 2009, the G-7 was permanently laid down in favor of the Group of 20 (G-20), which includes the large developing countries such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. Even so, this leaves 173 UN member states out of vital international economic decisions.¹⁶ Of particular concern is that the G-20 does not include even one of the 49 states that the GA has identified as “least developed.” Most of these countries are in Africa, and their populations live on less than \$2.50 per day.¹⁷

¹² UN General Assembly, “Rules of Procedure,” Section V, Rule 30, and Section XIII, Rules 99 and 103, available at http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_prez.shtml and http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_ctees.shtml.

¹³ “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter I, Article 1.

¹⁴ UN General Assembly Second Committee website.

¹⁵ International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>.

¹⁶ Edmund L. Andrews, “Leaders of G-20 Vow to Reshape Global Economy,” *New York Times*, 25 September 2009; [article online]; available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/26/world/26summit.html?hp>.

¹⁷ International Telecommunications Union, “Who are the Least Developed Countries (LDCs),” <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/lcd/who.html>

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Because the GA-2 includes all 193 UN member states -- regardless of financial stability and level of development -- and because each state on the committee has one vote, draft resolutions passed by the GA-2 are widely seen as statements of world public opinion on vital economic matters. In addition, because the GA-2 is a subcommittee of the GA, which controls the UN budget,¹⁸ the GA-2 can initiate development and other economic projects that have a good chance of being funded.

Recent and Current Work

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the centerpiece of the UN's campaign against global poverty, and are thus a perpetual part of the GA-2 agenda under the general topic of "Sustainable Development." The MDGs were passed in 2000 by the General Assembly.¹⁹ The goals are to meet the following benchmarks by 2015:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDs, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. A global partnership for development

Since 2000, the General Assembly has demanded and received annual reports quantifying country and regional progress towards the MDGs. In this way, the GA encourages both short- and long-term progress on the goals. The GA has also repeatedly urged all developed member states to commit to donating 0.7 percent of their country's gross domestic product toward overseas development assistance.²⁰

Even before the international financial crisis began in 2008, aid shortfalls of \$18 billion and the finding by the World Bank that poverty was more widespread than previously thought ensured that the MDGs would continue to be at the forefront of discussion in the GA-2.²¹ Although setbacks had been encountered, Sha Zukang, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, argued that they had been overstated and that the MDGs could still be reached if developed and developing states remain committed to poverty reduction.²² Since the international financial crisis began, however, both developed and less-developed states have seen dramatic reductions in asset prices and trade levels. This has made it more difficult to achieve the MDGs.²³

¹⁸ "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV.

¹⁹ "About the MDGs: Basics," United Nations Development Programme, available at <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>.

²⁰ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Security, Solidarity and Sovereignty: The Grand Themes of UN Reform," *The American Journal of International Law* 99, no. 3 (2005): 630. On the .7% goal, see "The 0.7% target: An in-depth look," Millennium Project website, available at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/press/07.htm>.

²¹ "MDG Gap Task Force Report 2008", available at www.un.org/.../MDG%20Gap%20Task%20Force%20Report%202008.pdf and "World Bank Finds More People live in Steep Poverty," *New York Times* 26 August 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com>.

²² Sha Zukang "Devising a shared global strategy for the MDGs: building on successes towards 2015," *UN Chronicle* 44:4 (Dec 2007), pp. 14-15, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1309/is_4_44/ai_n25356873.

²³ UN News Centre, "Economic slowdown in rich countries could hurt poorer status, UN reports" Available on <http://www.un.org/news/dh/pdf/english/2008/04092008.pdf>.

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Because the domestic economic policies of one state, especially a large state such as the US, can have a profound effect on global capital, stock, and real estate markets, a national economic crisis can easily become an international economic crisis, reducing investment, growth, and living standards all around the world.²⁴ The GA-2 is a natural forum for discussion of how to address economic crises when they occur and how to prevent their occurrence in the future. The GA-2 engages in debate about this under the broad category of “macroeconomic policy questions” and, more specifically, under “international financial system and development,” which is an annual topic. In June 2009, debates about the international economic crisis that first played out in the GA-3 in 2008 took center stage at a GA-sponsored summit of world leaders.²⁵

The GA-2 also considers more specific issues such as trade policy, natural resources supply and demand, and environmental effects of economic development. For example, in 2009, the GA-2 urged UN member states to fight global climate change by implementing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and urging states that have not yet signed onto the Kyoto Protocol to do so as soon as possible. Another draft resolution stressed the need for the global community to have a standard plan to deal with disaster reduction and recovery. Yet another dealt with the need to mitigate the negative impacts of price volatility in commodity markets. Focus was also placed on reducing poverty and addressing global food shortages. Finally, one of the draft resolutions put forth by the 64th General Assembly Second Committee, entitled “towards a new international economic order,” attempted to address the continuing impacts of the global economic and financial crisis of 2008.²⁶

In 2010, the Second Committee session lasted two months. During that time, the Committee met 33 times and considered 44 draft resolutions, 40 of which passed the GA-2 and went on to the GA Plenary.²⁷ Topics included: agriculture development and food security (A/RES/65/178); ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection (A/RES/65/173); and the special problems of landlocked developing countries (A/RES/65/172). In addition, the GA-2 once again passed a draft resolution calling for the establishment of a “New International Economic Order” (A/RES/65/167).²⁸

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

At the 2011 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the General Assembly Second Committee will consider the following topics:

1. Eradicating Poverty and Hunger
2. Water and Development
3. Reforming the International Financial System

²⁴ Steven Pearlstein, “With Bubbles Popping Worldwide, No Wonder the Economy’s Gone Flat,” *Washington Post*, 7 October 2008, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/06/AR2008100603184.html>.

²⁵ United Nations, “United Nations Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development, 24-26 June 2009,” available at <http://www.un.org/ga/econcrisissummit/>.

²⁶ Sixty-fourth General Assembly, Second Committee “Second Committee Forwards 11 Drafts to General Assembly, on New Global Economic Order, Agricultural Technology for Development, Climate Change, Among Others,” General Assembly GA/EF/3273 4 Dec. 2009, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/gaef3273.doc.htm>.

²⁷ United Nations General Assembly, “Sixty-ninth session, 60th plenary meeting, Monday, 20 December 2010,” Meeting summary A/65/PV.69, page 1, available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/700/78/PDF/N1070078.pdf?OpenElement>. See also United Nations, “General Assembly Second Committee,” 13 September 2011, available at <http://www.un.org/ga/second/index.shtml>.

²⁸ For the full text of these and other 2010-2011 GA resolutions related to economic and financial matters, as well as press releases summarizing their debate, see United Nations General Assembly, “Resolutions, 65th Session,” available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/65/resolutions.shtml>

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When writing your position papers and resolutions, think broadly about these issues, remembering both the overarching goals of the United Nations General Assembly and the perspective of the country you represent.

Recommended Reading

Amin, Samir. "The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South." *The Monthly Review*. Available at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0306amin.htm>

This is a scholarly critique of the Millennium Development Goals from the perspective of less-developed countries.

Annan, Kofi. "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All." Report of the Secretary General. 21 March 2005. Available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>.

The "Strengthening of the UN" sections of this report by the former secretary general summarizes some of the problems of the General Assembly. In addition, the "Freedom from Want" sections summarize many of the contemporary issues related to economics and finance.

"Charter of the United Nations." Available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>.

This document lays out the purposes and procedures of the UN. Delegates should be familiar with this document, especially Chapter IV, which addresses the GA.

Economist.com. "Special Reports." Available at <http://www.economist.com/specialreports/>.

This magazine from the United Kingdom is an excellent source for economic and financial news and analysis, as well as special reports on specific countries and issues.

United Nations. "The General Assembly of the United Nations." Available from <http://www.un.org/ga>.

This is the official website of the General Assembly. It is the best place to start for information on the General Assembly's actions and duties, as well as the agendas and resolutions of its various committees.

United Nations. "General Assembly Second Committee." Available at <http://www.un.org/ga/second/index.shtml>.

This is the official website of the GA-2. It provides access to the GA-2's draft resolutions and reports.

United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report 2011." Available from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/reports.shtml>

This report uses graphs and photos to show the work that has been done to meet the MDGs in various countries and regions since 2000. It also provides suggestions for meeting the goals by 2015.