



Committee History and Structure
General Assembly Second Committee¹

September 16, 2013

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, Montana Model UN faculty advisor, with contributions from Emily Tutvedt (2008), Samantha Stephens (2010), Brianna Sefcak (2011), and Jessica McCutcheon (2012). Copyright 2013 by Karen Ruth Adams.

² “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV, <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, <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.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

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.

All UN member states need economic growth and development to foster domestic political and social stability. International trade and finance 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. Similarly, a strong international financial system 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 the average state's gross domestic product (GDP) has risen dramatically since World War II. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the share of global production that is traded has increased three-fold since the early 1950s. Yet states and firms differ in the extent to which they have participated in this growth. According to the IMF, increasing international trade has been driven by emerging market economies such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and high-technology products such as computers and electronics.⁹ In 2012, UN member state participation in trade ranged from a low of 16 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in Syria to a high of 287 percent in Singapore.¹⁰

International trade requires a strong international financial system to create confidence in the currencies used to pay for traded goods. Since World War II and especially since the end of the Cold War, people, firms, and states have increasingly invested in stocks, bonds, currencies, companies, and real estate in markets beyond their national borders. In addition, banks and governments have increasingly loaned money to foreign firms and states. In 2012, the two largest sources of foreign investment were the Netherlands and Belgium, and the two largest recipients were China and the US.¹¹

High levels of international trade and finance mean that 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.

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, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F520&Lang=E.

⁹ International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Changing Patterns of Global Trade," 15 June 2011, p. 4, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/pp/eng/2011/061511.pdf>

¹⁰ World Bank, "Merchandise trade (% of GDP)," http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/TG.VAL.TOTL.GD.ZS?order=wbapi_data_value_2012%20wbapi_data_value%20wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc

¹¹ World Bank, "Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US\$)," http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?order=wbapi_data_value_2012+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc

Montana Model UN High School Conference

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.¹²

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 on economic and other matters.¹³

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 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.

¹² United Nations, “Permanent Observers: Non-Member States and Entities,” <http://www.un.org/en/members/nonmembers.shtml> and “Permanent Observers: International Organizations,” available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/intergovorg.shtml>.

¹³ “The Group of 77 at the United Nations,” <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.

¹⁴ UN General Assembly, “Rules of Procedure,” Section V, Rule 30, and Section XIII, Rules 99 and 103, http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_prez.shtml and http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_cttees.shtml.

¹⁵ “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter I, Article 1.

¹⁶ UN General Assembly Second Committee website.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

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 in favor of political and civil rights such as voting and freedom of the press. 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 1976.¹⁷

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 from 1973 to 1998, representatives of the seven largest Western economies (the United States, Britain, France, Canada, Italy, Germany and Japan) met regularly at Group of 7 (G-7) summits to discuss oil prices, exchange rates, and other economic matters. In 1998, the US invited Russia to join the group, and it was renamed the G-8.¹⁸

In 2009, at the request of the US, the G-8 ceased to meet and was replaced by the Group of 20 (G-20), which includes the G-8 countries plus Australia, Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, South Africa, Turkey, and the European Union.¹⁹ Together, the G-20 countries have 2/3 of the world’s population, produce 90% of global GDP, and account for 80% of global trade.²⁰

Although the G-20 has more participants than the G-7 and includes most of the large developing countries, it leaves the other 173 UN member states out of vital international economic decisions.²¹ 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.²²

To represent the other UN member states, in particular, and the GA in general, the UN Secretary General is often invited to G-20 meetings. At the 2012 G-20 meeting in Mexico, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged G-20 states to “stimulate our economies to create decent jobs,” to “provide social protection to the most poor and vulnerable,” and to “achieve all this while respecting the boundaries of our planet to make our world more prosperous, secure and sustainable for the next generations.”²³

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 often 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,²⁴ the GA-2 can initiate development and other economic projects that have a good chance of being funded.

¹⁷ International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>.

¹⁸ World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh, “How does the G-20 differ from the G-7 and G-8?” <http://www.worldpittsburgh.org/g20.jsp?pageId=2161392240601247133013726>

¹⁹ Group of 20, “Members,” <http://www.g20.org/en/members>

²⁰ Group of 20, “What is the G-20?,” <http://www.g20.org/index.php/en/what-is-the-g20>

²¹ Edmund L. Andrews, “Leaders of G-20 Vow to Reshape Global Economy,” *New York Times*, 25 September 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/26/world/26summit.html?hp>.

²² International Telecommunications Union, “Who are the Least Developed Countries (LDCs),” <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ldc/who.html>

²³ UN News Centre, “Ahead of summit, Ban urges G20 to focus on promoting sustainable economic growth,” 5 June 2012, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42153&Cr=sustainable+development&Cr1>

²⁴ “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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-2.²⁷ 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.²⁸ Since the international financial crisis, 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.²⁹ As of June 2013, progress on the 144 regional targets for the eight MDGs was as follows:

- 51% (73) targets with insufficient progress to meet the reach the 2015 goals if prevailing trends persist
- 44% (64) targets met or are expected to be met by 2015
- 5% (7) targets deteriorated or have shown no progress.³⁰

²⁵ "About the MDGs: Basics," United Nations Development Programme, <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>.

²⁶ 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, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/press/07.htm>.

²⁷ "MDG Gap Task Force Report 2008", 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, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

²⁸ Sha Zukang "Devising a shared global strategy for the MDGs: building on successes towards 2015," *UN Chronicle* 44:4 (Dec 2007), pp. 14-15, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1309/is_4_44/ai_n25356873.

²⁹ UN News Centre, "Economic slowdown in rich countries could hurt poorer status, UN reports," <http://www.un.org/news/dh/pdf/english/2008/04092008.pdf>.

³⁰ United Nations, "Millennium Development Goals: 2013 Progress Chart," http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/2013_progress_english.pdf

Montana Model UN High School Conference

On 25 September 2013, John W. Ashe, the Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda and incoming President of the GA, will host a high-level forum to call attention to the progress that has been made on the MDGs and the work that remains to be done.³¹

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.³² 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.³³

The GA-2 also considers more specific issues such as trade policy, natural resources supply and demand, and environmental aspects of economic development. With regard to the environment, 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.³⁴

From 2009 to 2012, the GA-2 was at the forefront of efforts to convene the Rio+20 Conference following up on the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Known formally as the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) and informally as Rio+20, the conference was held in Brazil in June 2012 and was charged with obtaining firm commitments to achieve sustainable development, defined as “the balanced integration of economic development, social development and environmental protection.”³⁵ Although the conference resulted in a report and resolution entitled “The Future We Want,”³⁶ most observers agree that the conference achieved little. According to the aid organization CARE and the environmental organization Greenpeace the meeting was “a political charade” and “a failure of epic proportions.”³⁷

³¹ United Nations, “President of the General Assembly's Special Event towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals,” <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/specialevent.shtml>

³² Steven Pearlstein, “With Bubbles Popping Worldwide, No Wonder the Economy’s Gone Flat,” *Washington Post*, 7 October 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/06/AR2008100603184.html>.

³³ United Nations, “United Nations Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development, 24-26 June 2009,” <http://www.un.org/ga/econcrisissummit/>.

³⁴ 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, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/gaef3273.doc.htm>.

³⁵ United Nations General Assembly, “Implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development,” A/RES/64/236, 31 March 2010, operative clause 19d, p. 6, <http://www.uncsd2012.org/files/OD/ARES64236E.pdf>

³⁶ United Nations, “Report of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development,” <http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/814UNCSD%20REPORT%20final%20revs.pdf>

³⁷ Simon Romero and John M. Broder, “Progress on the Sidelines as Rio Conference Ends,” *New York Times*, 23 June 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/24/world/americas/rio20-conference-ends-with-some-progress-on-the-sidelines.html?_r=1

Montana Model UN High School Conference

In recent years, the GA-2 has sent about 40 draft resolutions per year to the GA for final passage. In the 67th session (2012-2013), GA-2 resolutions addressed, among other things, agriculture development and food security, sanitation, harmony with nature, information technology, ecotourism, and trade and finance.³⁸

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

At the 2013 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the General Assembly Second Committee will consider the following topics:

1. Promoting New and Renewable Sources of Energy
2. The Role of Women in Development

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. See also footnotes 10 and 11 (above) for information about the extent of your country's participation in international trade and finance.

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.

³⁸ For the full text of these and other 2012-2013 GA resolutions related to economic and financial matters, as well as press releases summarizing their debate and voting results, see United Nations General Assembly, "Resolutions, 67th Session," <http://www.un.org/en/ga/67/resolutions.shtml> Resolutions that originated in the GA-2 are indicated in the second column from the left by "C.2." The fourth column contains links to meeting records.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

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 current draft resolutions and reports. For GA-2 resolutions and meetings from last year, see the source described above in footnote 38.

United Nations. "Member States." <http://www.un.org/en/members/index.shtml>

This site provides access to each state's UN mission website, where you can research your country's position on the issues before the UN.

United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report 2013." 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.

United Nations General Assembly. "Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review, Implementation of Rio+20 Outcome Draw Attention as General Assembly Takes Up Second Committee Reports," Press Release GA/11332. 21 December 2012. Available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2011/ga11200.doc.htm>

This press release summarizes a Fall 2012 GA Plenary debate on resolutions initiated by the GA-2. Search for your country's name to see what position it has taken on recent economic issues.

United Nations General Assembly. "Plenary Speeches." Available at <http://www.unol.org/gaspeeches.html>

From this site you can read or watch your country's speeches at high-level GA Plenaries. This will give you a sense of its policy priorities and diplomatic style.