



General Assembly Third Committee: Committee History and Structure¹

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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 and 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 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 Kelsi N. Steele, Kedra Hildebrand, Samantha Stephens, Lindsay Benov, Nicholas Potratz, and Dani Howlett. Copyright 2017 by Karen Ruth Adams.

² United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV, <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-iv/index.html>.

³ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly,” United Nations General Assembly website, <http://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background.shtml>.

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

⁵ United Nations, “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-3 is a forum for UN Member States to discuss social, humanitarian, and cultural issues, especially those related to human rights.⁷ Like the other main committees of the GA, the GA-3 was established in 1947.⁸ The GA-3 meets each fall at UN headquarters in New York, as well as in special sessions as deemed necessary.

Because social, humanitarian, and cultural issues have traditionally fallen within the domestic jurisdiction of states, GA-3 debates can be very contentious. Whether human rights are universal and when, where, and how they should be enforced, remain open questions.

Membership, Voting and Leadership

The membership of the GA-3 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, such as the European Union and African Union.⁹

Each Member State has one vote on matters before the GA-3. Resolutions and reports pass the committee and go on for General Assembly consideration if approved by a majority of Member States. According to the official GA website, “in recent years, a special effort has been made to achieve consensus on issues, rather than deciding by a formal vote, thus strengthening support for the Assembly’s decisions.”¹⁰ When the Chair determines that a consensus exists, a vote is taken by acclamation. Contentious issues are voted on in the traditional manner of in favor, in opposition, and in abstention.

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 have similar concerns. For example, the Group of 77 is a group of less-developed countries that often vote together.¹¹

The Chair of the GA-3 chairs the meetings and corrects any procedural mistakes. The chairs of the GA-3 and the 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-3 (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:

⁷ “Home,” UN General Assembly Third Committee website, <http://www.un.org/en/ga/third/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/en/ga/about/ropga/plenary.shtml>.

⁹ United Nations, “About Permanent Observers,” United Nations, “Observers,” available at <http://www.un.org/en/sections/member-states/about-permanent-observers/index.html>.

¹⁰ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly,” United Nations General Assembly website.

¹¹ “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* 50, No. 4 (1996), 629-652.

¹² 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.

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-3 and its subsidiary body, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), take the lead in drafting general resolutions on the social, humanitarian, and cultural matters (economic issues are referred to the GA-2). According to the GA-3 website, social, humanitarian, and cultural issues include:

the advancement of women, the protection of children, indigenous issues, the treatment of refugees, the promotion of fundamental freedoms through the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, and the right to self-determination. The Committee also addresses important social development questions such as issues related to youth, family, ageing, persons with disabilities, crime prevention, criminal justice, and international drug control.¹⁴

The GA-3 further works with the Human Rights Council (HRC) to address the human rights situation in particular UN Member States. Specifically, the HRC reports to the GA-3 on specific human rights situations and its recommendations and resolutions for dealing with them. The GA-3 then discusses the HRC's recommendations and usually endorses them. In October and November 2016, the GA-3 heard from "over 50 special rapporteurs, independent experts, and chairs of working groups" related to the HRC.¹⁵

In considering human rights in general and in specific countries, the GA-3 is guided by the General Assembly's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which articulates civil and political rights such as the right to assemble and the right to vote, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights such as the right to work, the right to health, and the right to take part in cultural life and benefit from scientific progress.¹⁶ The UDHR was primarily drafted in and debated by the GA-3.

According to historian Paul Gordon Lauren, the UDHR was revolutionary because states did "something that had never been done before: create a declaration of universally accepted...standards of human rights...and ... establish...a common standard valid 'for all peoples and all nations.'" Thus the UDHR is best seen as a hope and a vision for the future, not a statement of the extent to which people enjoy these rights today.¹⁷

In 1966, the rights articulated in the UDHR were codified in two international treaties: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,¹⁸ and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.¹⁹ Since then, some states have signed and ratified both covenants, while others have agreed to uphold only one. In general, Western bloc states signed the former, while Eastern bloc states signed the latter. Since the end of the Cold

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

¹⁴ United Nations, "General Assembly Third Committee," <http://www.un.org/en/ga/third/index.shtml>.

¹⁵ United Nations, "General Assembly Third Committee."

¹⁶ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

¹⁷ Paul Gordon Lauren, *Visions Seen: The Evolution of International Human Rights*, 2nd edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 226.

¹⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

¹⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1966, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/cescr.aspx>.

War, there has been some crossover among the two, but many debates remain about which of these rights are most important, and why.²⁰

These debates are at the root of many of the discussion of the GA-3. They are especially contentious, however, when it comes to country-specific matters. When particular states are criticized for failing to uphold certain social, humanitarian, and cultural standards, they and their allies often refuse to cooperate with the committee. Thus, the body must be mindful of both the substance and the language of draft resolutions. As explained by Hamid al Bayati of Iraq, GA-3 Chairman during the 61st session (2006), which addressed human rights abuses in Iran, Myanmar, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: "We need to put as much pressure as possible on countries to improve human rights conditions, and sometimes we are forced to follow the policy of name and shame.... However, we also don't want to provoke them unnecessarily or accuse them of false things."²¹

Recent and Current Events

Each year, the GA-3 sends about 50-60 resolutions to the GA Plenary for final passage. In its 71st Session, the GA-3 passed and sent 51 draft resolutions to the GAP, 50 of which the GAP adopted. The resolutions addressed "a range of issues, from the plight of migrants and other vulnerable populations, to the right to digital privacy."²²

Country-specific resolutions are often contentious. For example, in 2016, about 71 percent of voting states in the GA Plenary voted for a GA-3 resolution about human rights in Iran (85 in favor, 35 opposed, and 63 abstentions). Also in 2016, a resolution about rights in the Syria was adopted with an 88 percent majority of voting states (116 in favor, 16 opposed, and 52 abstentions).²³ Both the fact that consensus was not achieved and the fact that 25 to 36 percent of UN Member States abstained from these votes demonstrates that international human rights norms have yet to fully take hold.

In September 2009, then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon congratulated the GA for adopting its first resolution on the international community's "responsibility to protect" (R2P) civilians from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and other atrocities even if this means violating national sovereignty.²⁴ In March 2011, the Security Council acted on this principle when it authorized "all necessary means" to protect civilians in Libya. After that, several members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assisted Libyan rebels in their fight to depose President Moammar Kadafi. In doing so, they exceeded the Security Council mandate to protect civilians.

Since then, the international consensus behind R2P has weakened,²⁵ as is evident in the UN's limited responses to the civil war in Syria. Although the GA condemned the violence in December 2011,²⁶ several years

²⁰ Thomas M. Frank, "Are Human Rights Universal?" *Foreign Affairs*, February 2001, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/56666/thomas-m-franck/are-human-rights-universal>.

²¹ United Nations, "Sixty-first General Assembly: Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural)," *UN Chronicle*, 44:1, March 2007, p. 38.

²² UN General Assembly, Third Committee, "Third Committee Concludes Its Work, Sending 5 Draft Resolutions for Adoption by General Assembly," UNGA Meetings Coverage GA/SHC/4193, 23 November 2016, available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/gashc4193.doc.htm>; UN General Assembly, "General Assembly Adopts 50 Third Committee Resolutions, as Diverging Views on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Animate Voting," UNGA Meetings Coverage GA/11879, 19 December 2016, available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/ga11879.doc.htm>.

²³ United Nations General Assembly, Resolutions – 71st Session, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/71/resolutions.shtml>.

²⁴ "General Assembly agrees to hold more talks on responsibility to protect," *UN News Centre*, 14 September 2009, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32047>.

²⁵ Philippe Boloignon, "After Libya, the question: To protect or depose?," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/aug/25/opinion/la-oe-boloignon-libya-responsibility-t20110825>. For a list of resolutions see Security Council, "Security Council Resolutions," available at <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/>.

passed before the Security Council agreed upon measures to provide basic protection for UN aid-workers and geographically limited safety to evacuating Syrian civilians.²⁷ In fact, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon responded to the inaction in Syria by remarking that,

we face an urgent test here and now. Words must become deeds. Promise must become practice. You have all seen the horrible images and reports coming out of Syria: aerial bombardments of civilians; mothers weeping, clutching their dead children in their arms. Inaction cannot be an option for our community of nations. We cannot stand by while populations fall victim to these grave crimes and violations. We must uphold the core responsibilities of the United Nations.²⁸

In 2000, UN Member States adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as the centerpiece of the UN's campaign against global poverty. They have thus been a perpetual part of the GA-3agenda under the general topic of "Sustainable Development." The General Assembly passed the MDGs with a fifteen year deadline.²⁹ Upon reaching this deadline in 2015, and seeing success on many of the MDGs,³⁰ the UN passed a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which now act as a continuation of the MDGs with a stronger focus on environmental sustainability and protection.³¹ These goals are to meet the following benchmarks by 2030:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

²⁶ UN General Assembly, "General Assembly Adopts More Than 60 Resolutions Recommended by Third Committee, Including Text Condemning Grave, Systematic Human Rights Violations in Syria," press release GA/11198, 19 December 2011, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2011/ga11198.doc.htm>.

²⁷ Security Council Report, "Syria," <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/syria/>.

²⁸ UN Department of Public Information, "Responsibility to Protect Faces Urgent Test 'Here and Now', Secretary-General Tells General Assembly, Stressing Immense Human Cost of Failure in Syria," press release SG/SM/14490 GA/11271, 5 September 2012, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sgsm14490.doc.htm>.

²⁹ "News on Millennium Development Goals," United Nations Development Programme, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

³⁰ United Nations, "Millennium Development Goals: 2015 Progress Chart," http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20PC%20final.pdf.

³¹ United Nations, "Sustainable Development Goals," available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>.

17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.³²

These seventeen goals now characterize much of the work completed in GA-3, particularly with regard to poverty reduction, women's rights, and quality education. Certain goals, such as Goal 5 – to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls– relate directly to the work of the GA-3. Making progress on many of the other goals (improved employment opportunities, universal education, etc.) will depend (albeit indirectly) on an improvement of human rights around the world and shape the agenda of the GA-3 for the next fifteen years.

Many lower bodies report to and take direction from the GA-3, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Human Rights Council.³³ In October 2008, one of the ideas brought to the GA-3 by the Human Rights Council was the “right to development,” which the committee endorsed in a draft resolution.³⁴

In November 2011, then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) António Guterres (now Secretary-General of the UN) urged the Third Committee to address the forced displacement of people from their homes in response to “population growth, urbanization, climate change and food, water and energy insecurity.” Guterres also noted that, “displacement patterns [have] changed over the years, and further dramatic changes [are] likely. The world community [needs] to recognize protection gaps ... and open the way for innovative approaches to address those gaps.”

According to Guterres, if UN members do not develop the capacity and will to respond early and effectively to natural disasters, famines, and wars, states in other regions will be vulnerable to the complex humanitarian emergencies recently seen in the Horn of Africa, which he described as “the worst I have seen in my time as High Commissioner.” He further stated that,

All of us could see this escalation coming from a long way away. Nonetheless, we, the international community, were slow to react to signs that things were starting to deteriorate. What is worse, we also didn't have the capacity to prevent them from getting this bad in the first place... In such challenging circumstances, we must recognize our shared responsibility. And we must exercise our shared commitment.”³⁵

The UNHCR estimates that 18 million persons in Africa are “of concern” with regard to displacement and threats to their lives and security. This has increased dramatically in recent years due to drought in the horn of Africa and conflicts in the Central African Republic, Nigeria, and South Sudan. Currently, about 26 percent of the global refugee population resides in Africa.³⁶

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

At the 2017 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the General Assembly Third Committee will consider the following topics:

³² United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals.”

³³ UN General Assembly, “General Assembly Adopts 52 Resolutions, 6 Decisions Recommended by Third Committee” Press Release GA/10801, 18 December 2008, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/ga10801.doc.htm>.

³⁴ UN General Assembly, “Third Committee Draft Text Endorses Recommendations, Future Workplan of Human Rights Council's Working Group on Right to Development,” Press Release GA/SHC/3941, 2 November 2008, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/gashc3941.doc.htm>.

³⁵ UN General Assembly “21st Century Proving to Be ‘Century of People On the Move’, Innovative Approaches Needed to Address New Patterns of Forced Displacement, Third Committee Told,” press release GA/SHC/4024, 1 November 2011, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2011/gashc4024.doc.htm>.

³⁶ UNHCR, “Crisis in Horn of Africa,” <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/crisis-horn-africa.html>; UNHCR, “Africa,” <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/africa.html>.

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1. Abolishing the Death Penalty
2. Protecting the Rights of Indigenous People

When writing your position papers and resolutions, think broadly about these issues, remembering both the overarching goals of the United Nations General Assembly, the human rights stated in the UDHR and other resolutions and covenants, 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.php>.

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/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/larger_freedom_exec_summary.pdf.

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

"Charter of the United Nations." Available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/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.

Human Rights Watch. Website. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/>.

This non-governmental organization is an excellent source for human rights news and analysis, as well as special reports on specific countries and issues.

Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. "Home." United Nations. Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>.

This website provides numerous resources on sustainable development, the post-2015 agenda, and SDGs. It includes resources such as texts from recent high-level meetings on sustainable development, reports from the Secretary-General and UN agencies, and recent news relating to sustainable development.

United Nations. "The General Assembly of the United Nations." Available at <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 Third Committee." Available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/third/index.shtml>.

This is the official website of the GA-3. It provides access to the GA-3's current draft resolutions and reports. For GA-3 resolutions and meetings from last year, see the source described above in footnote 23.

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.

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United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report 2015." 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 improving on the work of the MDGs during and after 2015.

United Nations General Assembly. "General Debate." Available at <https://gadebate.un.org/en>.

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.

UN General Assembly. "General Assembly Adopts 50 Third Committee Resolutions, as Diverging Views on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Animate Voting." UNGA Meetings Coverage GA/11879. 19 December 2016. Available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/ga11879.doc.htm>.

This press release summarizes a December 2016 GA Plenary debate on resolutions initiated by the GA-3. Search for your country's name to see what position it has taken on recent social, cultural, and humanitarian issues.