

Student Handout

Background on the United Nations

Basic Facts of the United Nations

The United Nations was founded in 1945 with the mission to maintain world peace, develop good relations between countries, promote cooperation in solving the world's problems, and encourage a respect for human rights. It provides the nations of the world a forum to balance their national interests with the interests of the global whole. It operates on the voluntary cooperation and participation of its member nations. Nothing can be accomplished without their agreement and participation.



Currently, there are 191 member countries with different social, political, and economic systems. These countries agree to peacefully settle disputes, refrain from threatening or using force against each other, and refuse to help other nations that oppose the U.N.'s mission.

Headquartered in New York City, the U.N. is a separate and independent entity with its own flag, post office and postage stamps, and its buildings sit on international territory. Six official languages are used at the U.N. – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.

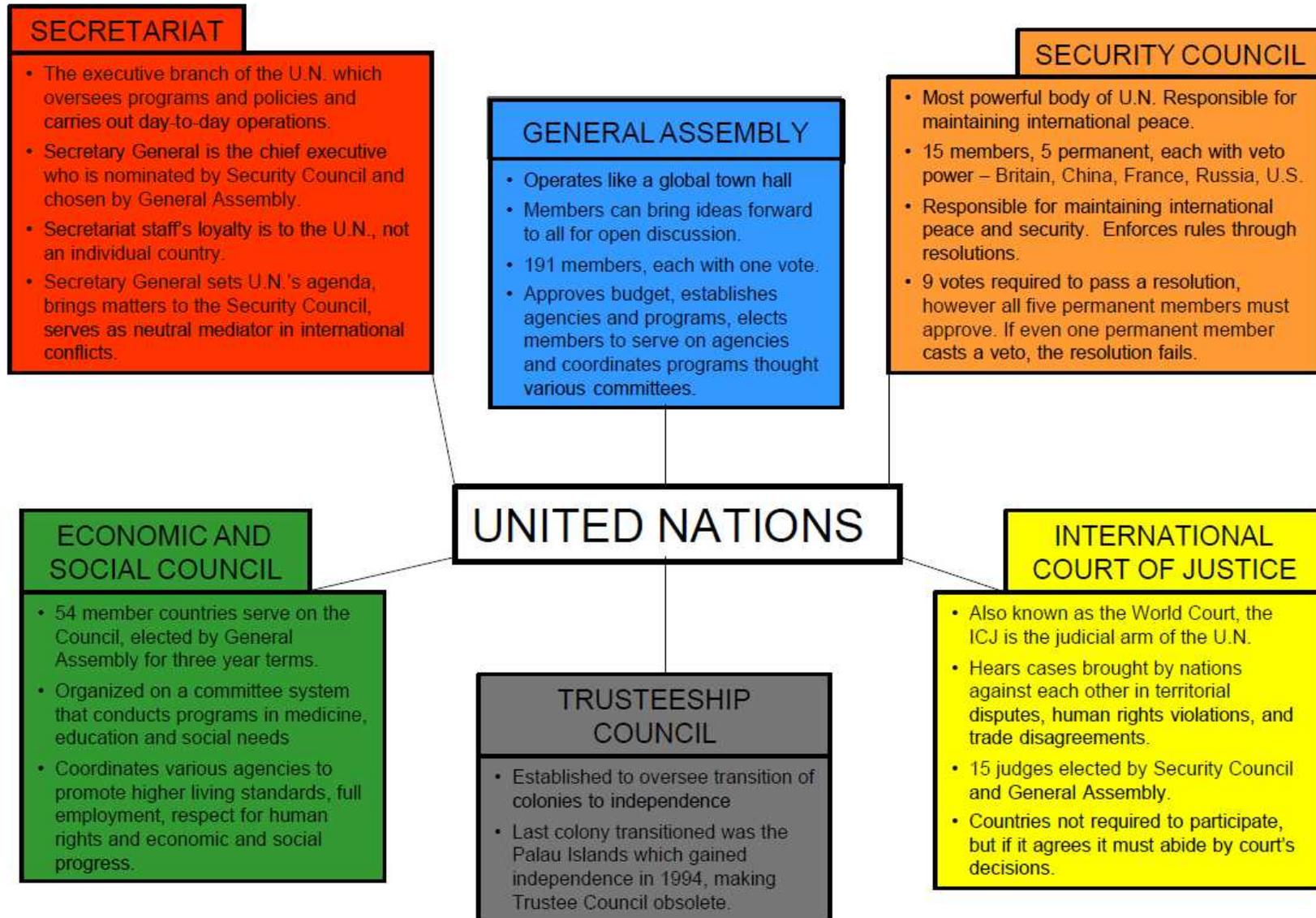
Creation of the United Nations

The creation of the U.N. resulted from a long history to promote international cooperation. Nineteenth century European philosophers and statesmen like Immanuel Kant had proposed a federation of nations dedicated to protecting the rights of smaller countries caught up in struggles between larger ones. The federation would punish any nation that committed an act of aggression against another. This idea became a reality after World War I with the establishment of the League of Nations. The League was the brain-child of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and some of the victorious European powers. During its operation from 1920 and 1946 it enjoyed a few notable successes but ultimately faltered when it couldn't prevent World War II. It suffered from two major flaws: 1) several of the world's most powerful and influential countries were not members, including the United States; 2) The League required unanimous agreement to oppose aggression. If any member disagreed, the League was powerless to act. Thus, when Germany, Italy, and Japan took military action against fellow members of the League in the late 1930s, they would not agree to take action against themselves to stop their aggression. In the end, the League failed in its primary mission to prevent another world war.

While fighting the Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan during World War II, United States President, Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin met several times between 1941 and 1945 to develop an international peacekeeping organization with the goal of preventing future wars on the scale of World War II. In April of 1945, even before the war was officially over, representatives from 50 countries met in San Francisco to create the charter for the United Nations.

Similar to the League of Nations, the U.N. was created to promote international peace and prevent another world war. To avoid the structural failures of the League, the U.N. founders gathered the support of the world's most powerful nations. U.S. participation was secured when the U.N. headquarters were located in New York City. To provide enough power to impose and enforce its will, a security council was developed with authority to take action against aggressor nations. To reassure powerful nations that their sovereignty would not be threatened, the U.N. provided veto authority over its actions. The five victors of World War II – the U.S. Britain, France, the Soviet Union (which Russia gained at the break up of the U.S.S.S.) and China – received this veto power. A veto provides any one of the five permanent Security Council members the authority to reject any U.N. resolution.

The Structure and operation of the United Nations



Accomplishments of the United Nations:

During its 60-year history, the U.N. has achieved many remarkable accomplishments in fulfilling its goals. The U.N. has peacefully negotiated 172 peace settlements that have ended regional conflicts and is credited with participation in over 300 international treaties on topics as varied as human rights conventions to agreements on the use of outer space and the oceans.

The U.N. has been involved in every major war and international crisis since its inception and has served as a catalyst for the prevention of others. It authorized the international coalitions that fought in the Korean War (1950-53) and the Persian Gulf War (1991). It provided a forum for mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflict resulting in numerous peace accords and keeping the conflict localized to the Middle East. During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the U.N. was used as a podium by the United States to challenge the Soviet Union's placement of nuclear missiles in Cuba. The embarrassment of public indictment was instrumental in forcing the Soviets to remove the missiles. U.N. military forces (provided by member states) have conducted over 35 peacekeeping missions providing security and reducing armed conflict. In 1988, the U.N. Peace-Keeping Forces received the Nobel Prize for Peace. The U.N. has also set up war crimes tribunals to try war criminals in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

The U.N. has also made great strides in raising the consciousness of human rights beginning with the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" adopted by the General Assembly in 1948. The U.N. Commission on Human Rights through its investigations and technical assistance in promoting free and fair elections has helped many countries in the transition to democracy. The U.N.'s intense attention to specific human rights abuses helped end apartheid in South Africa. In its humanitarian efforts, more than 30 million refugees fleeing war, persecution, or famine have received aid from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. The International Court of Justice has helped settle numerous international disputes involving territorial issues, hostage-taking and economic rights.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.N. has become increasingly involved in providing humanitarian assistance and promoting improvements in the health of the world's peoples. In addition to providing relief for humanitarian crises caused by international conflicts, the U.N. can also respond to emergencies caused by natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes. On a proactive level, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other U.N. affiliated groups have eliminated smallpox and are actively pursuing a battle against AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria around the world. The WHO played a significant role in diagnosing and containing the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003. U.N. programs, like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have saved and enriched the lives of the world's children through immunization programs for polio, tetanus, measles, whooping cough, diphtheria and tuberculosis. The lives of over 3 million children a year have been saved.

The U.N. operates under the principle that promoting economic and social development will help bring about lasting world peace. The United Nations Development Program provides economic assistance through expert advice, training, and limited equipment to developing countries. The U.N. Development Program coordinates all the U.N. efforts in developing nations and has had success in part because it is not perceived as an outside group threatening a developing countries' authority or degenerating it to colonial rule. In addition to promoting workers rights and the right to organize and bargain for better pay and working conditions, the U.N. has also played a significant role in improving agricultural techniques and increasing crop yields in Asia, Africa and South America. The U.N. has also helped developing nations obtain funding projects through the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, also known as the World Bank. A related U.N. agency, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) promotes international cooperation on monetary issues and encourages stable exchange rates among nations.

Sources: Wikipedia Encyclopedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_Nations
Encarta Encyclopedia: http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761564986/United_Nations.html