

WHO OR WHAT IS THE UNITED NATIONS?

It's an organization of the world's States. It works to keep international peace and maintain security. It tries to develop friendly relations among nations. It encourages co-operation to solve international problems. It promotes respect for human rights and basic freedoms. It helps countries with their economic development.

HOW DO COUNTRIES BECOME MEMBERS?

Any country can join the organization if it accepts the United Nations Charter, which expresses these ideals.

The Seychelles (population 66,000) is a Member. China (population over 1,000 million) also belongs to the United Nations. Almost every country in the world has now joined the United Nations.

A KIND OF WORLD GOVERNMENT?

No. A kind of world parliament or an association. A society for peace and progress. The United Nations does not force countries to do what it says. The countries themselves decide what they want the United Nations to do. It can advise Governments. It can tell them what would be best for them to do, if they ask for suggestions. It can send in people to help, if the Government wants. But no country has to give up the power to decide its own affairs when it joins the United Nations, and the United Nations can act only when its Member States decide it should do something. United Nations membership does not infringe on national sovereignty.

WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE UNITED NATIONS DO?

Name a problem. The chances are the United Nations is working on it.

Are you worried about jobs, the environment, human rights, or where you can find your next meal?

Perhaps what bothers you is getting equal treatment as a woman, finding an education, improving working conditions, staying healthy, or abolishing the threat of war.

What if your problems are drink, drugs or crime? Or perhaps you feel lost confronted with the world of responsibilities.

The United Nations tackles all of these issues.

IS IT FAIR TO GIVE EVERY COUNTRY, LARGE AND SMALL, AN EQUAL VOTE IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY?

This is how the rules of the General Assembly were written and how they have worked from the very beginning of the United Nations. Iceland, for example, with a population of under one quarter of a million, has enjoyed full voting rights since it joined the United Nations in 1946.

Because voluntary contributions account for over half the United Nations spending, countries have plenty of choice in the programs they support with extra cash. Most assistance programmes are funded by such gifts.

Also, the General Assembly's decisions on most issues are no more than recommendations. It has no powers to force any Government to act as the Assembly wishes. But the resolutions do carry the weight of world opinion, and this is part of the argument for giving each State an equal voice.

More and more, though, United Nations bodies today seek to approve decisions without having to go to a vote. This practice of reaching agreement by "consensus" involves finding common ground between the majority and the minority, rather than counting heads to force through a proposal.

And after all, isn't voting in the General Assembly a little like elections in one's own country where everyone voting has just one vote regardless of how rich or poor they are?

WHEN WAS THE UNITED NATIONS FORMED?

Fifty countries meeting in San Francisco (United States) in 1945 drew up the United Nations Charter. It was signed there on 26 June, 1945. Poland was not at the conference but signed the Charter later to become one of the 51 founding Member States.

WHY IS OCTOBER 24th CELEBRATED AS UNITED NATIONS DAY IF THE CHARTER WAS SIGNED ON JUNE 26th?

The Charter had to be ratified by China, France, the USSR, the United Kingdom, the United States, and a majority of the other countries. As a result, the United Nations officially came into existence four months after the signing, on 24 October 1945. So you see, the United Nations is perhaps younger than your parents.

