

# Briefing Paper



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## THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

**We the peoples of the United Nations determined**  
*to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and*

*to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and*

*to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and*

*to provide social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,*

**And for these ends**

*to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and*

*to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and*

*to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,*

**Have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.**

These ringing phrases of optimism and noble intent are from the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations. They represent the highest of ideals to which the leaders of a world emerging from the horrors of world war in 1945 attempted to commit themselves and succeeding governments in order "both to prevent (future) aggression and to remove the political, economic and social causes of war through the close and continuing collaboration of all peace-loving peoples"<sup>1</sup>

The articles of the Charter itself enumerate the purposes, the terms of membership, the structure and voting procedures of the principal organs, and

arrangements for the maintenance of international peace and security and for international economic and social co-operation. They were drawn up during a momentous conference meeting in San Francisco from 25 April to 26 June, 1945. The Charter came into force on 24 October, 1945 with 51 states as original signatory members of the United Nations.

The world has undergone years of unprecedented change since 1945. The political map has been dramatically redrawn with the emergence of over a hundred new nations. Human rights have taken on broader and deeper meaning. The world's economy has been altered in ways that seem to threaten rich and poor alike. Over everything hangs the spectre of a stockpile of armaments whose quality and quantity threatens the very existence of all mankind.

The United Nations has obviously not succeeded in meeting many of its goals. It has, however, within the limits imposed upon it by its structure and membership, been a crucial stage upon which many of the important events of the last nearly 40 years have been played. If, in order to continue to serve a useful function, the structures must change, then it is up to the Member States to show a willingness to initiate and accept such changes. International organization, *per se*, is no longer a gleam in the eye of an idealistic world. It is a fact of modern life, taken for granted on many levels and a corner-stone of the foreign policy of most governments.

The United Nations is not a single body in and through which the myriad functions and undertakings are realized. It is a multi-layered system which has evolved in response to continuing and escalating demands and needs. At its core are the six principal organs: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice and the Secretariat. Beyond these organs are 17 Specialized Agencies, each with its own memberships and functions, and a further group of operational bodies for specific purposes set up by the General Assembly. A few of the bodies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) predate the UN itself. A major concern now is to coordinate the activities of the component parts of the system in order to avoid duplication and to make the United Nations a more effective instrument for co-operation and development.