

United Nations Association in Canada

As a large-scale international organization, the United Nations may seem very distant and inaccessible to the general public. Although it is not a world government, it faces a challenge familiar to democratic governments: staying in touch with its constituents.

To narrow the gap between the UN and ordinary citizens, over the years a network of voluntary UN associations has grown up in 80 countries.

One of the most active is the United Nations Association in Canada (UNA-Canada). From its small national headquarters in Ottawa and 15 branches across the country, the 15 000-member organization works year-round to promote Canadian understanding of the UN and support for its cause.

The essence of the task is communication. UNA-Canada is a national clearing house for information about the UN. Among other things, it fields public and media inquiries, publishes a newsletter and other material, and operates a Web site. It also keeps Canadian industry up to date on UN-related business opportunities.

Locally and nationally, the Association is a tireless proponent of international co-operation, marshalling public and government support for UN action on such issues as landmines, human rights, food security, and the financial crisis caused by non-payment of UN dues on the part of some members.

The national office organizes annual events, including gala dinners that combine fund-raising with promotion by featuring UN officials as keynote speakers. Each year, the Association awards the

Pearson Peace Medal for distinguished service in support of human rights and other international causes.

With the UN turning 54 years old in 1999, UNA-Canada is focussing special attention on youth. Says Executive Director Harry Qualman, "People who can remember when and why the UN came into being are gradually passing from the scene. We have to guard against a generation gap in understanding."

UNA-Canada's youth programs include the following:

- support, through its branches, for model UN Assemblies in which high school and university students take the part of member states in the General Assembly and the Security Council;
- operation of an internship program funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, which places recent university graduates in UN and UN-related offices abroad; and
- a regular poll of Canadians about their UN views. ("Support has stayed high over the years," says Mr. Qualman. "We take some credit for that.")

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Individual Canadians can become involved in UNA-Canada by joining the Association, attending or organizing UN-related public events in their community, or making their views about the UN known to their elected representatives