GENERAL ASSEMBLY THIRD COMMITTEE
BACKGROUND GUIDE 2018

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NMUN•NY
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United Nations System at NMUN•NY

This diagram illustrates the UN system simulated at NMUN•NY and demonstrates the reportage and relationships between entities. Examine the diagram alongside the Committee Overview to gain a clear picture of the committee's position, purpose, and powers within the UN system.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACRWC</td>
<td>African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child</td>
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<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
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<td>CAR</td>
<td>Central African Republic</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil society organization</td>
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<td>DESA</td>
<td>Department of Economic and Social Affairs</td>
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<td>DPI</td>
<td>Department of Public Information</td>
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<td>EAC</td>
<td>Educate a Child</td>
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<td>F4R</td>
<td>Faith for Rights</td>
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<td>FBO</td>
<td>Faith-based organization</td>
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<td>HRC</td>
<td>Human Rights Council</td>
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<td>ICCPR</td>
<td>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</td>
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<td>IFAD</td>
<td>International Fund for Agricultural Development</td>
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<td>ISIL</td>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant</td>
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<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>MICS</td>
<td>Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>NSGT</td>
<td>Non-self-governing territory</td>
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<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organization of American States</td>
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<td>OHCHR</td>
<td>Office for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights</td>
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<td>OIC</td>
<td>Organisation of Islamic Cooperation</td>
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<td>OSCE</td>
<td>Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe</td>
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<td>PaRD</td>
<td>International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development</td>
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<td>PGA</td>
<td>President of the General Assembly</td>
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<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<td>SIDS</td>
<td>Small Island Developing States</td>
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<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics</td>
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<td>UDHR</td>
<td>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN-Women</td>
<td>United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women</td>
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<td>UNAOC</td>
<td>United Nations Alliance of Civilizations</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UNFPA</td>
<td>United Nations Population Fund</td>
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<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children's Fund</td>
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<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime</td>
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<td>UNPO</td>
<td>Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization</td>
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Committee Overview

Introduction

Following the Second World War, the United Nations (UN) was formed to act as a deliberative and cooperative forum for Member States to better prevent the outbreak of future hostilities.¹ The General Assembly, one of the six principal organs of the UN established under the Charter of the United Nations (1945), was created to act as the wholly representative and deliberative arm of the organization.² The large variance in the scope of its mandate led the General Assembly to allocate its work among six committees that would allow each to focus on a specific theme.³ The stated mandate of the Third Committee is the discussion of all matters related to social, humanitarian, and cultural affairs.⁴ Since its foundation, this mandate has naturally developed to also include a particular specialism as the primary forum for issues around human rights.⁵ More than 50% of the resolutions adopted by the committee in recent years were submitted under the human rights agenda addressing a variety of subtopics, thereby making it the world’s largest and most prominent forum for international human rights norm creation.⁶ This overview will introduce the Third Committee through a contextualization of it within the wider General Assembly structure, an overview of its governance and membership, and an analysis of its mandate and associated powers before examining its current priorities.

Governance, Structure, and Membership

In accordance with the Charter, the General Assembly is comprised of all 193 UN Member States, as well as the Holy See and the State of Palestine as Observer States.⁷ Furthermore the work of the committee is supported by non-governmental and intergovernmental observers like the European Union or the International Criminal Court.⁸ All main General Assembly committees begin their annual session in mid-September, following the drafting and allocation of agenda items by the General Committee to each specific committee, according to theme and content.⁹ Relevant reports of the Secretary-General are issued just before each corresponding agenda item, followed by an allotted time for questions for clarification or analysis.¹⁰ As is the case for all General Assembly committees, the Third Committee adopts draft resolutions on each agenda item and a report to the General Assembly Plenary.¹¹ All documents require a simple majority to be adopted, unless the agenda item is considered an important question, like for example those on peace and security which require a two-thirds majority.¹² Based on this, the Plenary then adopts, either through a vote or by consensus, the draft resolutions as recommended in the committee report.¹³

The President of the General Assembly (PGA) is the largely ceremonial head of the General Assembly, elected each year by a simple majority to a one-year nonrenewable term.¹⁴ The PGA’s duties are to facilitate Plenary sessions by directing discussion, managing the administration of meetings, and enforcing the General Assembly Rules of Procedure.¹⁵ The PGA does not preside over all six General Assembly committees separately; rather, Chairs and

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⁷ UN General Assembly, Member States, 2017.
⁸ UN General Assembly, List of non-Member States, entities and organizations having received a standing invitation to participate as observers in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly (A/INF/71/5), 2017.
¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 37-38, 65.
¹² UN General Assembly, About the General Assembly, 2017.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 16.
¹⁵ Ibid.
Vice Chairs are the facilitators of individual committees. The PGA also performs executive duties such as meeting regularly with the Secretary-General, the President of the Security Council, and the President of the Economic and Social Council; communicating with the press and the public; and organizing high-level meetings for certain thematic issues.

All General Assembly committees are supported by secretariats, which provide substantive and logistical support to the committees. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) serves as the primary substantive support wing of the Third Committee’s secretariat, acting as a natural focal point for human rights bodies, reports, and other publications. Given the varied nature of its work, various other UN entities may serve as substantive secretariats for the Third Committee, such as the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Volunteers program, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Furthermore, as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) provides an annual report to the Third Committee on its own recent sessions and discussions. Independent Experts, Special Rapporteurs, and Working Groups that compile reports and advise the HRC will also engage in interactive dialogues with the Third Committee on a variety of subjects.

**Mandate, Functions, and Powers**

The Third Committee derives its direction from a variety of UN documents. Articles 10-17 of the Charter are the principal guidelines for the substance and scope of all General Assembly committees. These articles state that the General Assembly has the authority to “initiate studies and make recommendations”, as well as “receive and consider reports” from other organs of the UN, including the Security Council. Article 1 also speaks of “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all”, which has been said to be the foundation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) (1948) and the mandate of much of the Third Committee’s work. Nearly every international human rights instrument since the UDHR has built upon its core principles, thereby enlarging the Third Committee’s mandate by extension. The Third Committee used the UDHR as the groundwork to adopt additional and more specific international human rights instruments, chief among them the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* (1966). These documents, along with the two optional protocols to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, make up what is known as the *International Bill of Human Rights*. Both covenants differ from the UDHR in that they are legally binding multilateral treaties to those Member States that have either ratified or acceded to them.

Under its overall mandate as the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee, the Third Committee spends a large portion of its time discussing matters relating to human rights and setting rights norms, demonstrated by the fact that around half of its work is based on the single agenda item “Promotion and protection of human rights”.

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16 Ibid., pp. 15, 18.
17 Ibid., pp. 16-17.
24 Ibid., Art. 13, 15.
26 UN OHCHR, *Fact Sheet No.2 (Rev.1), The International Bill of Human Rights*, 1996.
28 UN OHCHR, *Fact Sheet No.2 (Rev.1), The International Bill of Human Rights*, 1996.
29 Ibid.
the Third Committee’s work can encompass a broad variety of issues, including those beyond human rights, demonstrated during its 71st session wherein topics including crime prevention and criminal justice, international drug control, young people’s social development, and the advancement of women were discussed.31

As part of the General Assembly, the work of the Third Committee is of a normative nature, in that it does not actually carry out the operations or tasks called for in its resolutions.32 The Third Committee primarily works through the initiation of studies and the creation of nonbinding recommendations.33 The task of operationalizing the Third Committee’s recommendations is primarily delegated to the various agencies and offices of the UN Secretariat.34 The Third Committee can request studies to be undertaken by relevant UN bodies such as OHCHR, UNHCR, UN-Women, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).35 UN-Women, for example, delivered the “Report of the Secretary-General on trafficking in women and girls” (A/71/223) to the Third Committee, and UNODC similarly issued the “Report of the Secretary-General on international cooperation against the world drug problem” (A/71/316) prepared pursuant to resolutions 69/149 (2015) and 69/194 (2015), respectively.36 The Third Committee can also call for conferences to highlight certain issues, with a notable recurring example being the World Conference on Women, originating from the Third Committee resolution 3276 (XXIX) (1974), and monitored regularly through follow up reviews every five years.37

**Recent Sessions and Current Priorities**

During its 71st session, beginning in September 2016, the Third Committee addressed a variety of issues and topics, culminating in 50 final texts being adopted by the Plenary.38 With the Third Committee meeting for the second time since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the importance of the goals as a guidance for the work of the committee was stressed.39 The work on draft resolution concerning country-specific human rights questions led to heated discussions, due to the draft resolutions being considered “arbitrary and politicized” by some Member States.40 The reasons for increasing discussion on issues under the human rights agenda vary, but differing opinions on human rights questions as well as various ways to address the issue are part of it.41 A big question under debate that will need to be discussed further is whether resolutions on the human rights situation within single Member States are the suitable way to address the issue.42 Nevertheless, the Committee adopted four draft resolutions on the human rights situation in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.43 While the General Assembly mostly works on a consensus basis, the committee requested recorded votes for three of the four draft resolutions.44 Overall the General Assembly adopted 35 out of the 50 Third Committee draft resolutions

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33 Ibid.
38 UN DPI, *General Assembly Adopts 50 Third Committee Resolutions, as Diverging Views on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Animate Voting (GA/11879)*, 2016.
40 UN DPI, *Third Committee Approves 5 Draft Resolutions on Situations in Syria, Iran, Crimea, Introduces 5 Others Concerning Self-Determination, Enhanced Cooperation (GA/SHC/4188)*, 2016.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
The Charter of the United Nations is the fundamental document that underpins and informs all of the subsequent work of the United Nations. Delegates should understand the document as the foundational blueprint of the UN, both in terms of its structure and powers, but also its guiding ideals and objectives. Although much subsequent work has expanded upon the core principles of the Charter, it is essential that delegates understand the primary document and its context. Of particular interest is Article 17, which outlines the primary functions and powers of the General Assembly.

**Annotated Bibliography**


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45 UN DPI, *General Assembly Adopts 50 Third Committee Resolutions, as Diverging Views on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Animate Voting (GA/11879)*, 2016.

46 Ibid.


52 UN DPI, *Secretary-General Stresses Political Solutions in Addressing Nuclear, Terrorism Migration Issues as United States President Warns Pyongyang (GA/11947)*, 2017.


55 UN DESA, *The UN General Assembly’s Third Committee – social, humanitarian and cultural issues*, 2013.

56 UN DPI, *Speakers Focus on Greater Solidarity with World’s Most Vulnerable People, Unequal Economic Progress, Need to Empower Youth, as Third Committee Opens Session (GA/SHC/4163)*, 2016.

The PGA Handbook is an essential read for delegates who will be a part of a General Assembly committee. The entirety of the Handbook is relevant and delegates are encouraged to study it carefully; however, of particular interest is page 65, which offers a comprehensive breakdown of the basic information of the Third Committee, including details of proceedings and voting information. This handbook is an essential ‘first-step’ for delegates to understand the structures, processes and traditions of the General Assembly Committees.

This coverage of the work of the 71st session provides delegates with useful insight into the recent priorities of the committee. It provides a concise overview of resolutions adopted by the Plenary on the report of the Third Committee, and also a summary of statements made with actions undertaken on draft resolutions. Not only does this give delegates an understanding of the breadth of subject matter under consideration at the Third Committee, but it also serves as a useful starting point in their research that shapes and focuses lines of inquiry.

The UDHR is the cornerstone of international human rights, and, along with the Charter of the United Nations, is one of the most important documents delegates should study during their preparation. Delegates should seek to fully understand these principles, given their foundational role as the fabric of how human rights are viewed today. Special attention should be paid to the principles of equality and inalienability of these rights, as well as the strong desire that Member States express for the UDHR to be enshrined as the global standard for human rights.

Although the overall reach of the SDGs extends beyond the remit of the Third Committee, there is significant overlap between the mandates of the two. A rights-based approach is highlighted in nearly all of the goals, and many touch upon topics that the Third Committee regularly discusses. The SDGs represent the primary development agenda of the UN and it is therefore important that delegates understand the organization’s overarching objectives and how these interplay with and influence the work of the Committee.

Bibliography


