Chapter 18

Confronting Global Issues

How effectively do international organizations respond to global issues?

18.1 Introduction

On January 12, 2010, a disastrous earthquake hit Haiti, toppling major towns and triggering a series of aftershocks. Homes, hospitals, commercial buildings, power lines, and roads were destroyed. Tens of thousands died, and millions were left injured and homeless. As one of the most impoverished nations in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti did not have enough resources to deal with this emergency alone. Fortunately, help was soon on the way from all parts of the globe.

Governments and organizations around the world pledged around $4 billion to aid earthquake survivors and rebuild Haiti. Some of this money supported relief efforts organized by intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). These are organizations formed by the governments of many countries. The largest IGO is the United Nations (UN). Within hours of the tragedy, workers with UNICEF, the UN Children’s Fund, shipped emergency supplies to devastated areas. “The devastation is staggering,” reported Léo Mérorès, the Ambassador of Haiti to the UN. “UNICEF teams are working assiduously in the country.”

Private donors large and small also contributed to the relief efforts. American businesses donated everything from drinking water and medical supplies to clothing and cash. Much of the money was funneled through humanitarian groups that work

Foreign nations distribute aid to Haiti following the 2010 earthquake

Speaking of Politics

intergovernmental organization (IGO)
An international group formed by nations, often with the goal of increasing trade or security.

nongovernmental organization (NGO)
An international group formed by private individuals and associations to provide a service or pursue a public policy.

collective security
A system for maintaining peace based on an agreement among nations to act together to prevent or defend against aggression.

sustainable development
Economic development that meets the needs of people today without exhausting the resources that will be needed to sustain future generations.

convention
An international agreement on matters of broad interest. The best-known examples are the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war.

global climate change
Variations in Earth’s overall climate over periods of time.

protocol
An amendment or addition to a treaty or convention. The well-known Kyoto Protocol is an amendment to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
independently of governments. **Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)** receiving funds included the Red Cross, CARE, and Oxfam.

On March 11, 2011, another powerful earthquake struck halfway around the world. This time a magnitude 9.0 undersea earthquake shook Tohoku, Japan. The earthquake set off a series of massive tsunamis. Waves over 100 feet tall rolled inland, washed away buildings and vehicles, and caused one of the greatest nuclear disasters in history. One of the waves flooded the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and disabled the power supply, leading nuclear reactors in the power plant to melt down. In the aftermath of an earthquake, tsunamis, and a nuclear disaster, Japan was in dire need of aid. Once again, IGOs and NGOs stepped in to provide relief.

When faced with the consequences of these disasters, the world has shown its willingness to assist countries during times of emergency. But what about long-term problems like poverty, disease, and climate change? This chapter explores how international organizations are attempting to deal with these and other difficult global issues.

### 18.2 The United Nations

With a membership of 193 nations, the United Nations represents almost every nation in the world. Since it was founded in 1945, it has become the forum for debating every major issue facing humankind. UN agencies like UNICEF coordinate efforts to deal with short-term crises, like the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The UN also focuses attention on tougher, longer-term issues ranging from peacekeeping to poverty.

#### The Founding of the United Nations

Much of world history can be boiled down to a seemingly endless series of bloody conflicts. By the 20th century, it was clear that the world would never be at peace so long as countries chose to resolve their disputes on the battlefield. The League of Nations was formed after World War I to serve as an international peacemaker. But the League dissolved when it failed to prevent World War II. As that conflict came to a close, 50 countries joined together to form a more robust intergovernmental organization, the United Nations.

The founding countries adopted a constitution for the new IGO known as the United Nations Charter. The Preamble to the UN Charter identifies four main goals for the UN:

- **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 promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.**

The UN Charter established several organs, or bodies, to accomplish its goals. The General Assembly is the most democratic UN organ. It is made up of representatives from all member states, each of which has one vote. Problems that arise anywhere in the world can be brought to this body. The General
Assembly responds by passing resolutions that are taken seriously by member states.

The Security Council is the most powerful UN organ. The council is made up of five permanent members—the United States, Russia, Great Britain, China, and France—and ten members elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms. This body is responsible for maintaining international peace.

The UN's Main Activity: Keeping the World at Peace

The most important activity of the UN is peacekeeping. In 2012, some 115,000 UN peacekeepers were carrying out missions in about 15 countries.

The UN has no permanent peacekeeping force—no standing army of its own. It depends on member states to provide troops if called upon. This system is based on the principle of collective security. This principle calls for the uniting of individual countries against an aggressor in order to, as the UN Charter says, "maintain international peace and security."

Typically, peacekeeping involves sending lightly armed soldiers to the site of a conflict—but only after the two sides have formally agreed to stop fighting. UN peacekeepers, easily identified by their blue helmets, often position themselves between hostile forces. By providing a buffer zone, or neutral area, the peacekeepers help the two sides maintain their peace agreement. UN peacekeepers work under orders not to fire their weapons except in self-defense. On missions to dangerous hotspots, however, they may use their weapons to defend civilians and UN personnel.

On rare occasions, the Security Council has authorized the use of armed force against a country that has broken the peace. In 1950, for example, a UN force made up of troops from 16 nations helped South Korea push back an invading army from North Korea. The UN took a similar action in 1991 after Iraq invaded its neighbor Kuwait.

The United Nations is also a key player in efforts to halt the spread of nuclear weapons. Nearly all UN members are party to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Only four member states are not: India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea.

The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency conducts inspections to verify that countries are complying with the nonproliferation treaty. In July 2006, the UN Security Council took steps to discourage Iran from producing nuclear weapons and thus violating the treaty. The council imposed sanctions on Iran that banned the shipment of nuclear materials or technology to that country.
The United Nations consists of various organs and special agencies. Some of the most important are described below, with the UN emblem in the middle. The emblem is a world map centered on the North Pole and surrounded by olive branches, a symbol of peace.

**United Nations Organs and Special Agencies**

**Security Council**

The Security Council is responsible for maintaining international peace and security. It has 15 members, five are permanent, including the United States, while ten fill two-year terms. Permanent members can veto any council resolution.

**General Assembly**

All 193 members of the UN sit in the General Assembly, the chief policymaking body of the UN. Here member states, each with one vote, debate issues and recommend action on matters covered by the UN Charter.

**Secretariat**

The Secretariat carries out the day-to-day operations of the UN. It has nearly 9,000 staff members located around the world. The head of the Secretariat, the secretary general, serves a five-year, renewable term.

**Economic and Social Council**

The Economic and Social Council is a forum for discussing international economic and social issues. It seeks to promote higher standards of living, cultural cooperation, and respect for human rights.

**International Court of Justice**

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), also known as the World Court, settles legal disputes brought by one nation against another. It also advises the UN's other organs on legal issues. The United States takes part in ICJ proceedings but has been unwilling to accept its authority.

**International Monetary Fund and World Bank**

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank are special agencies of the UN. The IMF offers nations economic advice and serves as a "lender of last resort." The World Bank's mission is to reduce global poverty. It funds projects that build schools and health centers, provide water and electricity, and create jobs.
Other UN Activities: Improving People’s Lives
Besides peacekeeping, the UN works to improve the lives of people around the world. UN agencies and programs have, for many years, devoted their resources toward issues of poverty, education, health, and human rights. The UN has also been a champion of sustainable development. This approach to economic development focuses on ways to meet the needs of the world’s people today without exhausting the resources that will be needed to sustain future generations. Even so, as the 20th century drew to an end, more than a billion people worldwide were living on less than $1 a day.

In 2000, the UN hosted the largest gathering of world leaders in history to discuss the role of the United Nations in the 21st century. At that summit, the leaders of 150 countries ratified an agreement known as the Millennium Declaration. This document committed members of the UN to “free our fellow men, women, and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty.” To reach this objective, the Millennium Declaration laid out a list of goals to be reached by the year 2015, including the following:

- **Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty.** Reduce by half the number of people living on less than $1 per day.
- **Achieve universal primary school education.**
- **Promote gender equality and empower women.** Eliminate barriers that keep women from receiving an education.
- **Reduce child mortality.** Cut the death rate among children under five by two-thirds.
- **Improve maternal health.** Reduce the death rate of mothers by three-fourths.
- **Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.**
- **Ensure environmental sustainability.** Reverse the loss of environmental resources, and cut by half the number of people without safe drinking water.
- **Develop a global partnership for development.** Address poor countries’ need for good government, debt relief, economic growth, and jobs for young people.

Since 2000, the UN has launched a number of projects to achieve these ambitious goals. Projects in places such as India and Ethiopia contributed to the 2015 target of halving hunger and poverty rates. The Ethiopian Commodity Exchange, for example, arranged ways for farmers and exporters to trade. By 2005, the poverty rate in developing regions was 27 percent, a decline from 46 percent in 1990.

There has also been progress made toward gender equality in classrooms. For instance, more girls in Bangladesh enrolled in schools with the Female Secondary School Stipend, which helps families pay for tuition. In secondary schools where this program was available, females made up 56 percent of the student body in 2005. Still, few females were able to attend college in developing regions worldwide.

Although HIV/AIDS and malaria are still serious threats around the globe, there have been significant efforts to stop them from spreading. Those infected with HIV in Botswana, for example, have free universal access to antiretroviral treatment. In Botswana, from 1999 to 2007, the number of children contracting HIV in Botswana decreased by about 80 percent.

The global community made great progress toward its target of cutting the number of people without safe drinking water in half as 2015 approached. Programs, such as the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, helped monitor water supply and sanitation in developing regions. North Africa, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean had already met the goal by 2010.

The Millennium Development Goals have not been fully reached. However, efforts by organizations around the world helped developing countries make great strides toward meeting the 2015 targets. The UN continues to pursue its goals to create “a more peaceful, prosperous, and just world.”

The Limitations of the UN
The United Nations has helped to make the world a safer, more livable place. Yet critics often point out that the UN has not fully resolved many of the issues that it has tackled. Poverty, human rights abuses, war, and environmental destruction still persist, they say, in spite of decades of attention from the UN.

One reason for this is the sheer size and complexity of these problems. They are the most difficult issues facing the global community. However, there are other factors that limit what the UN can accomplish.
Paying Dues

All members of the UN are assessed dues based on their ability to pay. In 2012, the 39 poorest countries were assessed the minimum dues: $25,842 each. The United States paid the most: $568 million. The U.S. amount funded 22 percent of the total UN budget, the maximum any one country can be assessed.


One is the reluctance of the world’s nations to cede any of their national sovereignty to the UN. Most resolutions approved by the General Assembly or Security Council lack enforcement. In general, only decisions related to collective security are legally binding on all members. Moreover, the UN’s lack of a standing army means it must rely on member states to carry out peacekeeping missions.

Another factor is the structure of the Security Council. The five permanent members have the power to veto any action by the council. As these nations often have different foreign policy agendas, it is sometimes difficult for the UN to react effectively to problems.

In recent years, the UN has been rocked with corruption scandals and charges of mismanagement and waste. This has led many to question whether the UN can be trusted to deal with important global issues. Reform efforts are underway, but change is slow.

Despite these limitations, the UN has made progress in many areas. Because of the UN’s world health programs, diseases that once plagued the world, such as smallpox and polio, have been eliminated or greatly reduced. Every year, the UN World Food Programme helps feed tens of millions of people in countries around the world. As Kofi Annan, who served as secretary general of the United Nations from 1997 to 2007, has observed, "More than ever before in human history, we share a common destiny. We can master it only if we face it together. And that, my friends, is why we have the United Nations."

18.3 Intergovernmental Organizations

You have probably heard it said that there is strength in numbers. What an individual country cannot do alone, it might be able to do with the help of other countries. The United States understood this well when it joined the Allies in their struggle to defeat the Axis powers in World War II. An intergovernmental organization (IGO) is a type of alliance, though it need not be military in nature.

Promoting International Cooperation Through IGOs

Through IGOs, groups of nations cooperate to achieve common objectives. Those objectives vary from one organization to another, ranging from mutual defense to free trade.

Some IGOs share economic interests. For example, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is made up of 12 oil-producing countries. They have joined together to create a stable market for oil at the best possible price for OPEC members. Trade promotion is the objective of other economic IGOs. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for instance, has
removed trade barriers among Canada, the United States, and Mexico creating a large free-trade zone.

Other IGOs are formed to serve the security interests of their members. The countries in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) share military resources and strategies for protecting their region. ANZUS is another IGO that creates military ties among the countries of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

Still other IGOs focus on political as well as economic issues. The African Union (AU) promotes democracy and sustainable development among its members. The AU has also taken on peacekeeping duties in Africa. Similarly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) promotes regional peace and stability while encouraging economic, social, and cultural development.

The UN has formed its own specialized agencies and programs that are considered IGOs. The World Bank, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the World Health Organization are all IGOs with links to the UN.

**IGOs Have Strengths and Limitations**

Intergovernmental organizations would not exist if they did not provide definite benefits to their member countries. IGOs make it easier for nations to share resources, expand trade, and increase national security. They can be helpful in coordinating responses to natural disasters.

However, membership in an IGO can have its downsides. The need to get a majority of members to support a decision may slow an IGO’s response to pressing problems. Once a decision is made, each member is expected to abide by it. At times, those decisions may conflict with one nation’s foreign policy or national interests. Going along with the majority may mean surrendering a bit of national sovereignty or the power to act independently.

The question of how much power to give up to an IGO has become an issue in debates over the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC is an independent court presently headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands. Its purpose is to prosecute individuals accused of crimes against humanity, such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and aggression. The ICC can exercise its jurisdiction only when national courts are unwilling or unable to prosecute such crimes. Founded in 2002, the ICC conducted investigations in seven African nations in 2012.

By the end of 2012, 121 countries had joined the ICC. Several other countries, however—including China, India, and the United States—had not joined. Opposition in the United States centered on fears that the ICC might be misused to bring politically motivated charges against U.S. leaders and

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The 12 oil-producing countries in the Organization for the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) determine what prices would best stabilize the oil market. Members of OPEC often work together to make decisions about the oil industry.
troops serving in other countries. One U.S. senator summed up his concerns in these words:

_It is no secret that the majority of UN peacekeeping operations are conducted in countries that are non-democratic and whose leaders are hostile to U.S. policies. Leaving our leaders, troops, and personnel vulnerable to arrest and use as political pawns would be a colossal mistake._

—Jon Kyl. (R-AZ), 2004

U.S. supporters of the ICC, however, dismiss such fears. As one editorial put it,

_This scenario is far-fetched for several reasons. The court has no jurisdiction over an alleged war criminal if the suspect’s home country conducts a genuine investigation into the allegations. U.S. peace-keepers have been accused of war crimes in the past, but never prosecuted... In addition, prosecutors would have to obtain the permission of a three-judge court to even initiate an investigation of U.S. forces._

—St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 2, 2002

### 18.4 Nongovernmental Organizations

Another important player on the international scene is the nongovernmental organization (NGO). Generally, NGOs tackle problems that governments, through foreign aid or IGOs, cannot deal with as effectively. For this reason, governments and IGOs often look to NGOs for assistance in dealing with everything from health care to economic development.

**NGOs Tackle a Host of Global Problems**

Since 1970, the number of international NGOs has more than doubled to around 6,000. Most NGOs are nonprofit organizations whose funding comes from several sources. Private donors include individuals as well as corporations and foundations. Funding also comes from official sources: governments and IGOs. All these funders believe in the ability of NGOs to help solve global problems.

NGOs vary greatly in size and purpose. The largest of these organizations deal with a single issue. Amnesty International, for example, focuses on abuses of human rights and the plight of political prisoners. Save the Children is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of poor children and their families worldwide.

Many NGOs see their purpose as helping people in the world’s least developed countries (LDCs). These are the 50 or so countries with the lowest per capita incomes and living standards. NGO staff members in these countries make connections with local leaders and educate themselves about the needs of the people. They often take a hands-on approach to delivering assistance, whether that involves teaching, providing medical care, or caring for victims of a natural disaster.

Many NGOs focus on helping people in developing countries. In this photo, students in Kenya study at school with the support of WEMA, an NGO that helps vulnerable children. WEMA provided this school with uniforms, books, and solar lamps to improve the students’ schoolwork.
Disaster relief is the purpose of other NGOs like the International Committee of the Red Cross. When the earthquake struck Haiti in 2010, some NGOs were already “on the ground” in the affected areas. They were able to act as a bridge, linking victims with outside sources of relief. They helped pinpoint the worst-hit areas and direct the distribution of supplies.

NGOs serve another purpose. They provide valuable information and analyses to governments about global issues. Like other interest groups, they may lobby government officials to influence decisions on global issues that matter to them, such as foreign aid and sustainable development.

Some NGOs define their purpose as advocacy, or speaking out on their areas of concern. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines is an advocacy network of more than 1,400 NGOs in 90 countries. These groups are working to end the production and use of land mines. United Families International is an advocacy group that promotes pro-family policies and programs at the local, national, and international levels.

How One NGO Has Evolved: CARE
CARE was founded in 1945 as a humanitarian relief agency to help survivors of World War II. The new NGO sent millions of CARE packages containing food, supplies, and medicine to war-ravaged Europe. Since then, CARE has evolved into one of the world’s largest NGOs. Its mission also changed from helping victims of war to assisting people in need anywhere in the world. “Every CARE Package is a personal contribution to the world peace our nation seeks,” said President John F. Kennedy in 1962. “It expresses America’s concern and friendship in a language all peoples understand.”

Today CARE is engaged in long-term projects aimed at reducing global poverty. These projects include efforts to improve basic education, prevent HIV/AIDS, increase access to clean water, boost economic opportunity, and promote environmental awareness. In 2011, CARE’s work affected the lives of some 122 million people in 84 countries.

CARE continues to provide emergency aid to victims of war, famine, and natural disasters. After conflict erupted in the Darfur region of Sudan in 2003, for example, CARE supplied humanitarian aid. By 2012, CARE was providing food, water, and medical care to nearly half a million refugees from the Darfur conflict.

In addition, CARE worked to end the conflict in Sudan. It met with government leaders in the United States and Europe to suggest ways their governments might promote peace and stability in this region. It also brought representatives of different ethnic groups together in “peace committees” to help rebuild trust among them. “A sustainable solution will have to involve ordinary people at the community level,” observed a CARE official, “living together and sharing limited resources.”

CARE is one of the many NGOs providing relief to people living in poverty-stricken countries. At times, CARE works with other organizations to address global issues. Here, CARE workers distribute food aid provided by the World Food Programme to the people of Burundi.
What NGOs Do Well and Not So Well

NGOs like CARE take a hands-on approach to problems. They understand the needs of the people "at the grass roots." With that kind of relationship, they can effectively make the case to governments and donors that their concerns deserve attention and funding.

NGOs are also flexible. This makes them natural "first responders" to natural disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake. Often NGOs are able to bring help to survivors much faster than government relief agencies or IGOs. At the same time, NGOs often lack the personnel and resources to carry out large-scale, long-term relief efforts. Governments and large IGOs like the UN are better organized and funded for rebuilding efforts.

When a number of NGOs respond to an emergency, they may have issues coordinating their efforts. Each group may try to attack a problem from a different angle, depending on its resources and expertise. Without an overarching plan, they may find themselves duplicating efforts or getting in each other's way. This is where the UN can help. The UN is large enough to provide an effective plan of action and coordinate the work of a number of NGOs.

Individual NGOs working in foreign countries face other obstacles to their effectiveness. One is corruption. Throughout the world, many public officials will not provide needed documents or take official action without a bribe. Another obstacle is civil unrest. In some LDCs, the government may not be able to maintain law and order. Working in an area of civil unrest is dangerous. Warring factions may make conflicting demands of NGO staff members. In such situations, staff members must be skilled at negotiation to keep their projects going—and sometimes simply to stay alive.

18.5 Protecting Human Rights

In 2006, Zmitser Dashkevich and some friends took part in a peaceful protest against the government. No big deal, right? Except that the protest occurred in Belarus, a former republic of the Soviet Union that has resisted democratic reform. Police arrested Dashkevich and charged him with "organizing or participating in an activity of an unregistered non-governmental organization." After a closed-door trial, Dashkevich was sentenced to 18 months in prison. Where could he turn for help? The answer was one of the NGOs that focus on human rights.

### An NGO for Every Purpose

NGOs have been established to serve a variety of goals and purposes. The three featured here are a tiny sample of the NGOs at work on projects around the globe.

- **The Global Fund for Women** provides grants to promote the health, education, and economic security of women in poor countries. One of its recipients is the 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking agency in Nepal. Even though Nepal has a thriving tourist industry, women are often relegated to farmwork for little pay. The 3 Sisters agency trains local women as trekking guides, where they can earn good wages while developing leadership and business skills.

- **Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)** provides medical care to people affected by armed conflict, epidemics, and natural or human-made disasters. MSF is often one of the first NGOs to arrive at the scene of an emergency. Its teams arrive with specialized medical kits that may include a complete operating room or supplies to control outbreaks of such diseases as cholera or measles.

- **The World Wildlife Fund (WWF)** works to protect endangered species including pandas, elephants, tigers, whales, sea turtles, and great apes. Staff members conduct conservation research in the field. They lobby for antipoaching laws. They also help governments establish wildlife conservation areas. One of the WWF’s success stories is the preservation of the giant panda in China.
Defining the Basic Rights of All Human Beings
The basic rights that all human beings should enjoy are defined in a landmark UN document known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration includes many rights and freedoms that are familiar to any student of the U.S. Constitution. These include the rights to life, liberty, and equal protection under the law. They also include social and economic rights, including the right to work, own property, get an education, and enjoy a decent standard of living.

Adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is nonbinding. Such is not the case with two related documents, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. A covenant is a legally binding agreement. Together with the Universal Declaration, the covenants form what the UN calls the International Bill of Human Rights.

Defending Civil and Political Rights
The vast majority of UN members have ratified both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. A number of NGOs are working to see that they keep their word.

One of them, Amnesty International, took up Zmitser Dashkevich’s cause. Arguing that the young man’s rights to free assembly and speech had been violated, the NGO started a campaign to free him from prison. Members of Amnesty International around the world flooded the Belarus government with letters demanding Dashkevich’s release. In the past, such letter-writing campaigns have shortened the sentences of many “prisoners of conscience.”

The letters on behalf of Dashkevich were part of Amnesty’s “Make Some Noise” campaign. The purpose of the campaign is to show human rights violators that the world is watching and that further abuses will also be exposed. Probably due to international pressure, Dashkevich was released early in 2008. However, he was arrested again in 2011 for alleged assault. Many say that he is innocent, arguing that his arrest was used to prevent him from protesting the reelection of Belarus’s president. These claims, in addition to the fact that he was mistreated in prison, inspired Amnesty International to carry out another campaign. The organization again asked people to write appeal letters calling for Dashkevich’s release.

These teenagers are protesting the arrest of Chinese artist and civil rights activist, Ai Weiwei. Ai, a vocal critic of China’s government, was arrested in 2011 for alleged “economic crimes.” Upon his arrest, NGOs such as the International Council of Museums petitioned for his release.
Defining the Rights of Children

In addition to the International Bill of Human Rights, the UN has created agreements called conventions aimed at protecting the rights of specific groups. There are conventions dealing with the rights of women, minorities, disabled persons, and other vulnerable groups, including children.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere have. Among these rights are the right to life, survival, and protection from abuse and exploitation. The convention addresses child labor, saying,

*Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.*

—UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted Nov. 20, 1989

Enforcing this right, however, has been difficult. In many countries, children are employed in mines, in factories, and on farms at a young age. Families send their children to work because they need the money to survive. Employers hire children because they can pay them less than adult workers and because children may be easier to control.

Some countries have been slow to enact or enforce laws protecting child workers for fear of hurting their economies. As a result, many of the estimated 215 million child laborers worldwide work full time, often in unhealthy conditions. Most get no schooling.

Ending Child Labor Abuses

The UN is working with NGOs to encourage governments to pass stricter laws against employing children, to investigate employers who exploit children, and to improve access to education for children who do work. One such NGO is Human Rights Watch, an organization that investigates human rights abuses around the world.

In 2007, Human Rights Watch shone its spotlight on child labor abuses in the African nation of Guinea. It reported that thousands of girls as young as eight worked in near-slave conditions as household servants. Many were forced to labor up to 18 hours a day, often without pay. This and other similar reports by Human Rights Watch influenced the International Labor Organization to adopt a treaty in 2011 geared towards improving domestic and child labor laws.

Free the Children, the world’s largest NGO of children helping children, takes a different approach. Free the Children fights child labor by giving parents the farm animals, tools, and machinery they need to support their families while sending their children to school. Free the Children also helps poor villages build schools and meet their basic health care needs. By 2012, this NGO had built more than 650 schools around the world, providing education to more than 55,000 poor children.

An estimated 215 million children worldwide work to support themselves and their families. This girl is working at a brickyard in Peru. Although laws in Peru and many other countries prohibit child labor, these laws are often poorly enforced.
18.6 Tackling Environmental Issues: A Focus on Climate Change

For many years, the UN and a variety of NGOs have worked to bring environmental issues to the world’s attention. They have often expressed their position in dramatic terms. In the 1990s, a group of scientists issued this alarming warning of trouble ahead:

*Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.*


Some Environmental Successes and a New Challenge

The Union of Concerned Scientists is one of the many international environmental groups that have worked to reduce air and water pollution, save endangered species, preserve the world’s rainforests, and protect unspoiled places. As a result of these groups’ efforts, many governments have taken steps to limit damage to the environment. In addition, people worldwide are much more aware of environmental issues than they were a few decades ago.

The latest environmental challenge confronting the world is global climate change. This term refers to variations in Earth’s overall climate over periods of time ranging from decades to millions of years. Natural processes, such as volcanic eruptions and variations in the intensity of the sunlight reaching Earth, can cause climate change.

More recently, scientists have argued that human activities, mainly the burning of fossil fuels, are causing a global warming of Earth’s climate. They say that Earth’s temperature is rising as the result of a process known as the greenhouse effect. Gases in the atmosphere, such as carbon dioxide, act like panes of glass in a greenhouse. They let energy from the sun pass through the atmosphere to warm the surface of Earth. But they do not let all of that heat radiate back through the atmosphere into space. The gases absorb some of the heat and keep it trapped in the atmosphere. Without the greenhouse effect, Earth’s average temperature would be about 60 degrees Fahrenheit cooler, too cold to sustain life.

A UN report issued in 2007 predicted that temperatures would likely rise between 3.5 degrees and 8 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of this century, based on projected levels of greenhouse gases. This change could cause significant melting of mountain glaciers and the ice sheets covering polar regions. Such a meltdown would release an enormous amount of water into the oceans, causing a rise in sea levels. As sea levels rise, low-lying islands and coastal areas are likely to be flooded. Rising temperatures are also likely to change weather patterns. Some regions might suffer from drought and others from floods. The result could be crop failures and famine in some regions.

International Efforts to Slow Climate Change

The United Nations has responded to the challenge of global warming in two ways. The first is by sponsoring research on global warming by its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This group, made up of leading climate experts, has been researching the issue since 1988.

The UN has also sponsored a number of conferences focused on climate change. A 1992 meeting known as the Earth Summit produced the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This international environmental treaty is aimed at reducing emissions of greenhouse gases to combat global warming. It set no mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions and contained no enforcement provisions. But it did call for later amendments, called protocols, to set such limits.

A 1997 UN conference held in Kyoto, Japan, resulted in an agreement to set mandatory emission limits. This agreement, known as the Kyoto Protocol, has become much better known than the UNFCCC itself. The Kyoto Protocol committed the world’s industrialized nations to making significant cuts in their greenhouse gas emissions. Thirty-seven of these nations agreed to reduce emissions to 18 percent below their 1990 levels by 2020.

No binding goals for emission cuts were set for
developing countries at the Kyoto conference. Representatives of those countries argued that most of the emissions came from countries that had already industrialized. They also claimed that limiting emissions would unfairly stunt their economic development. As a representative from China observed, “In the developed world only two people ride in a car, and yet you want us to give up riding on a bus.”

By 2013, about 190 countries had ratified the Kyoto Protocol. The most notable exception is the United States, which until recently was the top emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. President George W. Bush has argued that meeting the emissions reduction target set for the United States in the protocol would hurt the U.S. economy. He has also argued that developing nations, especially China, which now ranks first in annual emissions, should also be forced to accept mandatory cuts.

U.S. Efforts to Confront Climate Change
Although the United States is not a party to the Kyoto Protocol, it is confronting the global warming challenge at many levels. At the national level, President Obama developed a standard for cars and light-trucks to reach a fuel efficiency of 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025. He has also provided funding for research on science and technologies related to renewable energy. However, Obama’s stance on climate change has also raised criticism. Workers in the coal industry complain that his policies are costing them jobs because power companies now prefer to use cleaner-burning fuels. Despite these criticisms, Obama spoke about the need to continue confronting global warming in his second term.

State and local governments have also become active in efforts to slow climate change. California led the way with the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, an ambitious program aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. New Mexico promotes wind and solar energy by providing tax incentive for businesses and individuals. Portland, Oregon, also took action. By 2012, the city had reduced emissions to 6 percent below 1990 levels.

Environmental NGOs have been active as well. The Sierra Club, through its “Cool Cities” campaign, encourages cities to take steps to reduce their carbon dioxide emissions. The Environmental Defense Fund has used “Fight Global Warming” TV ads to educate the public about the urgent nature of the problem. The Natural Resources Defense Council has launched a campaign aimed at cutting electricity use to reduce the burning of fossil fuels in power plants.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

This map shows emissions of carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas, in countries around the world. The United States and China are by far the largest emitters of carbon dioxide.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions per Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total CO₂ Emissions (thousand metric tonnes)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 5 million</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 million to 5 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>100,000 to 1 million</td>
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<td>50,000 to 100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under 50,000</td>
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In the private sector, some companies have made efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions for economic reasons. For example, by replacing refrigerator lights with energy-efficient light bulbs, Wal-Mart saved $12 million a year. Similarly, IBM saved over $442 million between 1990 and 2011 by cutting back on energy usage at their data centers and making their facilities more energy efficient.

Americans are still debating how much focus should be on combating climate change. Some Americans believe that the United States should prioritize climate change in order to become less reliant on foreign oil. One benefit of energy independence is that OPEC would have less influence over the price of crude oil in the United States. However, others worry that a focus on climate change will put regulations on businesses and slow down economic growth.

Public and private groups will continue to influence policy on climate change. However, as you have learned, what position the government ultimately takes on issues such as climate change largely depends on the actions of government officials, political parties, interest groups, and public opinion.

**Summary**

Over the past century, the nations of the world have learned to work together to confront global issues. Preventing violent conflict is one major concern. Other problems include extreme poverty, human rights abuses, and environmental destruction. A variety of international organizations are addressing these issues on different levels.

**United Nations** The UN takes on most major global issues. Its main mission has always been maintaining world peace. Working with other international organizations, the UN also pursues the goal of improving the lives of the world’s people.

**Intergovernmental organizations** Nations form IGOs—such as the UN—to achieve common objectives. Those objectives include national security, improved trade, and political and economic cooperation.

**Nongovernmental organizations** NGOs are private, nonprofit groups of citizens that tackle problems through people-to-people contacts. The typical international NGO focuses on a single issue, such as poverty, disaster relief, human rights, or health concerns.

**Human rights** The UN made human rights a global concern when the General Assembly ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Since then, the UN and a number of NGOs have made it their mission to monitor and report human rights abuses.

**Climate Change** Most scientists today believe that Earth is warming rapidly because of the burning of fossil fuels. Many people believe that global climate change and the environment are issues that should be on the forefront of our nation’s agenda. However, others worry that prioritizing policies related to climate change could hurt certain industries.