United Nations

Written by Silke Sahl
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Contents

1 Introduction
2 About the United Nations
   2.1 Main Organs
   2.2 Founding Documents
   2.3 Additional Sources about the United Nations
3 The United Nations Publishing System
   3.1 UN Documents
      3.1.1 Official Records
      3.1.2 Parliamentary Documents
      3.1.3 The Relationship of the Official Record and Parliamentary Documents
   3.2 Sales Publications
   3.3 Press Releases
4 Deciphering UN Document Symbols
   4.1 Organs and Subsidiary Bodies
   4.2 Additional Symbol Components
   4.3 Dates
   4.4 Additional Sources about Document Symbols
5 General Research Strategies and Sources
6 Comprehensive Research Strategies and Sources
   6.1 Commercial Online Source
   6.2 UN Online Sources
   6.3 Paper Indexes
7 Research Strategies for Very Recent UN Activities
8 Voting Records
9 Finding the Documents
   9.1 The United Nations Depository System
   9.2 Documents on the UN Official Document System (ODS) on the Internet
   9.3 Other Documents on the Web
   9.4 Documents in Microform
   9.5 Documents in Paper
   9.6 Documents Beyond the Diamond Law Library
10 Additional Resources
Introduction

Since United Nations research can be challenging, a solid knowledge of how the United Nations works and how its documents are published is helpful. Unfortunately, no single ultimate source exists. Instead, one has to consider a variety of sources and determine which is most appropriate on a question-by-question basis. One must carefully balance the use of official UN sources with commercial sources. Furthermore, print, online, and microform sources must often be used together.

This guide approaches research strategy in the order one might tackle a research question. First, one needs to know some basics about the United Nations and the United Nations documentation system. Next, one looks for relevant documents and identifies the appropriate document numbers. This can be done at a general level, looking for a few good sources on a subject, or at a comprehensive level, looking at all United Nations activities. Finally, one must use the document number to find the full text of the document.

For additional assistance finding United Nations documents at Columbia's Diamond Law Library, please do not hesitate to contact the reference librarians at the Reference Desk. For directions and reference hours, see http://www.law.columbia.edu/library/about.

About the United Nations

Background information about the UN is essential because the documentation systems and research strategies vary based on how the publishing body functions within the UN.

Main Organs

The United Nations functions in 6 main organs or bodies. The first five are the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat. They are all located in New York City. The sixth main body is the International Court of Justice, which is located in The Hague and has a separate documentation system from the first five.

The 6 main bodies of the UN are:

1. The [General Assembly](https://www.un.org/ga) functions as a parliament. All UN members participate.
2. The [Security Council](https://www.un.org/sc) deals with security issues. There are 5 permanent members and 10 rotating members. The permanent members are Russia, the United States, China, France and the United Kingdom.
3. The [Economic and Social Council](https://www.un.org/esa) handles economic and social issues. There are 54 members.
4. The [Trusteeship Council](https://www.un.org/sc/trusteeship) is currently inactive. Formerly, it oversaw trusteeship territories.
5. The [Secretariat](https://www.un.org/depts/dsg) deals with the administrative workings of the UN and includes the office of the Secretary General.
6. The [International Court of Justice](https://www.icj-cij.org) (also known as the World Court) sits in The Hague in the Netherlands. Its documentation system is distinct from that of the first five main organs. [1]
organizations are located throughout the world, many in Geneva.

**Founding Documents**

The founding documents of the United Nations include the UN Charter (1945), The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the Statute of the International Court of Justice. Beyond that, the United Nations has participated in and facilitated numerous treaties and conventions.[2]

Understanding the UN Charter is particularly important for research because some research databases are divided into two categories: Charter-based and Treaty-based. For example, one would use a Charter-based database to search for documents from a subsidiary organization that was founded in the UN Charter, such as the UN Commission on Human Rights. However, one would use a Treaty-based database to search for documents from a subsidiary organization that was founded by a treaty. For example, the Human Rights Committee was created by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

**Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs**

The Repertory is a legal publication containing analytical studies of the decisions of the principal organs of the United Nations under each of the Articles of the Charter of the United Nations.

**Additional Sources about the United Nations**

**United Nations Home Page**

This is one of the best sources for up-to-date information about the UN. The following links within the site are particularly useful:

- [About the United Nations](#) for member lists, founding documents, history, and a description of the main bodies.
- [International Law](#) for links to UN international courts, including The International Court of Justice, the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the International Tribunal for Rwanda, and the International Criminal Court.
- [UN News Center](#) to find out about the latest developments at the UN. The Press Release database can provide a wealth of information. Note: Press Releases are available beginning October 13, 1995.
- [UN Documentation Centre](#) for links to information about United Nations Documents and the full text of many recent United Nations documents.
- [United Nations System](organization chart) to find out how the many UN groups fit together.
- [Principal Offices of the United Nations](#) to find out where groups are located.
- [UN System Sites](#) to find links to subsidiary organizations.

**Law and Practice of the United Nations.**

4th Floor, KZ 4986 .C54 2008

Sections on "Relevance", "Capacity", "Practice" and "Accountability"

**The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations.**

3rd Floor Reserve, [JZ 4970 .093 2007](#)

A comprehensive analysis of the UN.

**Historical Dictionary of the United Nations.**
The United Nations has a complex and sophisticated method of publishing materials. There are different types of publications, and each type is published according to its own system. It is important to understand the different types of publications, so that one can determine which documentation system applies.

The most basic type of UN publication is a UN Document. Not all items published by the UN are considered UN Documents. "A document is a text submitted to a principal organ or a subsidiary organ of the United Nations for consideration by it, usually in connection with item(s) on its agenda."[3] UN Documents are governed by the sophisticated numbering system described in the next section of this guide.

There are also UN Publications that are not considered UN Documents. UN Publications is a broader category. "The term 'United Nations publication' refers to any written material which is issued by or for the United Nations to the general public, normally under the authorization of the Publications Board."[4] For example, sales publications and press releases are UN publications, but not UN Documents.

The distinction between UN Documents and UN Publications is important because they follow different documentation systems. Also, depository libraries[5] provide access to UN Documents, but they usually do not have a complete collection of other UN publications.

**UN Documents**

The UN Document Symbols System governs all UN Documents. Within the category of UN Documents, research strategy requires that one consider UN Documents in two distinct categories: 1) Official
Records and 2) Parliamentary Documents. The distinction is important for two reasons. First, when a document is in the Official Record, the Blue Book\footnote{6} requires citation to the Official Record. Second, the Official Record is almost always available in paper, whereas other documents may not be. See "Finding Documents" below, for further information.

**Official Records**

Official Records are the major, final records of the General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, and the Trusteeship Council. They are commonly referred to by their abbreviations: GAOR, SCOR, ESCOR and TCOR respectively. One can look at these records as a year-end report of each organ, reproducing the major documents of the year. Official Records are always identified explicitly with "Official Record" on the title page.

Each organ's Official Record is somewhat different. In general, the Official Records are made up of three main types of documents: meeting records, resolutions and decisions, and reports of all major committees. As they are UN Documents, they are governed by the UN Documents Symbol System.

Resolutions and decisions are important and heavily used documents. The main organs use the term resolutions for their long, substantive statements. Decisions are less substantive involving only a few lines, and are often about appointments, deferrals, etc. Resolutions and decisions of the main organs are published in supplements to the Official Record. Resolutions and decisions are in the last supplement of the General Assembly's Official Record and the first of the Economic and Social Council's Official Record. Note that the subsidiary organizations often use these terms in the reverse, and their more substantive statements are called "decisions."

The Official Record also includes reports of all major committees to the main organs. Some subsidiary organs report to the Economic and Social Council, while some report to the General Assembly. These reports are published as supplements to the Official Record. The supplement numbers have been inconsistent historically, although recently some have become more consistent. For example, the report of the International Law Commission is now always Supplement No. 10 of the Official Record of the General Assembly. UNIQUE (described below) is the best source for a list of these reports.

**Parliamentary Documents**

Parliamentary Documents consist of a variety of documents of the UN. These documents go by several different names, and are sometimes referred to as working documents, mimeodocuments, sessional documents, or masthead documents. They can be thought of as documents "other" than the Official Record. Of this huge system of parliamentary documentation, a small fraction is then compiled in the Official Record. Because parliamentary documents are official UN Documents, the UN Document Symbols System governs them.

**The Relationship of the Official Record and Parliamentary Documents**

The Official Record is a compilation of some of the documents of the main organs. Thus, documents can appear in both places: as a UN parliamentary document and later as a part of the Official Record. Therefore, there will be two versions and two document numbers. For example, a report of the Commission on Human Rights to the Economic and Social Council will have one document number reflecting its number in the Commission on Human Rights documents (ex: E/CN.4/1982/30) and a second number reflecting its appearance in the Official Record of the Economic and Social Council (ex:
In legal research, this distinction is particularly important. The *Blue Book* requires that documents in the Official Record should be cited to the Official Record. The document symbol is not enough for proper citation. For example, a correct *Blue Book* citation to a report would be: "Commission on Human Rights, Report on the Thirty-Eighth Session, U.N. ESCOR, 38th Sess., Supp. No. 2, UN Doc. E/1982/12 (1982)."

Note that the *Blue Book* calls for citation information to include the supplement number, which is on the front page of the Official Record document, but is not reflected in the parliamentary document number. Also, the *Blue Book* does not call for a parallel citation to the parliamentary document E/CN.4/1982/30. Thus a copy of the E/CN.4/1982/30 document may be insufficient, and the Official Record version required for citation purposes--both because this is the preferred source of the Blue Book and in order to get the supplement number.

**Sales Publications**

Not considered UN Documents, sales publications are publications of general interest that the United Nations offers for sale. Sales publications include many monographs about the United Nations. For example, the Yearbook of the United Nations is a sales publication. Sales numbers, based on a system distinct from the UN Document Symbols System, identify them.

A complete list of sales publications can be found at the [United Nations Publications](http://www.un.org) website. Sales publications are not part of the depository system. However, the Diamond Law Library receives some sales publications. These can be found by using the catalog, Pegasus. Other sales publications can be ordered through Inter-Library Loan.

**Press Releases**

Press releases are not considered UN Documents. Their use is considered only informational. However press releases are important research tools because they are produced in advance of the UN Documents.


Press releases before October 13, 1995 are difficult to find. In rare cases, older press releases may be found on the websites of various organizations. Use web search engines such as [Google](http://www.google.com) or [Hotbot](http://www.hotbot.com) to search for them. Alternatively, news articles or journal articles may provide citations for web site addresses or paper reproductions.

**Deciphering UN Document Symbols**[8]

Understanding the document symbols makes UN research much easier. In fact, it is sometimes essential. The UN Office of Documents Control assigns each official UN document a unique number. Although very informative, the Document Symbols System can be confusing and is not intuitive.

For example, the document symbol E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.2/1987/WP.4/Add.1 signifies: the Economic and

**Organs and Subsidiary Bodies**

Documents are divided by organ. It is important to understand the functions of the main organs, because many research sources are divided by organ, and are not cross-searchable. Document symbols are as follows:

A/- for General Assembly;

S/- for the Security Council;

E/- for the Economic and Social Council; and

ST/- for the Secretariat.

Certain subsidiary organizations have their own document symbols. For example CRC/C stands for the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Only some of the documents with such symbols are official UN Documents. Some subsidiary organizations' documents may be internal documents only. Although the subsidiary organizations can still assign document numbers to these documents, they are not considered UN Documents and are not part of the depository system. These documents may be available through the subsidiary organizations, but are sometimes not available at all.

**Additional Symbol Components**

The document symbols are informative beyond the organization designation. Following are a few examples. A more complete description can be found in the [United Nations Documentation: Research Guide](#).

It is important to distinguish between committees and commissions. -/CN stands for a Commission and -/C stands for Committee. There can be a committee and a commission on the same subject. For example, there is a UN Human Rights Committee (document symbol CCPR/C/) and a UN Commission for Human Rights (document symbol E/CN.4/).

Meeting records are important and are a good source for speeches. Meeting records are generally designated with two symbols, -/PV and -/SR. -/PV stands for verbatim records of meetings in the first person (i.e., proces-verbaux), and they are generally only issued for the main organ meetings. -/SR stands for summary records of meetings (abbreviated meeting records in the third person). Providing summary records is the more common (and less expensive) way of reporting meeting events.

Some documents, like those with the symbols -/L and -/R, are not meant for the public. -/L stands for limited distribution (generally draft documents). These documents are not part of the depository. They may appear on the Official Document System (ODS) since 1992 (for more information on the ODS, see below). -/R stands for restricted distribution, which means restricted access. These documents can sometimes be viewed at the UN, but not copied.

Changes in documents are indicated by -/Add, signifying an addendum or addition. On the other hand, -/Rev. signifies a revision, completely replacing texts previously issued.
Dates

Dates and session numbers are important ways of identifying documents. For the main organs, the first session of the United Nations was in 1945. To determine session numbers, subtract 45 from the year in question. For example, for the year 2000, subtract 45, to find that in the year 2000 the UN is in its 55th session. Note that sessions begin in September. Unfortunately, subsidiary bodies function differently. Their sessions can be numbered according to when they meet, not the session of the United Nations. Thus a subsidiary organization in 2000 could be in its 30th session, or even in its 60th session (if it meets more than once a year).

Note that some document symbols include the year of the document or the session numbers, but others do not. This is due to the different reporting procedures of the different organs and subsidiary bodies. For example, the Economic and Social Council uses the year in their document numbers (ex: E/2000/106), while the General Assembly uses the session in their document numbers (ex: A/RES/53/202). It is also due to historical changes in each body's reporting system. For example, the General Assembly began by numbering their documents sequentially, without regard to year. Only in 1976 did they start to number the sequence fresh each session and include the session number in the document number. The Economic and Social Council made a similar change in 1978, and the Security Council followed suit in 1994. Subsidiary organizations work in their own ways.

Document dates can also be confusing. A document might have several different dates. For instance, the date under the symbol on the document itself is the date of registration of the document. This is the date most commonly used when identifying the document. The date at the bottom of the document, usually near the barcode, is the date the document finished processing. Third, the documents have an issuance date, which can be found by looking at the daily list of documents. Fortunately, exact dates are not required for Blue Book citation.

Additional Sources about Document Symbols

This excellent source explains the symbols system in more detail.

This provides a complete (though out of date) list of the document symbols.

United Nations Documents Index System
This print index of UN documents is published four times a year, and is more up-to-date than series symbols. It can be a helpful aid for deciphering document symbols since 1996.

General Research Strategies and Sources

Sometimes, researchers only seek general information, and are not concerned with learning everything about a subject. For example, one might want to know what the UN's role has been in Rwanda lately. In other cases, researchers may be new to UN research and want to start their research gradually. In either case, starting out with complex indexes can be counter-productive. The search strategies, the lists of documents, and the symbol system can be overwhelming.
For general research, using one of the following text-based sources is a more user-friendly approach. They often provide more than enough information to satisfy requests. Alternatively, they are great starting points. Note that in most cases humans, not computers, compile these sources. The benefit of this is that the sources are user-friendly. The disadvantage is that publication is quite slow. These strategies may not be appropriate for current research.

*Everyone's United Nations*
2nd Floor, [JX1976.A21 Ev271](#)
This provides a good summary of major events in UN history. This publication comes in three, chronological volumes. This is a great place to start when trying to determine when the United Nations dealt with an issue. It is an ideal introduction to the next source, *The Yearbook of the United Nations*.

*The Yearbook of the United Nations*
4th Floor, [JZ4947 .Y43](#)
Free online from the [United Nations](#). This excellent source describes the workings of the UN in essay format, and includes helpful references to selected UN Documents. The table of contents and index make this a very valuable research tool. References to "YUN" are references to the *Yearbook* itself. This source is usually several years behind and it does not list all UN Documents. Note, check both print and online to see which format has the most recent issue.

*For the Record: The United Nations Human Rights System*
Cellar, [JX1 F7442](#)
Published from 1997 to 2003, this was a great source for human rights information. Each country's involvement in the UN human rights area is described. Citations and often links to specific documents are also included.

*United Nations Website*
The UN home page can be a great place to start research. There are several subject links from the main page: International Law, Peace and Security, Economic and Social Development, Human Rights, and Humanitarian affairs. These pages provide useful links to information and other bodies specializing in the subject areas.

*Global Issues on the UN Agenda*
The UN organized by subject. Click on subjects like Intellectual Property, Labour, Women or Education to find links to useful UN resources.

**Comprehensive Research Strategies and Sources**

When researchers need to search all UN activities in a particular area, it is time to turn to comprehensive research tools. For instance, one might need to find all the reports of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Alternatively, one might need a specific document, such as a recent letter regarding Bulgaria's view of landmines.

Unfortunately, no one source covers every aspect of the United Nations in a user-friendly way. Instead, one must pick the best resource depending on the subject and time frame of the research. This requires a balance between paper and online resources, and more importantly between official UN sources and commercial publications. It is not unusual to have to consult several of these sources to find the information needed. The trick is to evaluate the research requirements in order to start with the most likely sources first.
Commercial Online Source

Readex/Access UN
Dates covered: 1946 - current
This is a good commercial database that indexes ALL official UN Documents. Note that the online version has replaced the earlier CDROM product. This is the easiest comprehensive source, and often is the best starting point for comprehensive UN research. However it is an unofficial source and generally does not include full text. Note that this system works in conjunction with the microfiche set. It is best to check this database to be sure the document exists in the set and that the number and date are accurate, before proceeding to the microfiche. Be sure to note the Readex/AccessUN year of the document (which may be different than the document date), as microfiche is filed by Readex/AccessUN year.

UN Online Sources

The United Nations provides several excellent databases for UN research. However, none of these databases are comprehensive.

UN Official Document System (ODS)
Dates covered: 1993 - current
This is the official repository of UN documents and includes full-text images (.pdfs) of UN documents. The ODS covers all types of official UN documentation, beginning in 1993. Some older documents are added to the system on a daily basis. It includes resolutions from 1946 onwards. Note that resolutions before 1993 are in a separate database that must be accessed from the Advanced Search screen. The system does not contain press releases, UN sales publications or UN treaties. Since January, 2005, this database is free to the public. The system allows for both simple and advanced searching. See the UN Library's training guide Introduction to the ODS. If you are unable to find your document with this system, try searching for the document in the AccessUN index (which goes back further than the ODS) or UNBISNET (the UN catalog). Then, use the UN document number to search in the ODS.

UNIQUE
Dates covered: 1946 - current
This is an excellent reference file created by the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library. It indexes many UN Documents from 1946 forward. Generally, there is no full text and it does not include all UN Documents. UNIQUE focuses on documents of a recurrent nature: annual reports, session reports, committee reports, special rapporteur reports, etc. Librarians compile some of the document lists, for example, a list of all CEDAW reports. This is the best starting point when looking for documents of a recurrent nature.

UNBISnet
Dates covered: 1979 - current
This is a catalog of UN publications and documentation indexed by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and the UN Library in Geneva, as well as non-UN publications held at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. This is a good source when Access UN (described above) fails to locate requested material. Because it includes the catalog of all publications in the UN library, it is also useful for finding unofficial sources relating to the UN and is also a good source for voting records. See the UN Library's training guide, Introduction to UNBISnet.

United Nations Documentation: Research Guide
This is an excellent guide to doing UN Research. In particular the special topics: Human Rights, International Law and Peacekeeping Operations are very useful when trying to track down UN Documents. This guide is helpful in deciphering the difference between Charter-based bodies and Treaty-
based bodies. The librarians at the Dag Hammarskjöld library write this high-quality resource. However, it does not address the good commercial products, like Readex/Access UN.

**Paper Indexes**

Paper research is time-consuming, and generally the online sources are easier to use. However, for older materials, for questionable document numbers, and for a better understanding of the UN's publishing methods, the paper indexes can be a good choice.

United Nations Documents Index System
Dates covered: 1974 - current

For comprehensive research, the UN provides paper indexes to their documents. This system includes several paper tools, UNDOC (1984-current), UNDEX (1977-1978), UN Document Series Symbols (1978-1984), and UNDEX "C" (cumulative 1974-1977). All are located in the Finding Aids section of the library on the second floor. Publication of the paper indexes has changed over time. Currently, indexes are issued four times a year, and include two parts: a subject index and a document index. The document index organizes documents by number. Reading this index is a great way to understand how the document symbols work. This is also the best place to find document numbers that are incorrect or incomplete (as opposed to online).

Indexes to the Proceedings of the Main Organs
*Index to proceedings of the General Assembly*
2nd Floor Int'l Law Finding Aids, **JX1976.A23 In24**

*Index to proceedings of the Security Council*
2nd Floor Int'l Law Finding Aids, **JX1976.A22 In24**

*Index to proceedings of the Economic and Social Council*
2nd Floor Int'l Law Finding Aids, **JX1976.A25 In24**

These indexes are a great way to find document numbers. They provide an annual/sessional, comprehensive index of documents issued by the organ. They include a subject index to all documents issued by the organ that year/session and an index to speeches delivered. They also include a voting chart. This is a great way to do research if one knows what organ issued a document. See the UN research guide section on Indexes to Proceedings for additional information, including links to the UNIQUE information providing document numbers for all indexes.

**Research Strategies for Very Recent UN Activities**

Researchers often need to know about UN activities before the results are officially published in document form. It can take several weeks before UN Documents are published. Until then, news sources, press releases, draft documents and meeting documents are good sources of information on current developments.

**United Nations News Centre**
The UN News Center is a useful site for keeping up with the latest developments at the United Nations. Many of the subsidiary organizations within the UN System have their own news sites too. These can be found using the Official Web Locator for the United Nations System.

**UN Press Releases**
Press releases often contain information about, and sometimes full-text reports of, recent UN

Resolutions and Decisions
Resolutions and decisions may not be published until weeks after their adoption. Prior to official publication, information regarding these resolutions can be found in draft resolutions and decisions, meeting records and press releases. The United Nations Documentation: Research Guide Quick Links page provides links to some lists of document numbers for resolutions, decisions and recent actions.

Journal of the United Nations
The Journal of the United Nations is useful for determining what is currently happening at the United Nations. It includes information about meetings of United Nations bodies, the symbols of major documents to be considered at the meetings (before official release), and summaries of actions taken at the previous day's meetings.

Voting Records
The two easiest ways to find voting information are using UNBISNET and the Indexes to the Proceedings. For additional information on finding voting records, see the United Nations Documentation: Research Guide. Information on voting records is included in the sections on the General Assembly and the Security Council.

UNBISNET
Voting records for all adopted resolutions from the General Assembly (from 1983, 38th session forward) and the Security Council (from 1946, first year forward) are available in UNBISNET.

Index to the Proceedings of the Main Organs
Index to proceedings of the General Assembly
2nd Floor Intl'Law Finding Aids, JX1976.A23 In24
Index to proceedings of the Security Council 2nd Floor Intl'Law Finding Aids, JX1976.A22 In24
Index to proceedings of the Economic and Social Council 2nd Floor Intl'Law Finding Aids, JX1976.A25 In24
The indexes for each organ includes a voting chart. See the UN research guide section on the Indexes to Proceedings for additional information, including links to the UNIQUE information providing document numbers for all indexes.

Finding the Documents
Once one has a document number, such as E/CN.4/RES/1982/29, the next step is to find the document itself. It is important to note that not all United Nations publications are made public. However most UN Documents are available to the public.

Documents can be found in several formats: the ODS, online, in paper or in microfiche. No one source is complete. Many types of documents (such as Resolutions) can be found in each of these sources. When selecting a resource to use, one must consider the document type and date, the obscurity of the document, how quickly one needs it, and whether one needs an official version. Generally, more recent documents can be found in the ODS or online. For older documents, paper and microfiche might be the only option.
The United Nations Depository System

The United Nations facilitates the distribution of UN documents by using a system of Depository Libraries. Various libraries are given UN documents in exchange for making them available to the public. The Diamond Law Library is a depository library and receives all items that are part of the depository system. However, depository libraries do not receive all United Nations publications. Some documents are not made available to the public, and therefore cannot be found at the Diamond Law Library. Depository libraries receive "generally distributed documents and publications of the United Nations."

Some examples of documents that depositories do not receive include the following: limited and restricted documents, or documents "for participants only"; the documents of related UN organizations such as the UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNEP and the ICJ; the documents of specialized agencies such as the IMF, WHO, WIPO and the WTO, which have their own documentation systems; preliminary documents eventually produced elsewhere, such as verbatim records of plenary meetings of the Security Council, which will appear in printed final form as part of the Official Records); sales publications; press releases; and ephemeral material issued during sessions of UN bodies, such as working papers, conference room papers, journals, orders of the day.10

Note that in addition to the Depository System, the Diamond Law Library purchases additional publications, including UN Treaties, UN Sales Publications and commercial publications, to supplement its UN collection. Also, the Internet provides even greater access to UN publications.

Documents on the UN Official Document System (ODS) on the Internet

**UN Official Document System (ODS)**
Dates covered: 1993 - current
This is the official repository of UN documents and includes full-text images (.pdfs) of UN documents. The ODS covers all types of official UN documentation, beginning in 1993. Some older documents are added to the system on a daily basis. It includes resolutions from 1946 onwards. Note that resolutions before 1993 are in a separate database that must be accessed from the Advanced Search screen. The system does not contain press releases, UN sales publications or UN treaties. Since January, 2005, this database is free to the public. The system allows for both simple and advanced searching. See the UN Library's training guide, Introduction to the ODS. If you are unable to find your document with this system, try searching for the document in the AccessUN index (which goes back further than the ODS) or UNBISNET (the UN catalog). Then, use the UN document number to search in the ODS.

Other Documents on the Web

The Internet is sometimes the fastest way to get full-text UN Documents. However, it is not always considered an official source. Also, it generally includes only more recent documents. The main UN home page is a good source for these documents, and subject-specific web pages can be even better sources.

**United Nations Documentation Centre**
This page can be reached from the UN home page, by clicking on the section called "Documentation and Maps". From this page, one must choose the organ which issued the document. Each organ has different document coverage online. In general, coverage of full-text resolutions is quite good, but coverage of other documents is more limited.
UNBISnet
Dates covered: 1979 - current
This is a catalog of UN publications and documentation indexed by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and the UN Library in Geneva, as well as non-UN publications held at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. Includes links to the full text of a rapidly growing number of documents in the six official languages. See the UN Library's training guide Introduction to UNBISnet.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
The High Commissioner for Human Rights site is the best place to look for UN human rights related documents. It includes selected human rights documents in full-text. One must choose between using the Charter-based database (which contains the documents of bodies created by the UN Charter such as the Commission on Human Rights), or the Treaty-based database (which contains the documents of bodies created by UN treaties, such as the Human Rights Committee, created by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). These databases are very sophisticated and documents can be viewed in many different arrangements, including by date, by document number, by country and by treaty. There is a concept-based search engine that searches all UNHCHR web documents, but it is not very sophisticated.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
A great site for refugee documentation, including the very helpful REFWORLD database. REFWORLD includes the text of relevant refugee legislation and case law from around the world.

The United Nations' Women Watch
A good site for UN documents regarding women.

Official Web Site Locator for the United Nations System
This is useful for finding other subsidiary and related UN bodies that might have better UN documentation than the main UN home page.

Non-UN Sites
Many non-UN sites also reproduce documents, sometimes faster and more comprehensively than the UN sites. For instance the University of Minnesota is an excellent source for UN human rights documents. Also, the general web search sites, such as Google, Altavista or Hotbot can be used to find documents. General search engines can be particularly useful for finding obscure documents, such as restricted or limited documents, or internal documents of various committees.

Documents in Microform
The Diamond Law Library subscribes to the Readex/Access UN microform system. Although many people do not like to use microform, it is the most complete collection of UN documents that the Diamond Law Library owns. For older documents (documents not yet published in the ODS) it is an excellent source. It includes all official UN Documents and is located in closed stacks.

Requests for microform documents can be made via Pegasus. The microform will be paged, generally within 24 hours. Please see the reference librarians if you need assistance. Before requesting documents from the microform set, be sure to check the document on Readex/AccessUN in order to determine that the document is in the collection. Also, be sure to note the Readex year in the record. The Readex year is the year that the company assigns to the document, and it might be different than the date of the document. Confirming the Readex year is essential, since the microfiche is organized by Readex year, not by the date on the document. Include the entire document number in your request.

Documents in Paper
As a depository library, the Diamond Law Library receives all UN Documents in paper. Publication in paper is often slower than publication on the Internet or in the ODS. The library keeps and binds all the Official Records of the main organs. Therefore the paper approach is usually best for official versions of the documents in the Official Record (meeting records, resolutions and decisions, and committee reports).

Official Records of the General Assembly (GAOR)
2nd Floor, JX1976.A23 Of23

Official Records of the Security Council (SCOR)
2nd Floor, JX1976.A22 Of23

Official Records of the Economic and Social Council (ESCOR)
2nd Floor, Of23

Official Records of the Trusteeship Council (TCOR)
2nd Floor, JX1976.A29 Of23

Documents Beyond the Diamond Law Library

Sometimes documents cannot be found at the Diamond Law Library. Reference librarians can assist in determining whether documents are available in the law library.

Often, documents of subsidiary bodies are internal documents, not official UN Documents, and thus not available at the Diamond Law Library. In this case, it is sometimes possible to contact the subsidiary organization directly to inquire about documents. Contact information for these organizations is available through the Official Web Site Locator for the United Nations System or using the handbooks and directories described in the "About the UN" section of this guide.


Additional Resources

For further assistance, please contact the reference librarians at the Diamond Law Library Reference Desk. For directions and reference hours, see About the Library.

Additionally, the following research guides are excellent resources:


Georgetown University Law Center's United Nations Research Guide.

NYU's Guide: [1].


The United Nations Scholars' Workstation at Yale's: Research Approaches to UN Information.
Notes

1. ↑ The documentation of the International Court of Justice is not covered in this guide.
2. ↑ Treaty research is not covered in this guide. Go to the library's Guide to Treaty Research.
5. ↑ The United Nations facilitates the distribution of UN Documents by using a system of depository libraries. Depository libraries are given UN Documents in exchange for making them available to the public. The Diamond Law Library is a depository library.
7. ↑ See Rule 21.7.3.
8. ↑ Note that press releases and sales publications have separate documentation symbol systems.
9. ↑ Here, CCPR stands for the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the treaty that created the Human Rights Committee.

Please send comments regarding this guide to Silke Sahl, International, Foreign and Comparative Law Librarian, Columbia University, Diamond Law Library at ssahl@law.columbia.edu.

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