



General Assembly

Thirteenth Session

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Third Committee – Social, Humanitarian & Cultural

This committee wants to improve the world economy to help the poor. They discuss how national, regional and international economies affect the world. They also focus on countries that have special needs. Some examples are the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) or the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs).

This group believes people in poverty do not have to be poor forever. For this reason, they focus on how developing nations can improve their economies. They also find ways to directly help people in poverty. They might talk about how to help countries get access to money. Or, they might find ways that technology can help countries develop faster.

This committee works closely with the UN Economic and Social Council. Some of the resolutions they have passed deal with sustainable development, harmony with nature, and migration.

Agenda Item 71 – Rights of peoples to self-determination

Guiding Questions

Self-determination is a complicated issue because it can endanger a country's territory if people want to break away and start their own country. With your fellow delegates you need to find a way to work towards making the following goals a reality.

- How can countries support the rights of peoples to self-determination without upsetting the countries where those people live?
- What can states do to protect the rights of minorities so that they do not end up wanting to leave the country (and start a new one)?
- If a group of people want to separate from a country and start their own, how can states help make it a peaceful transition?

Background

Self-determination is when a group of people decides that the government that represents them is not protecting their interests. They then have the right to change that government. The term has been around since the mid-19th century and most countries agree that it is a right that all peoples are entitled to. States do not have the right to govern a group against their will. In the Charter of the UN it is mentioned as one of the founding principles. This is important because it means that all states agree it is an idea they support.

Self-determination is largely a product of colonialism. From the 16th to 20th century many empires took over lands and controlled them. They did not care what the people living there wanted and they rarely asked or involved them in decision-making. Now, we see how this was an attack on the human rights of people living there. All people should

have the right to choose their government.

From 1946 to 1960, 37 new countries were created from lands that were once under colonial powers. When the Soviet Union ended in 1991, 25 regions asked for the right for self-determination. Many of these regions become countries. Some of these regions asked for more rights or powers in the new countries created. Others are still trying to become independent countries.

There are more ethnic and cultural groups in the world than there are countries. If every group wanted their own country there would be thousands of countries in the world! Imagine how much the UN would need to expand! However, most peoples do not want to have their own country. Most minority groups just want to be respected and have their beliefs and culture protected. However, some groups do not want anything less than their own country.

Self-determination is a complicated subject for countries. Of course, states believe that all people have the right to choose their government – most modern countries were created when the people living inside them did not like their government anymore. China, the US, and Haiti all had revolutions. These countries believe these revolutions were the will of the people living there. Therefore, how can they be upset if other groups around the world want to self-determine?

However, self-determination means a part of a country might leave and become its own country. They could take resources, important people and jobs with them if they left. In order to keep them in the country, a state might give minority groups or regions special protections for their language or culture. States need to balance support for self-determination with what is in their best interests. They do not want to give up their sovereignty (highest power) or territorial integrity (how much land they have).

Another problem with self-determination is that there is no definition for peoples. Does language make a people? Does a shared culture? Does religion? What about political ideas? This term is not defined in international law and so it is difficult to know what groups are allowed to define themselves as “a people”. When a group comes together and says they are a group is that enough? The international community is still considering this question.

A stateless nation is an ethnic group that identifies as a people and do not have a country. Some of these groups are the Kurds (Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey), Catalonians (Spain and France), and Tibetan people (China). Some stateless nations used to have a country and then lost it when another country invaded. Or, they never had a country but their culture unites them.

One of the most controversial self-determination issues deals with the Palestinian people. In 1947, Jewish groups and Arab groups were living in Mandatory Palestine which was under the control of the British. Both groups wanted their own country. The international community decided the best thing to do was to divide the place in two: one country for Jewish people (Israel) and one for the Arab people (Palestine). In 1948, when the British army left, Arab countries around Israel attacked. Israel gained 60% of the land that was supposed to be for the Palestinian state. Today, (70 years later) Israel still occupies parts of Palestine. The Palestinian people have been fighting for the right of self-determination for a long time.

A more recent self-determination problem happened with Catalonia. Catalonia is a region of Spain that is autonomous (they are free to govern themselves). In 2017, the Catalan parliament had a vote to see if the people of Catalonia wanted to start their own country. The vote was declared illegal by the Spanish government. However, 92% of the people who voted wanted Catalonia to be independent. But, only 43% of the population showed up to vote and there were a lot of protests and police actions which disrupted the vote. Still, Catalonia said it was independent. The Spanish government took control of Catalonia. The international community supported Spain and said it was an internal Spanish matter. Members of Catalan parliament were jailed and charged with rebellion.

Self-determination is a right that all peoples have. It means people have the right to choose their government. However, groups need to work using the laws of the country they are in as best they can.

The United Nations Charter

This is the document outlining how the UN works. Article 1 says their goal is “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.”

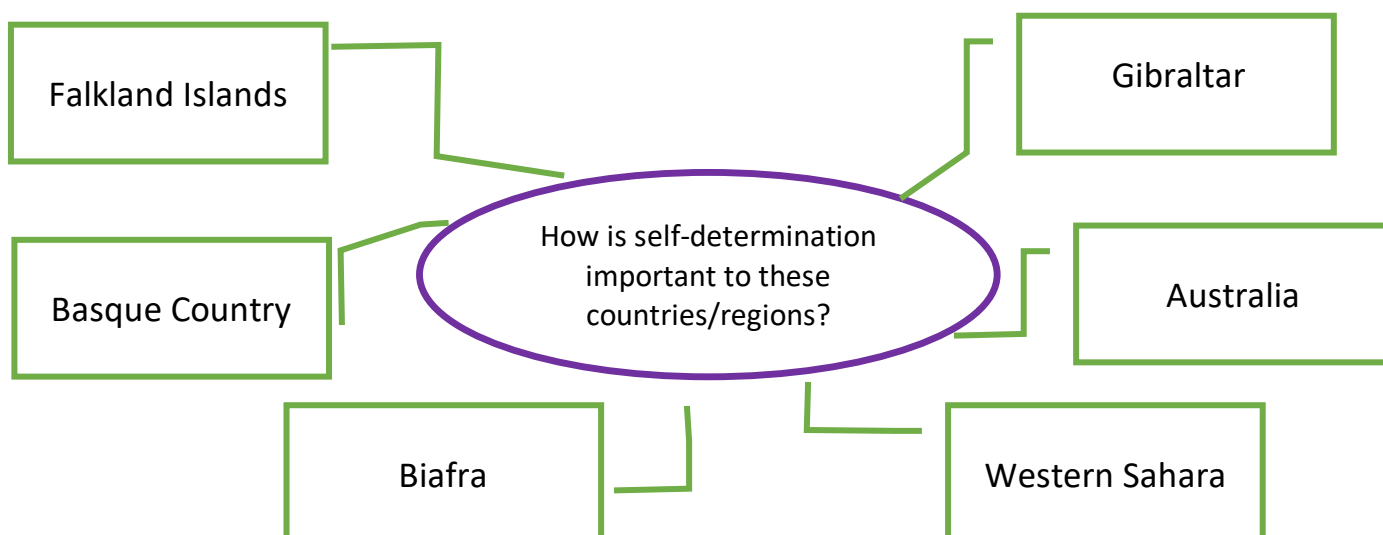
Universal Declaration of Human Rights

This was adopted by the UN in 1948. It outlines all the rights most states agree people should have. Article 15 states that everyone has the right to a nationality and that no one should be arbitrarily deprived of a nationality or denied the right to change nationality. This could refer to self-determination.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

This is a treaty that was adopted by the UN in 1966. It asks all countries to respect the rights of their people. Article 1 reads: "All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. "

Self-Determination: Countries and Regions



Research Questions

1. How did your state become a country? Did it need a revolution? Was there a vote? How did the people self-determine that they wanted to make their own country?
2. Do you think countries could come up with an agreement on how to define the word "peoples"? How would your country define it?
3. The international community supports self-determination a lot more in cases where a country (or region) has been invaded or taken over by another country. Why do you think in these types of situations self-determination is easier to support?
4. How are human rights related to why a people might want use their right to self-determination?
5. Many governments have laws preventing regions from leaving the state. Is this fair? Why or why not?
6. Why is violence often a problem when it comes to self-determination?
7. After World War II there was a major push to allow colonies to self-determine to become countries. Why was this an important goal?
8. Does the problem exist in your community?
9. Who is working on it? NGOs, not for profits, other groups or individuals?
10. Knowing about this problem, how does it impact your world view?
11. How could you make an impact on this issue through your life choices?

Resources

Source / Title	Hyperlink	How is it helpful?
<i>Nationalia</i>	https://www.nationalia.info/new/10936/ten-countries-that-grant-the-right-to-independence-to-some-of-their-territories-and-france	An article about countries that allow their regions to separate. Please note, this newspaper is slightly biased as it supports Catalan's independence from Spain. Great learning opportunity!
<i>United Nations Meeting</i>	https://www.un.org/press/en/2013/gashc4085.doc.htm	An overview of a UN meeting where they talked about the topic.
<i>Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations</i>	http://unpo.org/	A website of a group that works to highlight the problems faced by minorities.
<i>Ethnicities of the World</i>	http://worldmap.harvard.edu/maps/1894	A map of the world showing all the world's different ethnicities.
<i>Minority Rights Group International</i>	http://minorityrights.org/	An organization that tries to highlight the voices of minority groups around the world.
<i>New York Times</i>	https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/world/africa/10sudan.html	A news story about South Sudan having a referendum to start a new country.
<i>United Nations News</i>	https://news.un.org/en/story/2010/02/328262	A news story about Western Sahara and their quest to become independent.
<i>The Guardian</i>	https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/23/we-need-to-understand-why-catalonia-lombardy-scotland-are-reposing-question-of-self-determination	Opinion piece on why many regions want to create their own countries.
<i>The Independent</i>	https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/catalan-carles-puigdemont-spain-germany-arrest-leaders-a8455206.html	An article about what is happening with the organizers of Catalan's independence movement.