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UN Specialized Agencies: Mandates and Headquarters

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UN Specialized Agencies: Mandates and Headquarters

One UN agency is 80 years older than the UN itself. The International Telecommunication Union dates to 1865. Today the UN family has 15 specialized agencies. Each has its own members, budget and headquarters. This lesson gives you a quick map of who sits where, and what each one does.

> At a Glance
>
> Four facts to hold on to.
>
> 01
> 15
>
> Specialized agencies in the UN system.
>
> 02
> 5
>
> Agencies with headquarters in Geneva.
>
> 03
> 1865
>
> Year the ITU began, the oldest of all.
>
> 04
> 2
>
> Agencies based in Rome: FAO and IFAD.

Specialized agency An independent body linked to the UN by a special agreement.

Programme or fundA UN body set up by the Assembly, like UNICEF. It is not a specialized agency.
Bretton Woods The IMF and World Bank, born at a 1944 conference.
HQThe headquarters city, a favourite exam question.

Part 1: The big picture

Must Know

What is a specialized agency?

- A specialized agency is an international body with its own treaty, members, budget and staff.
- It is linked to the UN through a special agreement. The UN Economic and Social Council manages that link.
- The UN counts 15 of them. Each handles one field, such as health, work, farming, flying or post. (Source: Wikipedia: Specialized agencies of the UN)

Older than the UN

- Several agencies existed long before 1945.
- The ITU is the oldest, founded in 1865 to link telegraph networks.
- The UPU followed in 1874. The ILO came in 1919.
- They joined the UN family later, by agreement.

Remember: 15 agencies. Oldest: ITU (1865, Geneva). Then UPU (1874, Bern), ILO (1919, Geneva).

> **Quick check 1.** The ITU is older than the United Nations. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Part 2: The well-known agencies

Good to Know

Geneva, Paris, Rome and others

- **WHO** sits in Geneva. It began work in 1948 and leads global public health.
- **UNESCO** sits in Paris. It works on education, science and culture. Its constitution was signed in 1945 and took effect in 1946.
- **ILO** sits in Geneva. Founded in 1919, it sets labour standards.
- **FAO** sits in Rome. Founded in 1945, it fights hunger.
- **ICAO** sits in Montreal. Its Chicago Convention is from 1944, and it began work in 1947. It sets aviation standards.
- **IMO** sits in London. Its convention dates to 1948. It came into force in 1958. It covers shipping safety and ocean pollution. (Source: Wikipedia: Specialized agencies of the UN)

Why dates look confusing

- A treaty may be signed in one year and start working in another.
- Exams usually ask for the founding year in the textbook. When in doubt, check the question's wording.
- Rule of thumb: ICAO is 1944 (convention) or 1947 (agency). IMO is 1948 (convention) or 1958 (in force).

> **Quick check 2.** ICAO has its headquarters in Geneva. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Part 3: The rest of the list

Great to Know

More headquarters to remember

- **UPU**, Bern. It coordinates international post. Founded in 1874.
- **ITU**, Geneva. It sets telecom standards and shares radio spectrum.
- **WIPO**, Geneva. It protects intellectual property. Founded in 1967.
- **WMO**, Geneva. It covers weather and climate. Founded in 1950.
- **IFAD**, Rome. It fights rural poverty. Founded in 1977.
- **UNIDO**, Vienna. It backs industrial growth. Founded in 1966, it became a specialized agency in 1985.
- **UN Tourism**, Madrid. It was earlier called the UN World Tourism Organization.
- **IMF** and **World Bank Group**, both in Washington, D.C. Both date to 1945. (Source: Wikipedia: Specialized agencies of the UN)

Clusters

- Geneva hosts five: WHO, ILO, ITU, WIPO and WMO.

- Rome hosts two: FAO and IFAD. The World Food Programme is also in Rome, but it is a UN programme, not an agency.
- Washington hosts two: the IMF and the World Bank Group.
- The other six sit alone: Paris, Montreal, London, Bern, Vienna and Madrid.

Trap: agency or not?

- UNICEF, UNDP, WFP and UNOPS are not specialized agencies. They are funds, programmes or subsidiary bodies of the UN.
- Agencies mostly run on member dues. Programmes and funds mostly run on voluntary gifts.
- See IntlRel0104 — UNOPS and UN Funds, Programmes and Subsidiary Bodies.
- The IMF and the World Bank are agencies too. See IntlRel0019 — International Organisations (UN System, WTO, IMF, World Bank).

Exam Edge

Previous Year Questions

The WMO headquarters has been asked directly.

> **Think it through: Why do so many agencies sit in Geneva?**
>
> Switzerland has long been neutral and hosts the old League of Nations buildings. Many bodies settled there early. Rome is the second cluster, for food and farming.

Quick Q&A

Which agency is oldest?

ITU, 1865.

Where is ICAO?

Montreal.

How many agencies sit in Geneva?

Five: WHO, ILO, ITU, WIPO, WMO.

Which two sit in Rome?

FAO and IFAD.

Is UNICEF a specialized agency?

No. It is a UN fund.

Practice: UN Specialized Agencies

8 verified questions from this topic.

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IntlRel0009 — The United Nations: Principal Organs and Related Bodies

IntlRel0019 — International Organisations (UN System, WTO, IMF, World Bank)

GK0065 — UNESCO World Heritage Sites of India

Practice MCQs

1. Among the UN's 15 specialized agencies, which one is the oldest, founded in 1865, well before the UN itself?

A. ILO

B. ITU

C. UPU

D. WHO

See answer ↓

2. Which UN specialized agency, founded in 1919, sets international labour standards and is headquartered in Geneva?

A. UNESCO

B. FAO

C. ILO

D. UNIDO

See answer ↓

3. Which UN specialized agency, headquartered in Montreal, was founded in 1944 to set global civil aviation standards?

A. UPU

B. WIPO

C. IMO

D. ICAO

See answer ↓

4. Geneva alone hosts five of the UN's specialized agencies.

Which of the following is NOT one of the five headquartered there?

A. WHO

B. WIPO

C. UNIDO

D. WMO

See answer ↓

5. Where is the headquarters of the World Meteorological Organisation?

A. Geneva

B. Washington

C. London

D. Moscow

See answer ↓

6. The World Food Programme (WFP), the world's largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger, shares its host city with which two UN specialized agencies?

A. WHO and WIPO, in Geneva

B. UNIDO and UNESCO, in Vienna and Paris

C. FAO and IFAD, in Rome

D. ICAO and UPU, in Montreal and Bern

See answer ↓

7. How do the UN's specialized agencies, like the World Health Organization or UNESCO, relate to the UN's political organs?

A. Only the Security Council has any technical mandate within the UN system

B. Specialized agencies have no connection whatsoever to the United Nations

C. Each has its own specific technical mandate, distinct from the UN's political organs

D. They are identical in function and mandate to the UN's political organs

See answer ↓

8. UN programmes and funds, unlike specialized agencies, are funded mainly through which type of contribution?

A. Voluntary contributions from member states

B. Private corporate donations

C. Loans from the World Bank

D. Assessed, mandatory contributions only

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) was founded in 1865, making it the oldest UN specialized agency. It is headquartered in Geneva. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The International Labour Organization (ILO) was founded in 1919 and sets international labour standards. It is headquartered in Geneva. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) was founded in 1944 and is headquartered in Montreal. It sets global aviation standards. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** Geneva hosts WHO, ILO, ITU, WIPO, and WMO. UNIDO, by contrast, is headquartered in Vienna, not Geneva. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The WMO, a UN specialised agency, coordinates global weather, climate, and water-resource data. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** WFP is headquartered in Rome, alongside the specialized agencies FAO and IFAD. All three focus on food, agriculture, or rural development. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** The UN's specialized agencies, like the World Health Organization or UNESCO, each have their own specific technical mandate. This is distinct from the UN's political organs. ↑ Q7
8. **A.** UN programmes and funds are financed through voluntary contributions from member states, not assessed dues. This is a key distinction from specialized agencies, which get both voluntary and assessed funding. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2

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