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Consideration of a statement of ethics for endorsement by the global geospatial information community

Consideration of a statement of ethics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present paper contains the report for consideration on the start of a process to draft a statement of ethics for the global geospatial information community.¹ The report highlights that, in various intergovernmental discussions, the need for a statement of ethics and supporting code of conduct for the global geospatial information community has been raised as an important means to enhance the trust placed by the public on geospatial information. In addition, with the development of emerging practices such as crowdsourcing and volunteered information, there are acknowledged gaps in the legal and institutional frameworks that provide effective regulation or guidance for the capture, use and dissemination of geospatial information, which a statement of ethics will help to fill. The report provides examples of ethical standards and codes of conduct that currently exist in some related disciplines. It proposes a number of key elements that would need to be discussed and agreed upon by the geospatial information community. The Committee is invited to consider the need for a statement of ethics for the global geospatial information community and express its views on the process of its formulation.

* E/C.20/2012/1.

¹ The full report is available in the language of submission only from http://ggim.un.org/ggim_committee.html.

I. Introduction

1. The notion of developing a ‘statement of ethics’ and supporting code of conduct for the global geospatial information profession was first raised during the first High Level Forum on GGIM in Seoul in 2011 and at the first session of the UN Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management. It was further discussed at the International Symposium on Spatially Enabled Government and Society in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in February 2012, and the UN-GGIM Hangzhou Forum in China in May 2012. Additionally, the need for a statement of ethics was also raised as a substantive geospatial issue through the UN-GGIM Working Group on Inventory of Issues.

2. There was a general consensus that the geospatial information community should address the issue of ‘ethics’ in a coherent manner and evolve a statement providing principles on ethical behaviors for the profession in the production, processing, analyzing and dissemination of geospatial information. This was seen as being especially important as mobile devices, crowd sourcing, volunteered geographic information, and open data become a growing means of acquiring geospatial information via non-traditional methods. A statement of ethics will provide guiding principles for all practitioners in geospatial information in their endeavors.

3. The present report provides considerations for the need of drafting a statement of ethics for endorsement by the global geospatial information community. The Committee is requested to express its views and discuss the process of its formulation. Points for discussion and decision are provided in paragraph 14.

II. Consideration of a Statement of Ethics

4. There are no established overarching ethical guidelines or codes of conduct within the global geospatial information community to provide assurances to professional practices to enhance the trust placed by the public on geospatial information. With the development of practices such as crowd sourcing and volunteered information, there are acknowledged gaps in the current legal and social frameworks to provide effective regulation or guidance for the capture, use, and dissemination of much of this new geospatial information. Many ethical issues remain unresolved while technology, applications, location intelligence, private citizen engagement, the open data movement, and the generation of geospatial information continue to grow at rapid rates.

5. When considering a statement of ethics, it is understood that ‘ethics’ refers to principles of human values, morals, and approved behaviors in society. In its simplest form ethics concerns itself with questions such as when is an action right or wrong and what standards separate good from bad. By behaving ethically, one accepts the basic belief that reason and logic are the authority invoked for ‘good’ and that moral behavior implies civic responsibility by citizens towards each other and to society as a whole. Ultimately, when the law fails, it is ethics that may prevent any harm to society.

6. Several professional, industry bodies and associations already abide by ethical statements or principles, while some have also developed codes of conduct, primarily because their members require a professional qualification

and/or minimum practice requirements as pre-requisites to membership. Hence, a number of ethical principles and guidelines and/or codes of conduct can be leveraged and built upon. Examples of these efforts are summarized in the following paragraphs:

7. **International Federation of Surveyors (FIG).** The Statement of Ethical Principles adopted by FIG emphasizes the need for integrity; independence; care and competence; and a sense of duty as ethical principles. Model codes of professional conduct include: exercising independent professional judgment; acting competently; participating in continuing professional development; understanding fundamental principles when working in new areas of expertise; and not accepting assignments beyond their resources to complete reasonably and professionally.

8. **Council of European Geodetic Surveyors (CLGE).** The Code of Conduct for European Surveyors comprises 7 Articles, is principles-based, and is issued with a view to ensuring the highest quality services, to promoting higher levels of confidence in the relationship between European Surveyors and consumers, and to enhancing the image of the profession within Europe. It reinforces and clarifies the highest standard of professional behavior among European Surveyors.

9. **GIS Certification Institute (GISCI).** GISCI manages a certification program for GIS professional where the candidates must meet the minimum standards for ethical conduct and professional practice as established by the GISCI. A 2-part process, the Rules of Conduct relate to ‘obligations’ to society; employers and funders; colleagues and the profession; and to individuals in society. The Code of Ethics then provides a basis for evaluating a professional’s work from an ethical point of view against each of the obligations. Criteria include: quality work; professional relationships; respecting the work of others; contributing to the discipline; respecting privacy of data; and respecting individuals.

10. **Surveying and Spatial Sciences Institute (SSSI).** The SSSI (Australia and New Zealand) has taken the GISCI Rules of Conduct and Code of Ethics and replicated them as GISP-AP Code of Ethics and Rules of Conduct for the geospatial industry in the Asia-Pacific region.

11. **Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC).** The OGC Principles of Conduct provide principles on how participants should conduct themselves within the OGC processes, and govern personal and public interactions in any OGC activity. The principles include: extend respect and courtesy; develop and test ideas impartially; think globally, devising solutions that meet the needs of diverse environments; and be prepared to contribute to the ongoing work of the membership and the organization. They emphasize the value of mutual respect and stress the broad applicability of the work.

12. **Global Statistical Community.** The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics were created as a key part of the transformation process in redefining the role of official statistics in the early 1990s, as well making it clear to governments and other users of statistics that a good system of official statistics must meet certain general criteria. The 10 principles are transmitted under the following headings: relevance, impartiality and equal access; professionalism; accountability; prevention of misuse; cost-effectiveness; confidentiality;

legislation; national co-ordination; international co-ordination; and international statistical co-operation. These principles are universally subscribed by countries and are the basis for European Codes of Conduct in official statistics and various peer review mechanisms.

13. In evolving a statement of ethics for the global geospatial information community, key principles or common elements would need to be identified and agreed upon. Drawing upon existing efforts in ethical standards, some of the elements that have been expressed and debated in recent discussions include:

- (a) Being objective, science-based, and independent;
- (b) Servicing the public good, societal development and user requirement;
- (c) Ensuring non-discriminatory and transparent processes;
- (d) Maintaining confidentiality of data and appropriate access rules; and
- (e) Striving for quality; integrity; and cooperation at all levels.

III. Points for discussion and decision

14. The Committee may wish to:

- (a) **Consider the need for a statement of ethics and supporting code of conduct for the global geospatial information community;**
- (b) **Agree to initiate the drafting of a statement of ethics through an inclusive process; and**
- (c) **Provide guidance on the consultation process in the formulation of the statement of ethics.**