
Economic and Social Council

31 July 2016

Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management

Sixth session

New York, 3-5 August 2016

Item 14 of the provisional agenda*

Review of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management

Review of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

The present paper contains the report of the Secretariat on its review of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management for consideration by the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management.

At its fifth session, held in New York from 5 to 7 August 2015, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 5/110, in which it took note of the report on the coordination of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management, noted the many valuable initiatives undertaken throughout the United Nations system, but expressed some concern that they should be sustainable and not appear to be fragmented. The Committee called for a report documenting the geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements of the United Nations system in a systematic manner and invited the Secretariat to work closely with the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group to reach out to relevant United Nations partners to assist in the preparation of the report. This reports describes what progress has been made in this regard.

I. Introduction

1. At its fifth session, held in New York from 5 to 7 August 2015, the Secretariat noted the Committee's decision 5/110 regarding the coordination of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management, in particular: (i) its request to provide a report documenting the existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements of the United Nations system in a systematic manner; (ii) its request to review existing United Nations coordination frameworks and the need for support from senior management to ensure effective cooperation, including the elaboration of a proposal for a more structured coordination mechanism; and (iii) its emphasis on the fact that the sessions of the Committee of Experts are indeed an appropriate platform to address coordination issues.

2. The current report presents the Committee with an update on relevant activities of the United Nations in the area of geospatial information, especially referring to activities of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) and the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG). It furthermore outlines the initiatives undertaken by the Secretariat towards preparing a more comprehensive analytical report, as requested by the Committee. The Committee of Experts is invited to take note of the report and to express its views on the way forward regarding the coordination of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management. Points for discussion and decision are provided in paragraph 11.

II. Activities related to geospatial information management

3. In response to the request to provide a report documenting the existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements of the United Nations system in a systematic manner, the Secretariat has initiated a United Nations System-wide consultation in the form of a questionnaire with a view to constitute a directory of organizations within the United Nations System with specific mandates on geospatial information, field of activity or work programme. This has been initiated in a similar manner to that of the Directory of Statistical Organizations (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/accsub-public/directory.htm>.) drawing from experiences of the Statistics Commission for the Coordination of Statistical Activities from the statistical community. The Secretariat is currently awaiting inputs from the agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations System to provide information on their geospatial resources, activities and governance. The Secretariat will provide an oral update to the Committee on the initial findings of the survey. It is then suggested that the more comprehensive report on the findings of the survey be presented to the Bureau later this year.

4. With respect to United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), reference is made to the report submitted for the fifth session (E/C.20/2015/12/Add.1) which provided an extensive overview on the creation, structure, objectives and work of the Group. Over the past year the Group has engaged in an in-depth review of its working methods and in a debate how to strengthen its substantive relationship with the Committee. This is expected to lead to concrete proposals for consideration of the 11th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which will be held in August 2017.

5. The twenty-ninth Session of UNGEGN was held in Bangkok from 25 to 29 April, 2016. 180 experts from 22 of 24 linguistic/geographical divisions and 49 Member States discussed 85 working papers and six special presentations. Seventeen decisions were adopted and these were brought to the attention of the United Nations Economic and Social Council in July 2016. Some of the decisions were:- 29/101(d) encouraging the Bureau to elaborate in a transparent and consultative manner with all Member States specific proposals for review and

possible adoption by the 11th Conference in 2017, taking into consideration the review of the periodicity and length of Conferences and UNGEGN sessions, the articulation of the business case and a long-term vision for UNGEGN, as well as the definition of the relationship with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM); 29/107(e) encouraging the production of an advance toponymy manual consisting of 44 themes to be made freely available on the UNGEGN website in 2017; 29/108(f) the importance of establishing and providing standardized geographical names as an essential part of geospatial information management, as recognized by the UN-GGIM; and 29/108(g) noting the potential of geospatial data (including standardized geographical names) in supporting the geospatial dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

6. As part of its efforts to increase the awareness of geographical names standardization the 29th Session was convened for the first time in Asia with the proceedings streamed live on the [United Nations Statistics Division's YouTube channel](#). These initiatives were welcomed by experts who were unable to attend the session. Additional information and consultative efforts on the modernization of the Group's working methods and strengthening of its substantive relationship with UN-GGIM included presentations delivered by the Director of Statistics Division, [The Power of Place and Place Names](#) and Chair of UNGEGN during the 29th Session ([WP67/2](#)).

7. Other efforts conducted in the past year to increase UNGEGN's visibility and awareness, and also keep the geographical names community informed on local, regional and global names standardization activities, were the preparation and posting online of two issues of the UNGEGN Bulletin, in [November 2015](#) and [June 2016](#). Additionally, the twitter account @UNSD_GEGN was created. The UNGEGN Secretariat continues to maintain and support the Geographical Names Database that is updated quarterly. As at 7 April 2016 the database had 6,203 geographical names, consisting of 193 countries and 3,430 cities.

8. The 30th Session of UNGEGN will be convened on 7 and 18 August 2017, while the 11th UNCSGN will be convened from 8 to 17 August 2017 in New York. The fact that the UNGEGN events will be held back-to-back with the 7th session of UN-GGIM, provides a unique opportunity for further dialogue.

9. In the area of inter-agency cooperation of entities within the wider UN System, the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG) is the only currently existing mechanism. It was created in 2000 as a voluntary network of United Nations professionals working in the fields of cartography and geographic information science. UNGIWG addresses common geospatial issues that affect the work of United Nations Organizations. Current Co-chairs for the Working Group are the Department of Safety and Security (DSS) and the Office for Outer Space Affairs (UN-OOSA) of the United Nations Secretariat.

10. Already as part of the conclusions of the GGIM Programme Review (E/2016/47, para 35), it was noted that although there is continued expectation for United Nations activities on geospatial information management to increase collaborative efforts, many coordination activities are being carried out on a 'best efforts' basis by the geospatial practitioners who have been engaged through UNGIWG. Recently, there have, unfortunately, been delays in the issuance of the meeting report for the 15th session of the UNGIWG meeting. It appears, therefore, at this point that the current informal collaborative mechanisms would benefit from an extensive review. The objective of such a review would be to identify good past practices and build on them, whilst defining a UN internal coordination mechanism for the future, which is adequate for the new global challenges ahead. This will require attention at the senior management level of the United Nations.

III. Points for discussion

11. The Committee is invited to:

- (a) Take note of the report by the Secretariat;**
- (b) Express its views on how a sustainable coordination mechanism can be established in the United Nations on geospatial information management.**