

# Relationship of UNGEGN with UN-GGIM – “Building bridges”

## UNEGN Bureau’s proposal for a cooperation model

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### 1. The genesis of UNGEGN and UN-GGIM

Geographical names form a core theme in any geospatial data set. The geographical names theme has a direct relationship with all other data layers (perhaps with the exception of imagery) that constitute fundamental themes. However, its value is often not well recognized, perhaps because the accuracy and validity of geographical names is easily taken for granted, being frequently used in daily conversation when referring to where an event occurred or a destination. It is therefore desirable that geographical names receive heightened recognition as a common and standardized reference framework essential for all fundamental data layers, used in the same way throughout the global community and contributing to national development by improving the exchange of information.

Geographical names provide orientation and identity to a place; they are unique location identifiers for features and places of the real world and provide a link to cultural, social and historical heritage. They may be used together with appropriate information like maps, charts and gazetteers, as well as their respective data services. Gazetteers and gazetteer services associate the names with corresponding real world objects – or locations – by means of coordinates, feature types, authority, stories and other attributes.

Since it was established in 1946, the United Nations has addressed the need for geographical names standardization. This was initially from a cartographic point of view, but more recently also from a database and infrastructure standpoint, as well as reflecting cultural heritage and language issues. Geographical names standardization is acknowledged as a key element of the communication and administration needed to enable the United Nations to become the world’s most effective voice for international cooperation on behalf of peace, development, human rights and the environment.

The [United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names \(UNEGN\)](#) notes that, since its inception in 1959, multiple names or forms have often been in use, unless countries have a program in place to process geographical names towards a common understanding of spelling, application, feature type and extent, and freely disseminate this information. Equally, misinterpretation of the application of the name to the landscape can occur<sup>1</sup>. The functions of geographical names (orientation, identity, cultural social and historical heritage,...) can lead to a natural complexity (multiple names, languages, transliteration/transcription, political correctness, ...) and thus require an interdisciplinary approach. A series of meetings, debates and recommendations on this subject led to the formation of the UNGEGN and, since 1967, the holding of the quinquennial United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN). Through its specialist Working Groups, Divisions and Task Teams, UNGEGN facilitates the development and dissemination of principles, policies and procedures suitable for resolving the challenges of consistency in the authorization and use of geographical names. By helping to establish standardization guidelines, including through making recommendations on other matters such as the systematic transfer between writing systems, and by encouraging individual UN Member States to provide officially approved names, the United Nations aims to enhance the creation of usable and consistent written forms of geographical names throughout the world.

The United Nations [Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management \(UN-GGIM\)](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Such as names with a ‘false generic’ where the name’s meaning does not correlate to the feature type; an example is the city of Rocky Mount in North Carolina, United States of America.

was established by ECOSOC in July 2011 as the apex intergovernmental mechanism for making joint decisions and setting directions on the production and use of geospatial information within national and global policy frameworks, and to promote its use to address key global challenges.

Acknowledging UN-GGIM's provision of an effective forum to liaise and coordinate among the United Nations, its Member States, and between Member States and international organizations, ECOSOC broadened and strengthened the mandate of the Committee in July 2016 when it adopted resolution 2016/27 entitled 'Strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management'.

This resolution acknowledges the considerable achievements of UN-GGIM, producing key tangible outputs, and explicitly recognizes the relevance of geospatial information for the various United Nations policy agendas. Consequently, the Committee is well placed to continue to contribute even more to the work of the United Nations, especially in the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The establishment of a strong and operational regional infrastructure, composed of the five regional technical geospatial information committees that report to UN-GGIM, recognize and encapsulate the importance of strengthening coordination, capacity building on Geospatial Information-related issues, including Geographical Names, and the integration of statistical and geospatial information in support of SDGs and coherence of global geospatial information management, especially in developing countries. Noting the increased role and relevance, and efforts in streamlining, ECOSOC requested that UN-GGIM report back to the Council within 5 years on the implementation of the resolution and to examine the further strengthening of the Committee's institutional arrangements.

## 2. The essence of a relationship

In both communities, UNGEGN and UN-GGIM, geographic information, as an underpinning enabling infrastructure, is used in general or with a distinct relation to geographical names. Even though the similar terms "geographical" and "geospatial" are found in the titles of the two organizations, the formal interaction between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM thus far has been limited, and the potential for sharing work, avoiding overlap, and agreeing areas of common interest has not yet been realized.

UNEGN was established to support the objectives of worldwide national and international geographical names standardization by providing a sound theoretical, multidisciplinary base and continuously guiding and facilitating processes of standardization around the globe. Geographical names – from both a technical and a cultural viewpoint – are the primary focus of attention of UNGEGN, while from the viewpoint of UN-GGIM geographical names are one of the core fundamental data themes (albeit an important one) that enable a nation's national spatial data infrastructure to be developed and implemented. Furthermore, a number of resolutions address geographical names, or 'toponymy', as part of a nation's cultural heritage and emphasize the necessity to preserve toponymic heritage. The cultural viewpoint must, especially from the UN perspective and particularly in connection with peace keeping and conflict prevention, not be regarded as secondary, since it is this viewpoint which demonstrates the symbolic power of geographical names, their ability to distinguish between "ours" and "theirs" and their potential to be indicators and even causes of political conflict. Another aspect relevant in this context is toponymy's role in preserving the intangible cultural heritage, to which UNESCO has committed itself.

UN-GGIM is mandated, among other tasks, to provide a platform for the development of effective strategies on how to build and strengthen national capacity on geospatial information, as well as disseminating best practices and experiences of national, regional and international bodies on geospatial information related to legal instruments, management models, technical standards, methodologies and norms.

From a spatial data infrastructure or database point of view, the connection with a geographical object is only one of many attributes to the entity 'name'. The same geographical object may be described by

many different names in different languages, each one of which may again be pronounced, transcribed, transliterated or otherwise rendered graphically in different ways, which may or may not be considered 'official'. The opportunity to discuss and learn from differences between countries is a prime benefit to UNGEGN members. UNGEGN assists with support, training programs, and general advice for any country wishing to implement or improve its geographical names standardization program as an essential part of national spatial data infrastructures, leading to a significant improvement in this portion of the geospatial data management framework and its fundamental data themes promoted by UN-GGIM.

It has been recognized by the UN Statistics Division that UNGEGN and UN-GGIM should continue to operate and function as distinct bodies on account of their unique and specific roles. Many of the objectives and activities of UNGEGN are not included in the broader substantive, high level and policy-related elements of the UN-GGIM agenda. This is due in part to the lack of technical, interdisciplinary expertise and depth of professional knowledge required in such a specialized field, but also because it is widely understood that UNGEGN has competently and successfully fulfilled this role for decades. For these reasons, including the complementary nature of each community, a dedicated UNGEGN is indispensable alongside a well-functioning UN-GGIM; the effectiveness of the latter should not be impeded by the technical diversity (including occasional political sensitivities) of developments in the field of geographical names. Similarly, UNGEGN must give practical effect to the data objectives of the UN-GGIM, to ensure the success of both bodies.

### 3. The common principles

UNEGN and UN-GGIM agree to the following common principles<sup>2</sup>:

1. UNGEGN and UN-GGIM recognize that geographical names are an essential part of geospatial information management and its fundamental data themes.
2. UNGEGN recognizes that UN-GGIM has the mandate to provide a strategic assessment of geospatial information needs and will support UN-GGIM recommendations to meet mutual goals.
3. UNGEGN accepts strategic directions related to geospatial information management that flow from UN-GGIM, and UNGEGN will internalize and promote these directions as they apply to geographical names, encouraging countries and agencies within countries, as required, to meet the strategic initiatives.
4. UN-GGIM will support UNGEGN in communicating and promoting the essential role of geographical names in the overall geospatial information environment and the benefits of countries establishing a process for geographical names standardization management in line with UNGEGN guidelines and recommendations.
5. UNGEGN and UN-GGIM will continue to operate and function as distinct bodies. A dedicated UNGEGN is indispensable alongside a well-functioning UN-GGIM.
6. UNGEGN and UN-GGIM will communicate and collaborate with each other on a regular and ongoing basis.

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<sup>2</sup> Noting the currently still different but complementary roles and mandates of each United Nations mechanism reporting to ECOSOC, productive discussions between the UN-GGIM Bureau and UNGEGN Bureau are at present evaluating how the UNGEGN meeting rhythm can be better streamlined and incorporated into the global architecture in the interests of better collaboration and cooperation for Member States.

#### 4. The proposal for a cooperation model

As UNGEGN's activities and achievements are clearly relevant to the work of UN-GGIM, it is of unquestionable importance to establish and strengthen close contacts and cooperation between both groups. It is felt that this should be practicable as both operate under the umbrella of UN Statistics Division as Secretariat, and ECOSOC as a reporting means to Member States.

Synergies between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM can be forged if the same members or institutions/organizations actively participate in both bodies. Currently, this is happening in only a limited number of countries. In the majority of countries, the communication and cooperation mechanisms between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM representatives have not yet been well-established.<sup>3</sup>

ECOSOC resolution E/RES/2016/27 entitled "Strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management" and adopted on 27th July 2016, has decided to change the title of ECOSOC's item on 'Cartography' to 'Geospatial Information' and invites thereunder UNGEGN (and the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names) to continue to report on 'geographical names' and UN-GGIM to report on all [other]<sup>4</sup> matters relating to geography, geospatial information and related topics.

The following cooperation model is proposed, which is based mainly on exchange of knowledge and communication in order to bring UNGEGN and UN-GGIM closer together and better represent Member States.

It should be acknowledged that this model is a proposal, and that it is understood that national circumstances will necessarily mean significant differences in the realization of some of the elements of the model. It is felt that the member state-level activities should be the core of any relationship-building between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM.

##### 4.1. On a global level

Bodies to cooperate	How could this cooperation be established or strengthened?
Member State (representatives) in UNGEGN and UN-GGIM Committee of Experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Coordinate and/or inform each other about projects on the use or publication of geospatial information (including geographical names), e.g. publication of geographical names databases using linked data methods</li><li>- Represent UNGEGN and UN-GGIM at each others' meetings/sessions</li><li>- Circulate resolutions/decisions adopted at all meetings of UNGEGN and UN-GGIM</li></ul>

<sup>3</sup> One example for a solid and effective communication and cooperation between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM representatives is provided by Germany, as both activities are undertaken by the same organization.

<sup>4</sup> This word does not appear in the Resolution's text, but has been inserted here to represent UNGEGN's understanding of the statement.

Administration of UNGEGN and UN-GGIM Secretariats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invite UNGEGN Bureau and UN-GGIM Bureau to conduct joint web conferences twice a year</li> <li>- Invite UNGEGN and UN-GGIM chair(s) on an ad hoc basis to join Extended Bureau meetings depending on the topics to be discussed</li> <li>- Program Joint Bureau meeting and/or joint event for GGIM-7 and the 11th UNCSGN and for following events</li> <li>- Introduce a standing agenda item/report to UNGEGN and UN-GGIM to be delivered at each others' meetings/sessions</li> <li>- Circulate information on both bodies to the Bureaus and WG Convenors regularly</li> <li>- Arrange joint actions at each of the meetings (and holding more back-to-back sessions could be considered, if the meetings/sessions are arranged at UN HQ NY)</li> <li>- Identify key areas and challenges for UNGEGN and UN-GGIM</li> </ul>
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#### 4.2. On a regional level

Bodies to cooperate	How could this cooperation be established or strengthened?
Member State (representatives) in UNGEGN and UN-GGIM Regional Committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Promote the invitation of UNGEGN Experts from the respective region (Africa, America, Arab States, Asia-Pacific, Europe) to annual UN-GGIM Regional Committee Meetings</li> <li>- Invite WG Convenors located in the respective regions to UN-GGIM Regional Committee Meetings and to UN-GGIM Regional Working Group Meetings, e.g. in Europe with the UN-GGIM: Europe Work Group on "Core Data" (coordinated by France) or with the UNGEGN Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers (coordinated by Germany)</li> <li>- Arrange joint actions at each of the meetings</li> <li>- Introduce a standing agenda item/report to UNGEGN divisions/WG and UN-GGIM regional committees to be delivered at each others' meetings</li> <li>- Coordinate and/or inform about projects on the use or publication of geospatial data (including geographical names) and regional geographical databases</li> </ul>

Experts of UNGEGN Division level and UN-GGIM Regional Committee Secretariats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invite UN-GGIM Regional Committee representatives to UNGEGN Joint WG and/or Division Meetings</li> <li>- Invite UNGEGN representatives to National-GGIM committee meetings</li> <li>- Circulate resolutions/decisions made at UNGEGN division meetings and UN-GGIM Regional Committees meetings</li> </ul>
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#### 4.3. On a Member State level

Bodies to cooperate	How could this cooperation be established or strengthened?
Member State (representatives) in UNGEGN and UN-GGIM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organize (yearly) strategic meetings of the national UNGEGN and UN-GGIM representatives (and possibly with the ECOSOC representative from the Foreign Offices)</li> </ul>
Experts of National Committees on geographical names and UN-GGIM National representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invite UN-GGIM National representatives to Meetings of the National Committees on geographical names</li> <li>- Invite UNGEGN representatives to National-GGIM committee meetings.</li> <li>- Introduce a standing agenda item/report to national geographical names committee and national GGIM committee to be delivered at each others' meetings</li> <li>- Coordinate and/or inform about projects on the use or publication of geospatial data (including geographical names)</li> </ul>
Experts of National Committees on geographical names and national mapping and cadastral authorities (NMCA)/national statistics bureaus/geospatial organizations <sup>5</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordinate and/or inform about projects on the use or publication of geospatial data (including geographical names) and geographical databases</li> <li>- Provide assistance and guidance on legal issues</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> Very often the NMCA/other geospatial organization/national statistics bureau is directly involved in UN-GGIM and UNGEGN