Measuring sustainable development with geospatial information

NEW YORK, 15 August (United Nations Statistics Division) – At the second session of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM), held at United Nations Headquarters from 13-15 August, over 200 delegates met to discuss future trends in geospatial information management and management strategies.

Mapping tools have become an important part of our everyday life. A compass has been replaced by a smartphone, a hardcopy map with rich digital information on a location and its surroundings. Apart from simplifying life, these new tools also serve a broader purpose, to help increase understanding of the landscape around us, to monitor how our environment is changing and to help people make well-informed decisions.

In recognition of the important role of geospatial information, the newly formed United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) met for its second session; the first session was organized in Seoul, Republic of Korea last year. The second session was attended by leading experts from Member States across all regions of the globe, with delegates drawn from the fields of surveying, geodesy, geography, cartography, mapping, remote sensing, hydrography, meteorology and environmental protection.

The three-day expert group meeting covered a variety of major issues, which impact nations, communities and people across the globe. The committee discussed the major trends and challenges that will need to be addressed in the coming years, in order to ensure that the benefits of having accurate, maintained and reliable geospatial data – information about the geography of our environment and surroundings – are realised in all nations. A number of resolutions were adopted, including on the provision of high-quality and reliable geospatial information to deliver sustainable social and economic development, and on the development of a global knowledge base for geospatial information.

Mr. Wu Hongbo, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, said, “The recent Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development recognised that geospatial information is crucial for both sustainable development and humanitarian assistance. It provides a clear mandate for the future work of the UN Committee of Experts on GGIM. This high-level consensus provides critical momentum. It also reflects the United Nations Economic and Social Council’s vision that building effective geospatial infrastructures and promoting greater use of geospatial information are part of a new frontier in harnessing science and technology for advancing sustainable development.”

During the meeting between the Co-Chairs and Ms. Ameerah Haq, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Department of Field Support, Ms. Haq emphasised the fundamental importance of geospatial information in support of nation-building, particularly in post-conflict areas. She cited examples such as Afghanistan, Timor-Leste and Sudan based on her past field experience. Furthermore, she pointed out the fundamental importance of geospatial information in the context of land and resource management.

Dr Vanessa Lawrence CB, Co-Chair of the UN-GGIM and Director General and Chief Executive of Ordnance Survey, added: “It is especially pleasing to see the recognition of accurate, maintained geospatial information across many areas of the globe, with many countries and states using location information to support their economies, aid development and underpin fundamental decision making.

“Location information is playing an important role in sustainable development with accurate geospatial information already assisting better decision making in water management, food supply, agricultural planning and sustainable energy. It is essential that countries and states across the globe establish and implement accurate, reliable and up-to-date geospatial information as part of achieving success under the outcomes of Rio+20.

“The UN-GGIM is playing an important role in raising the awareness, and benefits of geospatial information, as well as promoting best practice on geospatial management. However, before the world will see the full potential of geospatial information we need the support of all the countries and states across the globe to ensure that part of the basic infrastructure of each nation and state is accurate, reliable and maintained geospatial information.”

The term ‘geospatial information’ describes data on a specific place. Today geospatial information is used by governments, organisations and individuals across the globe to enable effective decision making, support analysis to understand complex situations, drive efficiencies and underpin economic growth. The global recognition of the power of accurate, maintained geospatial information has resulted in world leaders wanting to use this data to tackle global issues, including sustainability.

Ten years ago many key technologies, such as social networking, cloud computing, and smartphones did not exist. The UN-GGIM committee has been established to be the official UN consultative mechanism on place, locality and geography. It plays a leading role in setting the agenda for the development of global geospatial information, whist promoting its use to meet key global challenges. The UN-GGIM is in a unique position to act as a coordinating point to ensure that all Member States and all citizens benefit from the value of geospatial information.

Further information on the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management can be found at ggim.un.org