



Update on SALB project

Background

During the First Meeting of the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG) in 2000, participants agreed that international and administrative boundaries are key cross cutting layers for the United Nations (UN). The Second Administrative Level Boundaries (SALB) project was initiated in 2001, under the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO), with the objective to create a mechanism to collect, manage and disseminate the administrative boundaries between UN and the Member States National Mapping Authorities (NMAs) to be able to share with the general public.

Due to changing organizational priorities, in 2009, WHO agreed with United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in coordination with United Nations Cartographic Section (UNCS), Department of Field Support (DFS) that the SALB project should be transferred to the UN Secretariat. During its consultation, UNSD and UNCS determined to jointly manage the SALB project to take advantage of the complementary strengths of the offices. UNSD has the mandate and experience in engaging with the Member States (ECOSOC Resolution RES-1839-LVI of 1974) and UNCS has the mandate to ensure the maps and geographic information meet the UN publication standards (ST-AI-189-Add.25-Rev.1 of 1997) and provide geographic information services to its users in the UN Secretariat (RES-57-300 of 2003) and hence, has the operational track record in dealing on the technical aspects.

As of 1 January 2011, the SALB project has been transferred from WHO to UN Secretariat whereby the coordination aspects are taken care of by UNSD and the technical aspects are under the responsibility of UNCS. A knowledge transfer workshop which took place in New York, 10 - 12 January 2011, was conducted to facilitate the SALB handover.

Objectives

The objectives of the SALB project were to develop a mechanism to collect, manage and disseminate administrative boundary data and information in coordination with NMAs on:

1. Seamless administrative boundary maps and data (ArcGIS format) since January 2000;
2. Coded historic changes of the administrative boundary at the 1st sub-national level since 1990 and at the 2nd sub-national level since 2000;
3. Contact information of NMAs.

In order to streamline this mechanism, the SALB Portal (<http://www.unsalb.org>) was developed and used as a platform where NMAs, UN and the general public could find the relevant data and information.

With the transfer of the SALB project to the UN Secretariat, the objectives shall not change, but using the complementary mandates and operational strengths UNSD and UNCS have, we would like to focus on:

1. Building the fundamental component of a spatial data infrastructure (SDI) that can be taken advantage by the Member States, UN Secretariat and UN Agencies as well as the geospatial community.
2. Increasing the ownership of the SALB-related data and information by the Member States.
3. Involving the regional mechanisms in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of data collection, management and dissemination.

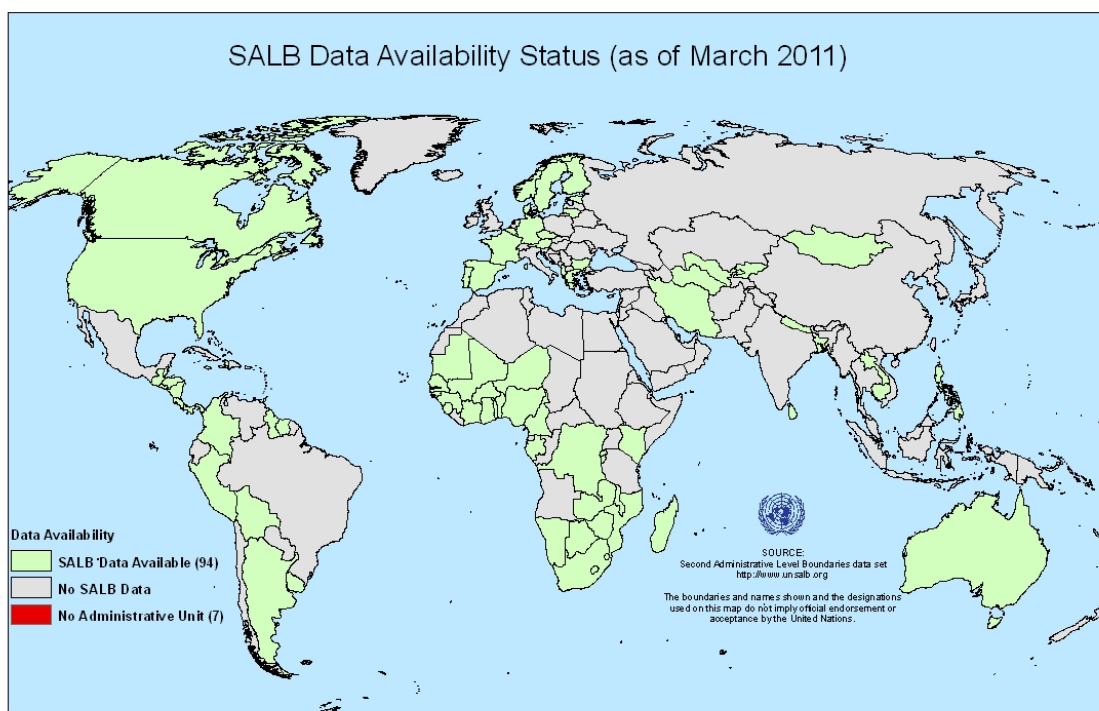
Operational Concept

After the UN Secretariat took over the SALB project in January 2011, the newly established SALB project coordination team has determined that the year of 2011 shall be a transition phase where the current established mechanisms are to be maintained, but with some slight different approach with regard to the various areas in consideration:

- In the following areas, change may occur with consultation by those involved:
 1. Future role and structure of regional nodes (formal involvement of Regional Economic Commissions).
 2. Future of Newsletter (a user questionnaire will be implemented to determine if the Newsletter system will be replaced by a news feed system).
 3. Transfer of the hosting of SALB portal site from current domain either to (1) UN domain or (2) external domain to streamline UN public information policy (timeline: October 2011).
- Starting in April 2011, the following operational activities will resume as in the past:
 1. Updating of NMAs contact information.
 2. Follow-up of harmonization, validation and publication of data received but with pending status.
 3. Follow-up on historic change data.
- Areas where the SALB project coordination team is envisioning active development in the future are:
 1. Expanding the usability of the SALB Portal (giving access to NMAs contact information site to ensure currency of information).
 2. Strengthening capacity building of the Member States (training workshops on data harmonization, validation, editing through the regional nodes).
- The follow-up with the Member States who have applied to the SALB ESRI grant by 31 January 2011 shall commence shortly after the preparatory meeting of the UN Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UNCE-GGIM) in April 2011.

Current Status

A SALB status map attached in the next page describes the current status of SALB activities in terms of data received, harmonized, validated and published in the SALB website (<http://www.unsalb.org>).



The following table is about some descriptive statistics related to SALB project as of 1 March 2011:

Table: Descriptive Statistics related to SALB project

Descriptions	No. of Member States
Contact information of NMAs	171
Coded historic change data	172
Validated data	51
Data under validation	50
SALB registered users	1,670
UN staff who are SALB registered users	200

When observing the profile of the SALB user community, the mixed representation (university, research institutes, regional organisations, development organisation, NGOs, NPOs, individual students, GIS consultants to GIS/RS vendors and media) leads the UN Secretariat to believe that the SALB project is a useful consultation platform when preparing to build a SDI. We hope to confirm these initial observations through the questionnaire to be distributed to the SALB registered users on the future of the SALB newsletter.

Challenges

The SALB project coordination team is configured of existing UN Secretariat staff in UNSD (1 staff, requiring 20% of staff time) and UNCS (2 staff, sharing 30% of staff time). However, with the global financial crisis impacting the Member States, the UN Secretariat is increasingly asked to deliver more services with less resources. During the transition phase of 2011, the workload of the SALB project needs to be revisited in the following areas:

1. workload by SALB coordinator in engaging with the NMA focal points
2. workload by SALB technical coordinator in engaging with the NMA technical focal points to carry out collection, harmonization, technical consultation in validation of the data, incorporating the validated data into a global database, disseminate in SALB Portal
3. workload by SALB project team to coordinate and streamline the initiative in the context of UNCE-GGIM and UNGIWG activities.

Benefits to the Member States, the UN and the geospatial community

The transfer of the SALB project to UN Secretariat will benefit to the Member States, UN Secretariat and UN Agencies as well as geospatial community in the long run.

From the coordination perspective, through SALB, UNSD can streamline the coordination of NMAs and develop the role and structure of the regional nodes further. Additionally, UNSD is well positioned to help streamline the activities between the NMAs and National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in the near future.

From the technical perspective, the SALB data set has been collected with active engagement of NMAs. But when it comes to harmonization, the WHO SALB team needed to coordinate with UNCS in charge of the development of the international boundary dataset at 1:1,000,000 and 1:5,000,000 scale (to-date limited to UN internal use) to adjust the country boundaries according to the UN practices with regards to sensitive geopolitical areas. This harmonization is done prior to requesting the NMAs to validate their initial data. Thus, the adjustment exercise would establish a one-stop shop for harmonization of data that will minimize duplication, avoid time lag and ensure the technical consistency. Furthermore, UNCS is envisioning that the establishment of stronger mechanisms in collaborating with the Member States will allow opportunities to consult with the Member States on how we could share such geo-politically sensitive data in the future.

As mentioned earlier, the SALB project coordination team within UN Secretariat is envisioning active development in expanding the usability of the SALB Portal and capacity building of the Member States. These efforts will allow opportunities for NMAs from developed and developing countries to interact together more closely whether it be for information sharing, knowledge transfer or capacity building cooperation.

Since Administrative boundaries are a fundamental component of any National Spatial Data Infrastructure, we believe that the SALB project initiative will create stronger foundation of SDI with consolidated mechanisms, streamlined technical adjustments to increase the quality of the information, and increased capacity building opportunities for NMAs and cooperation among countries and the geospatial community.

Being accessible online, the SALB dataset can be used by countries and the international community in contexts such as:

- emergency situations, during disasters, requiring to be able to contact the NMA of a country very rapidly (this can be done through the use of the NMA contact information);
- statistical analysis looking at sub national indicators through time (trends) in using a coding scheme which reflects a nested administrative hierarchy;
- poverty and other thematic mapping where the administrative divisions is the level of representation of the information;
- aggregate information/data up to the reporting or decision level, when it is necessary.