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Review of United Nations activities in geospatial information management

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Note by the Secretariat

Summary

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

At its sixth session, held in New York from 3 to 5 August 2016, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 6/112, in which it welcomed the report of the Secretariat on the review of United Nations activities in geospatial information and requested the Secretariat to continue its analysis of the United Nations system-wide consultation. A questionnaire has been circulated in order to provide a systematic overview of the existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements of the United Nations system and to enable the Secretariat to report on specific evidence and results to the Committee at its seventh session. In the report, the Secretariat provides an overview of the existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements within the United Nations system. As noted during the sixth session of the Committee of Experts, since many coordination activities were being carried out on a “best efforts” basis by geospatial practitioners, the current informal collaborative mechanisms required attention by senior management of the United Nations and by the Committee of Experts. The analysis presented provides a basis for including, within the Committee’s framework, its consideration of a formal mechanism for geospatial information management activities conducted by the United Nations system.

* E/C.20/2017/1.

I. Introduction

1. At its fifth session, held in New York from 5 to 7 August 2015, the Committee of Experts, in making its decision 5/110, noted the many valuable geospatial information initiatives undertaken throughout the United Nations system, while expressing some concern that they should be sustainable and not appear to be fragmented. The Committee invited the Secretariat to reach out to relevant United Nations partners to assist in the preparation of a report documenting the existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements of the United Nations system in a systematic manner. The Committee suggested that the support from senior management was necessary to ensure effective cooperation, including the elaboration of a proposal for a more structured coordination mechanism; and emphasized that the sessions of the Committee of Experts are indeed an appropriate platform to address coordination issues.

2. At its sixth session, held in New York from 3 to 5 August 2016, the Committee of Experts, in making decision 6/112 regarding the review of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management, requested the Secretariat to continue conducting the analysis of the United Nations system-wide consultation in the form of a questionnaire in order to provide an overview of the existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements of the United Nations system in a systematic manner and to report the results back to the Committee at its next session.

3. The present report presents an overview of the system-wide consultation on existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements. As noted previously at the Committee's sixth session, as many coordination activities are being carried out on a 'best efforts' basis by the geospatial practitioners, the current informal collaborative mechanisms require attention by the senior management of the United Nations and the Committee. The analysis of the consultation presented provides a foundation to consider a more structured coordination approach for the geospatial information activities in the United Nations. The Committee of Experts is invited to take note of the report and to express its views on the review of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management. Points for discussion and decision are provided in paragraph 19.

II. Geospatial information management in the United Nations

4. In response to the request by the Committee to provide a report documenting the existing geospatial resources, activities and governance arrangements of the United Nations system in a systematic manner, the Secretariat conducted a system-wide consultation with: (i) the Departments and Offices of the United Nations Secretariat; (ii) the Regional Commissions; (iii) funds, programmes and specialized agencies; and (iv) other United Nations organizations (68 in total), all hereafter referred to as "UN entities". The request in the form of a questionnaire (attached at Annex I) was sent to the Heads of Departments/Offices/Agencies at Under-Secretary-General level, or equivalent for other parts of the United Nations, to ensure support and awareness of the ongoing geospatial activities by senior management.

5. The questionnaire was aimed at compiling a directory of organizations within the United Nations system with a specific mandate, field of activity or work programme, on geospatial information. This was applied in a similar manner as the Directory of Statistical Organizations (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/acsub-public/directory.htm>) drawing from experiences of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities from the statistical community.

6. The Secretariat subsequently prepared an analysis of the responses received to summarize the UN entities responses, capabilities, mandates and coordination mechanisms. From the responses provided by the UN entities it can be observed that:

- a) The response rate to the questionnaire appears low, as only 43% (29 of 68) of the UN entities provided a response to the questionnaire. However, based on common knowledge within the Secretariat, an estimated 35 UN entities do not have geospatial capabilities, and therefore are not likely to answer. Consequently, approximately 88% (29 of 33) of the known major or potential actors conducting geospatial activities in the United Nations system responded to the questionnaire.
- b) In view of the response rate, particularly the delay in responses and the multiple efforts required by the Secretariat to reach out to the geospatial practitioners directly in the UN system to ensure a satisfactory response rate to the questionnaire, it can further be concluded that the senior management in the United Nations system is often not aware and/or briefed of the geospatial activities within its respective organization in support of its mandate, resulting in the absence or delayed responses by some UN entities.
- c) The results of the questionnaire highlight that 41% of UN entities have some geospatial capabilities, with four entities accounting for over half of the total geospatial capability (57.1%) in the UN system: Department of Field Support (DFS); Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); and World Food Programme (WFP).
- d) In general, the major geospatial capabilities in the United Nations system are in support of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, WFP, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), etc.) which accounts for 36% of the geospatial staffing, 34% for peace and security (DFS, Department of Safety and Security (DSS), Office on Drugs and Crime (ODC), Office for Outer Space Affairs (OOSA), etc.) and 27% for sustainable development (UNEP, Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), etc.). We can further note the different focus of the UN entities towards operational work, advocacy or support to intergovernmental bodies. Also, we note that two entities have geospatial activities related to the marine environment (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Office of Legal Affairs (OLA)).
- e) This process was aimed at identifying organisations within the United Nations system with a specific mandate, field of activity or work programme, on geospatial information. However, the Secretariat is cognizant that the professional classification of 'geospatial expert' has not been well understood or applied consistently across the UN entities. This makes the authoritative identification of geospatial capabilities in the UN system difficult. The identification by senior managers of the geospatial experts and related capabilities may therefore be complicated and consequently account for other specialities which are, in fact, not primarily related to geospatial information capabilities at all. The absence of a common 'geospatial expert' classification results in considerable ambiguity, and allows each UN entity to use a large variety of professional categories including: imagery specialist; data scientist; programme manager; remote sensing officer; statistician; researcher; database manager; web-developers; etc. to name a few.
- f) The results of the questionnaire highlight that, while there is some inter-agency collaboration (in particular in the context of UN operations) and coordination mechanisms (such as the Information Management Working Group for international humanitarian organizations), none are currently specifically addressing geospatial information management. The existing internal operational coordination mechanism of the United Nations Geographic Information Working

Group (UNGIWG)¹ was referred to only once in the questionnaire responses; by the UNGIWG co-Chair. Further, no UNGIWG activities or meetings have been observed for the past two years.

- g) Throughout the analysis of the questionnaire responses, it was observed that there is presently no functional and effective coordination mechanism on geospatial information management within the United Nations system.

III. Considerations on the current status

7. In view of the observations derived from the questionnaire responses, past informal coordination mechanisms, and highlighted by the intergovernmental bodies on geospatial information activities, it can be noted that the senior management of the United Nations system may not be fully aware of the ongoing geospatial capabilities and activities within their purview, and its support to implementing their respective mandates within the Department, Office, agency, programme or fund. As an example, some geospatial services are fragmented in several different units or offices within the same UN entity. Further, as an often technical and ‘back room’ enabling capability, geospatial information activities are often invisible to the higher level mandates and outcomes of the respective UN entity. Therefore further advocacy and awareness should be conducted at senior levels to ensure the effective use of, and consolidated approaches to enhance, geospatial information management.

8. The United Nations system, as a whole, currently does not appear coordinated and structured when reaching out to the geospatial capabilities and services of Member States, whether in-country offices or in the form of partnerships. This may lead to repeated, duplicating and undue requests to Member States by the United Nations. Therefore, a United Nations system-wide coordination mechanism on geospatial information management should be established to ensure streamlined coordination with Member States, in particular in the context of United Nations operations and in-country offices.

9. The coordination of geospatial services requirements should be considered to allow for pooling of resources and cost-effective investments within the United Nations system. The importance of a functional and properly resourced governance, data, staffing and infrastructure for the United Nations system, as an enabler for more efficient operations, has been highlighted in several instances, including by UNGIWG, and would allow for more efficient planning of infrastructure, software, data, policies and web-services system-wide.

10. The Programme Review of the work of the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management² noted that “although there is continued expectation for United Nations activities on geospatial information management to increase, many of the collaborative geospatial activities occurring within the United Nations have for many years been carried out on a ‘best efforts’ basis” by the geospatial practitioners and still require more formal mechanisms to ensure support from senior management for an effective cooperation and prioritization of geospatial activities in the United Nations.

¹ The United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG) is a voluntary and ad-hoc network of UN professionals formed in 2000 and working in the fields of cartography and geographic information science. UNGIWG has previously provided update reports to the Committee of Experts from 2013-2016 (E/C.20/2013/12/Add.1; E/C.20/2014/12/Add.1; E/C.20/2015/12/Add.1; and E/C.20/2016/4/Add.1), and was referenced in the 2016 Programme Review of the work of the Committee of Experts (E/2016/47).

² E/2016/47, para 35: http://ggim.un.org/docs/Programme%20review_E-2016-47_en.pdf

11. The Committee of Experts has emphasized that it is an appropriate platform to address coordination issues on geospatial information management. In this regard, and considering the breadth of activities within and across the various expert and working groups of the Committee, interactions with relevant UN entity geospatial practitioners, whom may have similar technical problems to solve, would be of benefit. This may assist Member States in discussing, coordinating and prioritising work undertaken in the context of geospatial activities in the United Nations in collaboration with the relevant Working Groups of the Committee of Experts, and would ensure efficient use of resources and adequate prioritisation on programme, projects and capacity building efforts of the organization.

12. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution 2016/27³ entitled ‘Strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management’ stresses the need to strengthen the coordination and coherence of global geospatial information management, in capacity-building, norm-setting, data collection, data dissemination and data sharing, among others, through appropriate coordination mechanisms, including in the broader United Nations system, building on the work of the Committee of Experts. The Council has additionally requested that the Committee report back to the Council within five years on the implementation of the resolution as well as *inter alia* on its continued efforts to work with the entire United Nations system.

13. Although detailed in a separate report to the Committee of Experts at this seventh session (provisional agenda item 3), and noting that ECOSOC resolution 2016/27 provides a basis for Member States to ask for better and improved coordination of geospatial information activities within the United Nations system, the Bureau and Secretariat appreciate that the missing link within UN-GGIM’s architecture are those entities within the United Nations system engaged in geospatial information activities.

IV. Options for coordination

14. In view of the aforementioned points, the Committee of Experts is invited to consider a number of options that provide the foundation to consider a more structured coordination approach for the geospatial information activities in the United Nations system.

15. **Option 1:** The need (and subsequent request) for an effective coordination mechanism on geospatial information management in the United Nations system be brought to the attention of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, as the responsible Executive of the United Nations and of coordination mechanisms of the UN system. However, such a process would likely be time consuming, and would have no guarantee of endorsement, particularly if financial implications in governance and management are potentially perceived/involved. Further, the request would need to suggest what that coordination mechanism would be, what role it would play, and what its relationship with the Committee of Experts would be. Therefore, this option presents a high level of ambiguity at this point and will require further procedural consideration.

16. **Option 2:** Consider the constitution of a formal coordination mechanism on geospatial information management activities for the United Nations system, drawing from the experience of UNGIWG, and conducted within the framework of the Committee of Experts. This option has merits, but brings with it two main complexities. Firstly, what would become of UNGIWG as an established, albeit not presently operating, mechanism? Secondly, there will be expectations that the UN-GGIM Secretariat could be responsible for initiating and coordinating this mechanism, including the report to the Committee of

³ E/RES/2016/27: http://ggim.un.org/docs/E_RES_2016_27_en.pdf

Experts annually. However, the Secretariat already has significant challenges in fulfilling its role and function to serve the Committee's increasing workload with limited resources.

17. **Option 3:** As a less formal and exploratory mechanism, the Committee of Experts may wish to consider establishing a United Nations System Network within its global structure, and in a similar approach to the other thematic groups within the Committee's architecture. This Network could be the UN-GGIM: UN System Network, be self-organized with appropriate modalities and Chair, report annually to the Committee, and inclusive of the Chair participating in the Expanded Bureau of the Committee of Experts. The benefit of this option is that it is able to be implemented almost immediately under the purview of the Committee and, once up and running, could address and review the other two options at an appropriate time in the future, with the guidance and support of the Committee of Experts.

18. The Secretariat will endeavor to continue its consultations concerning the questionnaire to ensure to include the responses of UN entities which have not yet responded, and with a view to maintain a list of points of contact within the United Nations system. The Secretariat will further aim at maintaining this list of point of contacts established during the system-wide consultation in view of the possible establishment of the coordination options described above.

V. Points for discussion

19. The Committee is invited to:

- (a) Take note of the present report by the Secretariat; and**
- (b) Express its views on the three options provided for the establishment of a sustainable coordination mechanism in the United Nations system on geospatial information management.**

ANNEX I**Directory of geospatial services of international organisations**

Brief description of the organisation⁴	
Mission⁵	
Fields of Activity/ structure	
Mandate	
Geospatial work programme	
Number of staff <i>Total / geospatial staff</i>	
Flagship Publications	
Website	

Contacts:

XXXX

XXXX

Department/Office/Programme/Agency

Email :

Telephone :

⁴ Description of the statistics section/department in the organization

⁵ Mission of the statistics section/department of the organization