

---

# Economic and Social Council

19 July 2017

---

## Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management

### Seventh session

New York, 2-4 August 2017

Item 16 of the provisional agenda\*

### Strengthening collaboration with the United Nations

### Group of Experts on Geographical Names

## Strengthening collaboration with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

### Note by the Secretariat

#### Summary

The present paper contains the report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names 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 took note of the ongoing work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names to modernize its working methods and strengthen its relationship with the Committee of Experts regarding place names. In the decision, the Bureau of the Committee of Experts was requested to engage in a dialogue with the Group of Experts, with a view to defining an effective relationship between the two bodies and how best to use the opportunity of back-to-back sessions in 2017. The potential synergies and possible areas of collaboration between the Group of Experts and the Committee of Experts were recognized through the adoption, in July 2016, of Economic and Social Council resolution 2016/27 on strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management, particularly with regard to strengthening the coordination and coherence of global geospatial information management, capacity-building, norm-setting, data collection, data dissemination and data sharing as critical needs for Member States. In addition, in decision 29/101, adopted at its twenty-ninth session, the Group of Experts on Geographical Names encouraged its Bureau to define the relationship between the Group of Experts and the Committee of Experts. In this report, the Group of Experts details the series of tasks and activities undertaken with the Bureau of the Committee as part of efforts to strengthen collaboration and implement the above-mentioned decisions. The background document on building bridges between the Group of Experts and the Committee of Experts, prepared by the Bureau of the Group of Experts, substantively anchors these activities and includes common principles and a proposed cooperation model for the two bodies. The report before the Committee of Experts also includes information on the first meeting convened between the two Bureaux in February 2017; on the consultative exercise conducted to seek agreement on the common principles and the cooperation model; and on the

---

\* E/C.20/2017/1

preparation and staging of back-to-back joint activities in each of the intergovernmental sessions to be held in August 2017. The Committee of Experts is requested to consider and endorse the common principles of cooperation and support future joint activities, including a joint side event on fundamental geospatial data themes and geographical, cultural and political names to be held on the margins of the fifth High-level Forum on Global Geospatial Information Management, to be convened in Mexico City in November 2017.

## I. Introduction

1. 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 took note of the ongoing work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) towards modernizing its working methods and strengthening its relationship with the Committee of Experts regarding geographical names. The Committee requested its Bureau to engage in a dialogue with a view to defining an effective relationship between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM and how best to use the opportunity of back-to-back sessions in 2017. The potential synergies and possible areas of collaboration between UNGEGN and the Committee of Experts were recognized in July 2016 when the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted resolution 2016/27, entitled ‘Strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management’<sup>1</sup>, particularly with regard to strengthening the coordination and coherence of global geospatial information management, capacity-development, norm-setting, data collection, data dissemination and data sharing as critical needs for Member States. In addition, decision 29/101 of the 29th Session of UNGEGN in 2016<sup>2</sup> encouraged the Group of Experts to define a relationship with UN-GGIM.

2. This present report describes the tasks and activities undertaken in pursuance of strengthening collaboration and implementing decision 29/101 from the 29th Session of UNGEGN. The background document “Relations of UNGEGN with UN-GGIM – Building Bridges”, prepared by the UNGEGN Bureau, substantively anchors these activities and includes common principles and ideas for a cooperation model for the two bodies. The Committee of Experts is requested to express its views on the common principles of cooperation, consider its endorsement, and support future joint activities, including a joint side event on fundamental geospatial data themes and geographical names as part of the basic geographic reference framework and the cultural heritage of a country, on the margins of the UN-GGIM Fifth High Level Forum in Mexico City, Mexico in November 2017.

## II. Mandate and areas of work of UNGEGN

3. Geographical names constitute the basic reference framework for indicating location and orientation, but doubts or ambiguity about the written form or application of a name can lead to confusion. In order to improve communication between peoples, countries and cultures, standardization of geographical names is required. At the national level, names standardization involves the selection of the most appropriate names in their written form based on principles, policies and procedures established by the names authority in that country. Worldwide, geographical names standards (for example, for romanization) are equally important for clear communication involving data exchange. However, international standards cannot occur without national standardization as the base.

4. All features in the geographic information environment are important and each layer has a specific and important role to play. However, geographical names have a role both as a spatial data theme of their own and as a vital index for cross-referencing and linking between geospatial data layers, as well being a bridge to aspatial data. Therefore the problems associated with either a lack of, or limited, standardization of toponyms<sup>3</sup> need to

<sup>1</sup> E/RES/2016/27: [http://ggim.un.org/docs/E\\_RES\\_2016\\_27\\_en.pdf](http://ggim.un.org/docs/E_RES_2016_27_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> E/2016/66: [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/29th-gegn-docs/E\\_2016\\_66\\_Report%20of%20the%2029th%20session\\_en.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/29th-gegn-docs/E_2016_66_Report%20of%20the%2029th%20session_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Toponym defined in “Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names”, United Nations 2002, pg.26, #339 – A proper noun applied to a → topographic feature. Comprehensive term for → geographical names and → extra-terrestrial names.

be recognized. The absence of standardized geographical names limits the capability of geographic information systems to provide accurate and reliable decisions, and quality outputs. For example, if the names of towns, villages and urban spaces are not standardized, it would not be possible to have standard addressing. Without standardized names it is challenging to respond to crises. For example, this was reported to be the case following the devastating earthquake in Kashmir (2005), where little available data on communities and their locations had a negative impact on efficient delivery of disaster relief; or in Somalia, where the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) recently reported that the duplication, repetition and lack of standardized names for communities adversely affected resource use, security and decision-making in providing humanitarian aid.

5. Geographical names standardization is therefore a key element of the communication needed to enable the United Nations to become the world's most effective voice for international cooperation on behalf of peace, development, migration, refugee resettlement, human rights and the environment. Governments and all sectors of society's operations depend on authoritative naming of locations, including regional and local authorities, legal institutions, statistical bureaus, tourism authorities, public works departments, transportation companies – air, land and sea, national security agencies, disaster management authorities, users of the internet, businesses and the public in general. According to resolution VIII/6 of the 8th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) in 2002, geographical names should be integrated into national, regional and international spatial data infrastructures. These infrastructures constitute a centrepiece for monitoring the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicator framework under the geospatial lens.

6. The mandate of UNGEGN focuses on the ability of every country to be responsible for standardizing its geographical names. The standardization processes have been discussed since the first meeting of a group of experts in 1960, which was called in response to ECOSOC resolution 715A (XXVII). The mandate on national standardization is enshrined in resolution I/4, one of the most significant and long enduring, decided on at the first United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in 1967.

7. From its inception UNGEGN has been aware of the congruency and the symbiotic interdependence that exist between geographical names/toponyms, and mapping/cartography. This relationship is in fact mandated, as reflected in the Group's Terms of Reference<sup>4</sup>. In recent years the focus has broadened to cover integration of geographical names into the wider spatial data environment. Given the rapid development in the use of geospatial data in the general community, this is significant.

8. The core responsibility of UNGEGN is to encourage countries to be responsible for the standardization of geographical names in their jurisdictions; the Group itself has no mandate to make decisions on names. Countries are encouraged to adopt toponymic authority management models suited to their administrative structures, population and language distribution, cultural heritage and resource capabilities. Some models will involve decision-making at a national level, while others will devolve decision-making to lower levels of government.

### **III. Collaborative activities**

9. Collaborative efforts should enable the sharing of human and knowledge resources to allow both expert bodies to respond better to the evolving needs of Member States. Within

---

<sup>4</sup> See E/2001/INF/3, 12 April 2001, Subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council ... p. 47-48.

the context of new and emerging opportunities and challenges, sharing knowledge and ideas should allow us to avoid duplication of efforts.

10. In accordance with its mandate and given the importance of collaboration, UNGEGN has over the years cultivated relations and has forged strong alliances with international bodies such as the International Cartographic Association (ICA), Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), Unicode Consortium and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) among others. These relations have been strengthened through the active participation of their members and nominated liaison officers, working together on projects of mutual interest. Advances in telecommunication and technology, coupled with the increased use of geospatial information management tools and their application to spatial data infrastructures, have spurred on an evolution in functions, methods and levels of interaction among these inter-governmental and international bodies and their stakeholders.

11. Fast forward to 2011 with the creation of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM), 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. The Committee of Experts mandate was further strengthened in 2016 with ECOSOC resolution 2016/27, which “Stresses the need to strengthen the coordination and coherence of global geospatial information management ... through appropriate coordination mechanisms, including in the broader United Nations system...” UNGEGN, in recognition of these developments, agreed in decision 29/101 of the 29th Session of UNGEGN, to encourage its Bureau to elaborate in a transparent and consultative manner, with all Member States, the articulation of the business case and a long-term vision for UNGEGN, and the definition of the relationship with the Committee of Experts.

12. The UNGEGN Bureau actioned this decision with the preparation of a proposal entitled “Relationship of UNGEGN with UN-GGIM – Building Bridges” which is now presented as a background document to this present report. Activities in relation to this document are elaborated in section IV. This collaborative endeavour is welcomed within the United Nations framework of system-wide coherence and the “Delivering as One” approach. Further the relationship is strengthened by the fact that both expert bodies are serviced by the Statistics Division as Secretariat, they are subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC, they support the global community and have common purposes – working towards the global agenda, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, to combat climate change, and to address disaster risk reduction.

13. To further strengthen collaboration and coordination on the development of policies, practices and the standardization of geographic information in support of sustainable development and national to global needs, the UNGEGN and UN-GGIM Bureaus convened its first WebEx meeting on 8 February 2017. A major decision emanating from the meeting, and to ensure that coordination and communication was being realised, was that each entity would reciprocate with a standing agenda item on their activities for each of their substantive intergovernmental sessions from 2017 onwards (UNGEEN will be a standing item on the UN-GGIM agenda, and UN-GGIM a standing item on the UNGEGN agenda). Also proposed and discussed was the need to identify the technical representatives, organizations and common areas of work between the two groups, at the global, regional and national levels. Common work items identified were fundamental data themes and geographical names databases. For the fundamental data themes working group of the Committee of Experts, two experts from UNGEGN have been active members since May 2017.

14. The next meeting between the UNGEGN and UN-GGIM Bureaus is to be convened in New York on Saturday 5 August 2017, between each of the intergovernmental sessions of the two entities.

#### **IV. Summary of the background document and the consultation exercise**

15. In fulfilment of the decision from the 29th Session of Bangkok, the UNGEGN Bureau prepared a proposal entitled “Relationship of UNGEGN with UN-GGIM – Building Bridges”. It proposes common principles and ideas for a cooperation model based mainly on an exchange of knowledge and communication, and approaches for engagement between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM at the global, regional and national levels. The UNGEGN Bureau emphasizes that the cooperation model is a proposal, and it is understood that national circumstances will necessarily mean significant differences in the realization of some of the elements of the model. The operational modalities of UN-GGIM and UNGEGN mechanisms and representatives within the countries is for each Member State itself to establish and manage.

16. The central message of the proposal refers to the following common principles:

- i. UNGEGN recognizes that UN-GGIM has the mandate to provide a strategic assessment for geospatial information needs;
- ii. UNGEGN and UN-GGIM recognize that geographical names are an essential part of geospatial information management and its fundamental data themes;
- iii. 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, as required, to meet the strategic initiatives;
- iv. UN-GGIM will support UNGEGN in communicating and promoting the critical role of geographical names in the overall geospatial information environment and the benefits of countries establishing a plan for geographical names standardization management in line with UNGEGN guidelines;
- v. UNGEGN and UN-GGIM will continue to operate and function independently. A dedicated UNGEGN is indispensable alongside a well-functioning UN-GGIM: and
- vi. UNGEGN and UN-GGIM will communicate and collaborate with each other on a regular and ongoing basis.

17. The proposal was circulated for global consultation to the members of both UNGEGN and UN-GGIM. The feedback received indicated that the proposal is seen as a positive communication tool and sets the stage for good working relations between the two entities. The proposed common principles underpinning the relationship, as listed above in paragraph 16, were generally accepted by both entities. Most of the proposals for engagement noted in the cooperation model were considered feasible, although some would only be possible in the longer term. Responses indicated that the Member State-level activities should be the core of any relationship-building between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM.

## V. The way forward

18. A collaborative arrangement between UNGEGN and the Committee of Experts will allow the two entities to strengthen their respective relationships and to work jointly towards the common goal of ECOSOC's resolution 2016/27 towards strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management. This includes an effective method of transferring 'know how' among experts, critical to creating and sustaining a competitive advantage and to seeking solutions advantageous to both intergovernmental bodies. It will succeed if the interaction between UNGEGN and the Committee of Experts is realised as being important to both entities in working towards their common goals.

19. The benefits of collaboration are, amongst others, improved sharing of knowledge, better innovation, and increased agility. These benefits are intangible and are consequently difficult to measure in quantifiable terms.

20. In order to better communicate, to manage work, monitor and evaluate relations the UNGEGN Bureau has identified the following implementable measures.

### Immediate actions

21. The following immediate implementable measures in the short term are proposed to strengthen the collaboration between the two expert entities:

- i. Formally work together based on the common principles under paragraph 16 (iv) above;
- ii. Continue to work with the UN-GGIM Working Group on Fundamental Data Themes, with UNGEGN recognized as the de facto inter-governmental body responsible for providing expert advice/guidance on geographical names;
- iii. Convene one virtual meeting annually between the two Bureaus;
- iv. Where and when possible have members of each expert body attend each other's plenary meetings;
- v. Consider the creation of a liaison group between the two expert bodies or the appointment of liaison representatives/focal points, with responsibility for managing interactions between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM; and
- vi. Cooperate at the national level (as for example, is indicated in the Netherlands where UNGEGN experts are now helping the National Mapping and Cadastral Agencies to audit its names database) and cooperate at the regional level (as for instance, to address the fundamental discrepancies in the continent-wide names layer, indicated through the work of UNGEGN's Dutch- and German-speaking Division for the European Union's EuroGeonames project).

### Long term actions

22. The following implementable measures in the longer term are proposed by UNGEGN:

- i. Work jointly to encourage and communicate the benefits of geographical names standardization and the importance of creating names authorities/committees;
- ii. Work with the UN-GGIM Academic Network to have universities include toponymy in their courses/programmes in Geographic Information; and

- iii. Develop a collaborative/integrated work plan and common agenda items.

## **VI. Points for discussion**

### **23. The Committee is invited to:**

- (a) Take note of the report and progress made by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names;**
- (b) Express its views on the common principles of cooperation and consider its endorsement as a means for closer collaboration between the two subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC, and towards strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management; and**
- (c) Provide guidance on the way forward for strengthening relations between the Committee of Experts and UNGEGN, inclusive of joint activities mutually beneficial to both expert entities;**