

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

At the Sixth Session, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 6/11

- 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.
- 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

Some Observation on Geographical Names

- Geographical names constitute the basic reference framework for indicating location and orientation.
- 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.

- All features in the geographic information environment are important and each layer has a specific and important role to play.
- Geographical names have a role both as a spatial data theme of their own and for cross-referencing and linking between geospatial data layers, as well being a bridge to aspatial data.
- The absence of standardized geographical names limits the capability of geographic information systems to provide accurate and reliable decisions, and quality outputs.

UNGEGN Bureau prepared a proposal entitled “Relationship of UNGEGN with UN-GGIM – Building Bridges”. Identified the following common principles.

- UNGEGN recognizes that UN-GGIM has the mandate to provide a strategic assessment for geospatial information needs;
- UNGEGN and UN-GGIM recognize that geographical names are an essential part of geospatial information management and its fundamental data themes;
- 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;
- 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;
- UNGEGN and UN-GGIM will continue to operate and function independently. A dedicated UNGEGN is indispensable alongside a well-functioning UN-GGIM: and
- UNGEGN and UN-GGIM will communicate and collaborate with each other on a regular and ongoing basis.

Immediate actions

1. Formally work together based on the common principles under paragraph 16 (iv) above;
2. 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;
3. Convene one virtual meeting annually between the two Bureaus;
4. Where and when possible have members of each expert body attend each other's plenary meetings;
5. 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
6. Cooperate at the national level and cooperate at the regional.

Long term actions

1. Work jointly to encourage and communicate the benefits of geographical names standardization and the importance of creating names authorities/committees;
2. Work with the UN-GGIM Academic Network to have universities include toponymy in their courses/programmes in Geographic Information;
3. Develop a collaborative/integrated work plan and common agenda items.

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;