

Meeting of the UN-GGIM Expert Group on the integration of statistical and geospatial information –Lisbon 24 May 2015

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1 PURPOSE

This paper presents a brief summary of the current activities of the European Forum for Geography and Statistics and aims at making a proposal for the future cooperation between the EFGS and UN-GGIM. The focus of this paper is the situation in Europe and many of the elements are specific to Europe. However the European situation might serve, at least partly as a model for other regions to address issues that are common to all regions.

Based on this paper and the discussion in the meeting, the Expert Group should first answer the question whether regional and global groups like the EFGS are a valuable partner for UN-GGIM. It should then discuss in *what ways the Expert Group can collaborate and cooperate with the EFGS ?*

2 BACKGROUND

In its program review report¹ the Australian Bureau of Statistics expressed the need for a coordination mechanism between NSIs and NMCAs.

“To effectively meet the challenge of linking socioeconomic information to location, there needs to be increased collaboration between the statistical and geospatial communities. Both communities are beginning to seek ways to develop this link. ... There are a number of activities that can be undertaken to increase collaboration. These include:

(a) **Outreach.** While there are a number of forums discussing geospatial and statistical activities at the international level, there is presently no focused discussion taking place on the specific issue of linking socioeconomic information to a location.”

This document aims at making a proposal how statistical-geospatial networks like the EFGS and the UN-GGIM process.

The idea is that EFGS and similar regional groups could help UN_GGIM filling the gap identified by the program review report.

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3 WHAT IS THE EFGS

3.1 Organisation

The European Forum for Geography and Statistics is a network of experts primarily working in European National Statistical Institutes (NSI). Initially these experts were mainly GIS specialists but in recent years statisticians, researchers and employees of mapping authorities have also joined the network. The network started out as a forum for cooperation between the Statistical Offices of Scandinavian countries and has ever since the start in 1998 largely driven by the voluntary work done by devoted experts with visionary ideas. As such it is still very much a bottom-up type of network.

Currently the EFGS does not have a statute or terms of reference. There is no official membership in the EFGS, e.g. through an application or nomination process. Whoever participates in EFGS meetings has the right to speak and endorse proposals. The EFGS has a national contact point in all European countries, normally a GIS or spatial analysis expert in the NSI. A corresponding mailing list is maintained by the EFGS webmaster.

The EFGS leadership is distributed among a president, a CEO and a steering committee. They meet on a regular basis, mostly in tele-meetings where they discuss the activities of the EFGS. The CEO has the main task to organise and chair these tele-meetings and to draft background documents on the various topics to be discussed.

For EFGS conferences, a joint task force is formed composed of EFGS members and the host country. From the EFGS side the CEO and the previous and future host country are involved to ensure continuity and knowledge sharing.

In addition, the EFGS holds annual meetings in the form of plenaries, one in March in conjunction with the GISCO working group meetings in Luxembourg and one as part of the annual EFGS conference, typically in the last quarter of the year. These meetings are semi-formal in the sense that this forum elects the president of the EFGS, the EFGS steering committee and the CEO. However, everyone interested is invited to participate. The plenaries also discuss and endorse the strategic orientation of the EFGS.

The EFGS does not have a budget. The participation of employees is courtesy of their sending organisation. However EFGS and the ESS share the same strategic goals and hence participation in EFGS activities normally corresponds to the job description of geospatial experts working in Statistical Offices.

There is a close relationship between Eurostat and the EFGS: the activities of the EFGS are partially sponsored through Eurostat grants and the EFGS advises Eurostat on strategic issues regarding integrated statistical and geospatial information and supports Eurostat in the communication with Member States. This partnership has proven very successful.

3.2 EFGS activities

The main goal of the EFGS is to promote the integration of statistical and geospatial information in public sector information and the use of GIS in NSIs.

In terms of activities, the EFGS acts as a reference group for Eurostat and the project group for the GEOSTAT projects. Now sponsored by Eurostat, the EFGS has since many years successfully organised annual conferences on the integration of statistical and geospatial information, with growing attendance and thematic scope. The latest edition in 2014 organised in Krakow, organised by Polish statistical office has attracted more than 70 experts from Europe but also overseas. These conferences do not charge a participation fee in order to be as open as possible. The focus is on application of data integration in a chiefly official context. However an important asset of the EFGS conferences is the knowledge exchange between experts from NSIs and researchers and users of spatial statistics.

The EFGS also maintains a website www.efgs.info which has become a central reference point for projects and discussions around the integration of statistical and geospatial information in Europe. It is also a repository for the results of the GEOSTAT projects. The website attracts growing interest from all over the world.

Based on discussion in the steering committee the EFGS regularly produces strategy documents (as an example the Prague declaration²) on various aspects regarding the integration of statistical and geospatial information. It also formulates project proposals that serve as input for Eurostat calls for proposals. As an example, the main aspect of the current GEOSTAT 2 project, the need for a point-based spatial reference framework for statistics in Europe was first formulated by the EFGS.

² https://circabc.europa.eu/d/a/workspace/SpacesStore/0a1f6588-7399-4930-bf4b-635a5b975027/D_GIS_103%20GISCO-2013-WP-Task%20Force%20EFGS%20Proposal.docx

Key members of the EFGS regularly give presentations on statistical-geospatial data integration at national and international conferences where they systematically advocate EFGS activities and the need for a better integration of statistical and geospatial information.

3.3 EFGS work program

The current agenda of the EFGS can be summarised as follows:

- Creation of a point-based spatial reference framework for official statistics;
- Partnership between NSI and NMCAs on equal terms;
- Increased participation of NMCAs and geospatial experts in the activities of the EFGS, e.g. in the EFGS conference;
- A fully geocoded census 2021;
- A truly object oriented statistical-geospatial information system for sustainable development ranging from local to global

4 OTHER TECHNICAL GROUPS WORKING ON STATISTICAL-GEOSPATIAL DATA INTEGRATION

- GISCO working group – this is a formal Eurostat working group dealing with the topic of the integration of statistical and geospatial information, and the implementation of INSPIRE in statistical offices. It addresses technical experts from NSIs and NMCAs, but the attendance is biased towards NSIs. UN-GGIM has helped to reverse this trend though.
- UN-GGIM: Europe working group A on core geospatial data – this working group has been created by the executive committee of UN-GGIM: Europe with a lifetime until 2017. The group aims at drawing up a list of geospatial data that are to form a spatial reference framework for geocoding other information. The working group will also set out conditions for producing and maintaining these data including the funding issue. The requirements of working group B will be the most important input into working group A. The group consists of experts from NMCAs.
- UN-GGIM: Europe working group B on the integration of statistical and geospatial information – this working group has been created by the executive

committee of UN-GGIM: Europe with a lifetime until 2017. Working group B deals with the topic of statistical-geospatial data integration within the framework of sustainable development (SDG and Europe 2020). Working group B will first present a report on user needs and then deal with data sources and methods for data integration. The expert group is composed of senior technical experts of both NSIs and NMCA and targets senior managers and decision makers.

- The Global Forum for Geography and Statistics GFGS – a recent group that was created on initiative mainly from Norway and non-European countries attending recent EFGS conferences. The idea is to emulate the EFGS at the global scale with a similar work program. However, the participation of European and other NSIs is rather low, while the participation of the research community is much higher. This reflects the larger role that non-traditional data sources and modelling would play globally in producing essential socio-economic large-scale spatial statistics. In addition, the range of topics on the agenda of the global forum is potentially much wider and would include topics that are more specific to developing countries e.g. on land management.

5 REDUNDANCIES AND OTHER ISSUES

There are evidently redundancies between the topics covered by the Expert Group, the GISCO working group, the EFGS, and the working groups of UN-GGIM: Europe. In addition a small group of key experts is involved in most or all of the groups. However, this might be also seen as an advantage as it ensures better coordination of the corresponding work plans. Nevertheless, it is felt that the mandates of the various groups should be set out more clearly. The GISCO Working Group and the Expert Group have Terms of References. Working groups A and B have received a mandate from the executive committee of UN-GGIM: Europe.

The EFGS and the GFGS, given their informal, networking oriented character so far do not have a mandate or terms of reference.

There are plans to transform the EFGS into a registered European interest group or another type of official organisational structure.

6 A PLACE FOR THE EFGS

6.1 EFGS as a driver of statistical-geospatial data integration and innovation

The lack of an official mandate from the ESS, its bottom-up character, missing budget, legal personality or terms of references may be considered a drawback of the EFGS. Financially the EFGS relies largely on Eurostat support. Despite these shortcomings, the EFGS has been highly successful in building a reputation among NSI and NMCA in Europe and in selected countries in other regions. It has substantially contributed to the success of the GEOSTAT project on European population grids and in setting the agenda for statistical-geospatial data integration for the period until the 2021 census. The collective expertise present in the EFGS on information integration is outstanding and at least in Europe unmatched.

Feedback from NSIs up to senior managers indicate that recommendations from the EFGS carry weight in designing national and European statistical products and production processes for spatial statistics. NSIs and the ESS are working on a harmonised European approach to statistical-geospatial integration and recommendations that originated from the EFGS group have already helped in many NSIs to accelerate the transformation of national activities.

The EFGS wants to remain a network where new developments in spatial statistics emerge and new strategies are discussed first. As such it could be a very valuable discussion partner for UN-GGIM to understand emerging issues in spatial statistics. Innovation however requires freedom and flexibility. One may therefore conclude that the absence of any formalities and its bottom-up nature is actually rather a strength of the EFGS and gives it the flexibility to achieve results that might be harder to achieve in a more formal set-up.

6.2 EFGS as a forum for exchange among NSI and NMCA experts

There is a general feeling that the cooperation between NSIs on the one hand and other producers of geospatial information, mainly NMCAs, on the other could be improved. The lack of regular contacts and working relationships between NSIs and NMCAs often is a major obstacle for better cooperation and data sharing. The EFGS has so far been mainly a network of producers and users of spatial statistics and integrated information and should keep this focus. Due to the fact that NSIs are the main actors within the EFGS, Eurostat can directly fund EFGS activities carried out by individual NSIs or

groups of NSIs. The conferences are an example of such a funding. Hence it should not be the ambition of the EFGS to focus too much on geospatial core activities at the price of losing its roots. Nevertheless the EFGS would like to see NMCAs more active in this field not least to receive direct input from key users. Support from the UN-GGIM side for the goals and activities of the EFGS will hopefully raise the interest of NMCAs into spatial statistics matters. An active participation in joint projects touching on topics that are of interest to NMCAs, like data access conditions, funding or the definition of a spatial reference framework for statistics consisting of geospatial core data would be welcome.

The EFGS has been providing a platform for an intensified exchange of ideas mainly through its conferences. As the Report from the Australian Bureau for Statistics states:

“Convening an international conference that brings together members of the geospatial and statistical communities, that focuses on linking socioeconomic information to a location, would help to establish an effective outreach programme. It would also help identify and address common issues achieving this linkage. Similar events could be held at the national level to promote common understandings between the geospatial and statistical communities within a country. National statistics offices, ideally in collaboration with their national spatial organization, would be well placed to provide this leadership.”

Most of the activities of the EFGS are presented and discussed at the annual conferences. Together with the EFGS website they are the key event for achieving progress, presenting new ideas and formulate new strategies. It is the ambition to make the conferences more attractive for NMCAs, by covering topics that are more relevant for them. A joint organisation of the conferences by EFGS and UN-GGIM will help to increase the relevance of the conferences for both NSI and NMCAs and result in a better exchange of ideas and requirements.

The strength of the EFGS is in networking and knowledge sharing. UN-GGIM and NMCAs should take advantage of the network established by the EFGS in this important area of geospatial information management.

7 THE PROPOSAL

The EFGS has greatly helped to pave the way for a better integration of statistical and geospatial information in Europe. The success story of the EFGS has worked well largely

due to the specific situation in Europe with Eurostat and a strongly organised European Statistical System. It can serve as a model for other regions and worldwide but this may take time.

The Expert Group is therefore invited to discuss the following alternatives, taking into account the regional specifics and the funding issue of such activities. The alternatives are based on the assumption that UN-GGIM needs a forum for networking and information exchange in the field of statistical-geospatial data integration, in line with the review report of Australia:

- Alternative 1 – encouraging regional Geographical-Statistical (GS) networks:
 - Do you think that the conditions are right to create voluntary networks similar to the EFGS in other UN regions and eventually globally?
 - How could their activities be financed?
- Alternative 2 – creating regional UN-GGIM expert groups instead of GS:
 - What could be achieved more/better by creating regional permanent expert groups with representation from both NSI's and NMCA's under the UN-GGIM umbrella? Can they completely carry out activities currently done by the EFGS?
 - Would it be possible to get sponsors to finance regional projects and conferences like the EFGS ones?
 - It is worth noting that this is not an option for Europe where the EFGS is an established player.
- Alternative 3 – UN-GGIM expert groups and GS networks partnership
 - Division of responsibilities - the European model: (i) EFGS for networking and more technical discussions, advisory body to ESS, (ii) UN-GGIM and others mainly for political discussions;
- Alternative 4 – Output orientation
 - Can we agree on a set of outputs from the integration process for each of the regions and globally, and leave it to each of the regions how they will deliver these outputs to the UN-GGIM process?

For Europe the EFGS clearly favours alternative 3, based on the principle that existing successful platforms should be kept and that roles and scope are different in Europe.

Globally, starting from the successful example of the EFGS, the partnership between GS networks and regional UN-GGIM committees could look as follows:

- UN-GGIM could present the success story of the EFGS to other regions. The other regions are advised looking out for an established intra-regional sponsor with a strong position in official statistical-geospatial information management, e.g. a regional association of NSIs or NMCAs.
- EFGS should encourage other countries in the world to participate in EFGS activities. This is based on the assumption that the EFGS is the most active and most advanced GS globally and therefore sets in a way a standard for regional networking. This could eventually lead towards a global GS. A global Steering Committee would gather the most active countries from the other GS. It would allow other regions to benefit from the experiences made and capacity already built within the EFGS. It seems that this approach is natural and gives a good chance of gathering experts engaged in merging statistical data with geographical data.
- Regional UN-GGIM committees should grant GS networks observer status. In addition they may be granted observer status in UN-GGIM should they wish so.
- All GS networks will regularly inform corresponding regional UN-GGIM committee about their activities. These reports should form a standing item of regional UN-GGIM plenaries. UN-GGIM bodies and groups commit to consider the contributions of GS networks in their activities.
- GS networks commit to support their regional UN-GGIM committee, executive bodies, and expert groups mainly by organising regional conferences on the topic. Another main activity in this field would be to contribute to regional and global recommendations and guidelines to be adopted by UN-GGIM bodies based on national and regional best practices.
- UN-GGIM: Europe should be a co-sponsor of future EFGS conferences. No financial contribution is expected but support in kind such as branding, co-signing invitation letters, publicity within the UN and among UN partners, participation by UN experts. The actual organisation would remain the task of the EFGS.

- Similar conferences should be organised in the other regions of UN-GGIM.
- The question of GS network websites needs further attention. Coordination between UN-GGIM websites and GS network websites is vital to avoid contradictory content.

The Expert Group should also discuss if formal agreements between UN-GGIM and GS networks on joint activities should be signed.