
Economic and Social Council

27 July 2020

Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management

Tenth session

New York, 5 – 7 August 2020

Item 14 of the provisional agenda*

Collaboration with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

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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 ninth session, held in New York from 7 to 9 August 2019, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 9/114, in which it affirmed the importance of strengthened collaboration between the Committee and the Group of Experts and noted the special role that the Group had to play in the specialized areas of geographical names, including on romanization, linguistics, culture and history. The Committee also acknowledged the importance of regular communications between the Bureau of the Committee and the Bureau of the Group of Experts to support the development of their respective strategic plans and the creation of geographical names authorities where they do not presently exist. Furthermore, the Committee encouraged increased communication between geospatial information management authorities and geographical names authorities. In this present report, the Group of Experts presents its collaborative activities at the global, regional and national levels as part of its efforts to implement the decisions of the Committee of Experts at its ninth session. The report includes information on the meeting convened in August 2019 between the expanded Bureau of the Group of Experts and the expanded Bureau of the Committee of Experts, and an overview of the Group's activities, including the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work that is aligned with the larger policy framework of the United Nations. In the report, the Group also highlights the collaboration with the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for the Americas on the Caribbean geospatial initiative, which is aimed at encouraging the standardization of geographical names in participating countries.

* E/C.20/2020/20

I. Introduction

1. At its eighth session, held in New York from 1 to 3 August 2018, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 8/114, in which it welcomed the report of the Group of Experts¹, and commended its efforts to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the Committee of Experts and to identify items for collaborative work. The Committee of Experts encouraged further collaboration and welcomed the proposal to create a liaison group tasked with defining operational working relations and coordinating future collaborative work. Further, the Committee of Experts commended the cooperative activities of the Group of Experts, specifically the GeoNyms project of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the work on the 14 global fundamental geospatial data themes, and joint communication and training initiatives. The Committee of Experts also commended the Group of Experts for modernizing its operations in line with Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution 2018/2 of 10 November 2017, and suggested that the collocation of the Group of Expert meetings be explored as a possible cost-saving and further integration measure.

2. At its ninth session, held in New York from 7 to 9 August 2019, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 9/114, in which it welcomed the report of the Group of Experts (see [E/C.20/2020/17](#)), and acknowledged its efforts to strengthen its relationship with the Committee and to identify items for collaborative work. The Committee of Experts affirmed the importance of strengthened collaboration between the Committee and the Group of Experts and noted the special role that the Group had to play in the specialized areas of geographical names, including on romanization, linguistics, culture and history. The Committee further acknowledged the importance of regular communications between the Bureau of the Committee and the Bureau of the Group of Experts to support the development of their respective strategic plans and the creation of geographical names authorities where they do not presently exist and in addition encouraged increased communication between geospatial information management authorities and geographical names authorities.

3. This present report includes information on the meeting convened in August 2019 between the expanded Bureau of the Group of Experts and the expanded Bureau of the Committee of Experts, and an overview of the Group's activities, including the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work that is aligned with the larger policy framework of the United Nations. In the report, the Group also highlights the collaboration with the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for the Americas on the Caribbean geospatial initiative, which is aimed at encouraging the standardization of geographical names in participating countries. The Committee of Experts is invited to take note of the report and the collaborative progress made by the Group of Experts.

II. UNGEGN's Intersessional Activities

Preparation of the UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work

4. At the first session of the "new" UNGEGN, convened from 29 April to 3 May 2019 in New York, the Group of Experts adopted the draft session report that included six recommendations and 15 decisions. Further, these recommendations and decisions were adopted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council at its management meeting in July 2019 (E/2019/99). **Recommendation 1** (see [E/C.20/2020/17/Add.1](#)) requested that the Bureau of the Group of Experts undertake the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work for the new UNGEGN, to be presented for consideration at its second session in May 2021. In pursuance of **Recommendation 1**, the Bureau and working group

¹ E/C.20/2018/17

convenors of the Group of Experts have been working assiduously to complete the draft strategic plan and programme of work.

5. A strategic plan and programme of work are necessary in order to build on the advancements made in modernizing and making the Group of Experts operations efficient, and to strengthen the Groups' alignment with other expert bodies of ECOSOC. In doing this task, the Group is required to take into consideration, rapid technological developments, the priority geographical names standardization requirements of Member States, and support ECOSOC's work on advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

6. At the start of the exercise, the Bureau and working group convenors prepared a schedule and outline for the preparation of the UNGEGN draft strategic plan and programme of work. An important element of the exercise is the engagement of the Group's Member State representatives, to ensure their contribution and transparency of the process. Based on the proposed schedule provided in Table 1, it should be noted that Member States will be consulted three times throughout the exercise. The first consultation was carried out between September and December 2019, when Member States were invited to submit their national geographical names standardization issues and propose priority actions to be pursued by the Group of Experts over the period 2021 to 2029.

December 13, 2019	First global consultation. Deadline for receipt of geographical names standardization issues and proposed priorities for action from Member States.
April/May 2020	Second global consultation. Circulation of initial draft strategic plan and programme of work to Member States for review and comments.
July/August 2020	Receive comments from Member States on the draft strategic plan and programme of work. Bureau revises and updates document.
November/December 2020	Recirculation of finalized draft strategic plan and programme of work to Member States for information
May 2021	Adoption of the draft strategic plan and programme of work at the second session of UNGEGN.

Table 1: Proposed Schedule for the preparation of the UNGEGN draft Strategic Plan

7. Based on the feedback received from ten Member States, the Bureau and working group convenors prepared the draft strategic plan. The second round of consultations began in June 2020 with the global circulation of the draft strategic plan, for review and feedback submitted by 31 August 2020.

8. The Bureau and working group convenors are currently preparing the first draft of the programme of work, which is based on the five strategies outlined in the draft strategic plan (as shown in Table 2 below). The draft programme of work will be circulated to Member States for consultation over the next few months. The Group of Experts is on schedule to complete its first draft strategic plan and programme of work, which is being made possible by the strong commitment and contribution from its Bureau, working group convenors and supporting experts from Canada and Australia.

Outline of UNGEGN Draft Strategic Plan 2021-2029

- i. Vision
- ii. Aims
- iii. Values
- iv. Strategies
 1. Technical expertise
 2. Relationships, links and connections
 3. Effective work programmes
 4. Culture, heritage and language recognition
 5. Promotion and capacity building
- v. Background to UNGEGN
- vi. Outreach
- vii. Organizational Structure
- viii. UNGEGN Working Groups and Task Teams

Table 2: Outline of UNGEGN Draft Strategic Plan, showing strategies 1-5

Alignment of UNGEGN’s work to the 2030 Agenda

9. ECOSOC provides the central platform for fostering debate and innovative thinking, forging consensus on ways forward, and coordinating efforts to achieve internationally agreed goals. Importantly, ECOSOC operates at the centre of the United Nations system and works to advance all three pillars of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental. It is also responsible for the follow-up to a number of major United Nations conferences and summits. A cornerstone of the work of ECOSOC is the promotion of sustainable development and the implementation and evaluation of the 2030 Agenda.

10. UNGEGN is currently focused on organizing its work to address its core mandate and that of supporting the broader United Nations system. In recognition of the overarching ambitions of the 2030 Agenda, the Group of Experts has added ‘supporting sustainable development’ to its session agenda as item 8; which was addressed for the first time in April 2019 at its first session of the “new” UNGEGN. In pursuance of **Recommendation 3** (see [E/C.20/2020/17/Add.1](#)) from its first session, the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation is conducting an exercise to review the United Nations General Assembly and ECOSOC resolutions noted in [GEGN.2/2019/83/CRP.83](#) for their relevance to the work of UNGEGN. The findings will be submitted in an information report to the Group of Experts for consideration at its second session.

Contribution to ECOSOC Annual meeting of its subsidiary bodies and the High Level Political Forum

11. The United Nations system plays a critical role in supporting Member States’ implementation of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). System-wide coherence at global, regional, sub-regional and country levels is crucial for the United Nations system to deliver on its mandates effectively. The annual meeting of ECOSOC with the chairs of its functional commissions and expert bodies, and the high level political forum (HLPF) on SDGs follow-up and review, are two mechanisms which are used by the United Nations to encourage other multilateral processes, agencies and entities to participate and present the alignment of their work with the SDGs and their contribution to the process.

12. On 31 January 2020 three members of the UNGEGN Bureau, from France, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea, remotely attended the annual meeting of the Bureau of ECOSOC with the Chairpersons of the Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies. The meeting, which was well attended, focused on contributions of the

ECOSOC eco-system to the 2020 theme of ECOSOC and the HLPF, “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”. UNGEGN’s Chair interventions focused on the planned contribution to the HLPF thematic review and ECOSOC, as well as the Group of Expert’s status on the implementation of the provisions of General Assembly resolution 72/305 on the strengthening of ECOSOC. This included the addition of supporting sustainable development to UNGEGN’s agenda and the adoption of three recommendations aimed at aligning its work to that of the wider UN and ECOSOC, including the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work. UNGEGN’s Bureau noted their appreciation for the dialogue, which allowed them to acquire a deeper understanding of the important work of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies, and to discuss ideas for further enhancing the relationship with the Council and their work.

13. ECOSOC Functional Commissions, and other intergovernmental bodies and forums, are invited annually by the President of ECOSOC to provide substantive inputs into the HLPF, to showcase their contribution towards the 2030 Agenda in general, and particularly for the SDGs and respective targets that are most relevant to their respective mandates. In March 2020, UNGEGN submitted its contribution to the 2020 HLPF by showcasing the body’s key policies, measures and recommendations related to its work relevant to the 2020 theme “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development” and specifically consistent to target 11.4 - strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage. UNGEGN’s contribution to the 2020 HLPF is available here on the [Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform](#).

Some UNGEGN Working Groups and Divisional activities

14. The current COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the cancellation or postponement of several in person divisional and working group meetings and workshops, including the Training and Seminar on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage that was scheduled for 8 to 13 June 2020 in Bali, Indonesia.

III. Collaborative activities

15. This section provides an overview of the activities undertaken to build a stronger relationship between UNGEGN and the Committee of Experts. These collaborative activities include: (i) the Bureaux third physical meeting; (ii) UNGEGN’s participation in the ninth session of the Committee of Experts; and (iii) collaboration with the Regional Committee for UN-GGIM Americas for the CARIGEO initiative.

Meeting of the Bureaux

16. On Thursday 8 August 2019, both Bureaux convened a side meeting on the margins of the ninth session of the Committee of Experts. The meeting was attended by 20 participants from both Bureaux, the UN-GGIM secretariat and the regional committees of UN-GGIM - Africa, the Americas, and Europe.

17. This meeting was markedly different from the two previous meetings, in that two Member States, Indonesia and New Zealand, whose national mapping organizations have responsibility for both geospatial data management and the standardization of geographical names, shared how both groups worked together. Their presentations showcased the work being done on geographical names and the links to geospatial information. The presentations are available on the [UN-GGIM ninth session side event web page](#).

18. The presentations were followed by open discussions. The following challenges were identified: (i) within the two “Geo” communities there is the need to determine who are the relevant speakers in each community per country, given that approximately 60% of all countries do not have geographical names authorities; (ii) at the national level there is the need for database management and the creation of geographical names gazetteers; (iii) focus should be placed on collaborative training opportunities between both groups, and this could be supported by the UN-GGIM Academic network; and (iv) there is a need for mutual reporting and representation by both groups at each other’s annual meetings. An outcome from the discussions was the recommendation to create a Friends of the Liaison UNGEGN and UN-GGIM group that would be responsible for keeping the dialogue going and connecting the technical representatives from both bodies.

19. During the intersessional period the UNGEGN/UN-GGIM Secretariat conducted a few activities to increase awareness of the work and activities being done by both bodies. Articles on UN-GGIM, such as an announcement of the Sixth High Level Forum on UN-GGIM and Geospatial Frameworks being developed by the Committee of Experts, were included in the 57th (November 2019) and 58th (May 2020) issues of the UNGEGN Bulletin, respectively. In addition, the 58th issue of the Bulletin was circulated to the UN-GGIM mailing list, and a short survey executed inviting the UN-GGIM community to indicate their interest in receiving future issues of the bulletin. Twenty-eight geospatial experts from across the globe accepted the invitation and will be future consumers of geographical names standardization articles and work updates.

20. It is hoped that a meeting of both Bureaux could be scheduled to be convened towards the end of January 2021, to advance strengthening of the collaboration between both bodies.

Participation of UNGEGN at the ninth session of the Committee of Experts

21. At the ninth session of the Committee of Experts in August 2019, UNGEGN was represented by its Vice-Chair from the Republic of Korea. The Vice-Chair presented the report of the Group under agenda item sixteen “Strengthening of collaboration with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names”, where two projects were suggested: one to update the UNGEGN World Geographical Names Database, and two, to codify the resolutions of UNGEGN. The summary² and full report³ are available on the UN-GGIM website.

Collaboration with UN-GGIM Americas, CARIGEO initiative

22. CARIGEO is a collaborative effort among the Regional Committee of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management for the Americas (UN-GGIM: Americas), the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-ECLAC or CEPAL), the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEEN), public agencies of Member States and Territories within the Caribbean, geospatial private sector organizations, academic institutions and civil society representatives. This initiative seeks to empower the countries and territories of the Caribbean region to advance the greater use and sharing of geospatial, statistical and related information to support improved decision making for sustainable national and regional development.

23. The overall objective of the CARIGEO initiative is to increase resilience through the strengthening of geospatial information management to support decision making in favor of disaster risk reduction, action for climate change, economic and

² E/C.20/2020/17

³ E/C.20/2020/17/Add.1

sustainable development. This objective will be accomplished through: (i) strengthening geospatial information management governance and policies; (ii) creating datasets and procurement and development of tools for decision making; (iii) enhancing collaboration and partnerships; and (iv) capacity development, communication and engagement to upskill people to benefit the region. UNGEGN's national geographical names authorities' records as at December 2019 indicated that, of the 30 Member States and territories in the Caribbean, only Cuba, Jamaica and Suriname have geographical names authorities. The CARIGEO initiative provides the Group of Experts the opportunity to engage national mapping organizations within the Caribbean countries and territories to consider pursuing geographical names standardization and encourage the creation of national names authorities, the definition of geographical names standardization procedures, and sharing the significant cultural and historical value of geographical names to a country's peoples.

24. Geographical names standardization will be included as a component in the CARIGEO programme of work. UNGEGN's input will be largely technical support and capacity development. The scope of UNGEGN's contribution will however be dependent on the level of engagement Caribbean Member States and territories wish to have, and the funding that becomes available. The CARIGEO initiative is in its initial stages and is actively seeking funding to support its programme of work. UNGEGN's collaboration with UN-GGIM Americas and its partners under the CARIGEO initiative represents one significant area of joint work in which both bodies will create synergies, coherence and strengthen their relations. The Group of Experts looks forward to the opportunity to support the national mapping/geospatial data management organizations in the Caribbean to build awareness on the importance of geographical names standardization and the creation of national names authorities.

IV. Possible collaborative work items

25. It is noted that both intergovernmental bodies acknowledge the need to strengthen their relations, have mutual representation and identify items for collaborative work. This is further supported by decision 8/114 of the Committee of Experts at its eighth session, where it welcomed the proposal to create a liaison group tasked with defining operational working relations and coordinating future collaborative work. The Group of Experts wishes to bring decision 8/114 to create a liaison group, to the attention of the Committee of Experts for consideration. It is proposed that this liaison group may be composed of two representatives from each body. The liaison group would be responsible for leading and managing the interaction between both expert bodies, which includes providing a regular flow of information between both bodies' experts, and identifying areas of work that would be of mutual benefit to their respective Member States.

26. The following potential areas for collaboration are being brought to the attention of the Committee of Experts for their consideration and future action: (i) at the national level, where national mapping agencies/geospatial information management agencies and geographical names authorities are separate organizations, both may consider forging links to share and exchange technical expertise, share geographical names data, and conduct joint data collection exercises among other cost saving and efficiency initiatives; (ii) work jointly at the global, regional and national level to encourage and communicate the benefits of geographical names standardization and the importance of creating names authorities; (iii) at the global level, pursue joint capacity building initiatives, particularly for those countries in transition and on the cusp of implementing national geospatial information management systems; and (iv) the Group of Experts contribute to the implementation of the data strategic pathway of the Implementation Guide of the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework.

V. Recommended for noting by the Committee of Experts

27. The Committee of Experts is invited to take note of the report of the Group of Experts, including its strategic plan and programme of work, and suggestion to convene a joint Bureaux meeting towards the end of January 2021, to advance strengthening of collaboration between both bodies. The Committee is also invited to urge Member States to strengthen and/or create awareness and encourage the standardization of geographical names in Member States and territories of the Caribbean under the CARIGEO initiative.