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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 (UNGEGN) for consideration by the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management.

At its tenth session, held virtually on 26 and 27 August and 4 September 2020, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 10/112, in which it congratulated the Group of Experts on its efforts to develop a strategic plan and programme of work in a transparent manner and aligned to the priorities of Member States as well as the broader United Nations development agenda. The Committee reaffirmed the importance of a stronger relationship between the Committee and the Group of Experts to strengthen communication and collaborative activities between geospatial information management authorities and geographical names authorities at the national level and across themes, including creating awareness on toponymy and sharing guidelines, methods and practices on the standardization of geographical names. Furthermore, the Committee supported the establishment of a liaison group between the Committee and the Group of Experts to act as a guiding mechanism to manage the flow of information between the two bodies and to continue to identify areas of joint work, and welcomed the proposal to convene a joint meeting of the Bureau of the Committee and the Bureau of the Group in early 2021.

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 tenth session. This report contains an overview of the Group's second session, held virtually from 3 to 7 May 2021, and of its intersessional activities, including the development of its strategic plan and programme of work, which is aligned with the larger policy framework of the United Nations, and its actions to encourage and assist in the creation of geographical names authorities. The Group also highlights the work being done to support efficient geographical names data management, and emphasizes the importance of innovation in methodology and technology for the development of integrated national geographical names databases, web services and applications for a variety of purposes. They may be used, for

* E/C.20/2021/1

example, in the health-care and emergency response fields, in particular for management of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, or to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals

I. Introduction

1. At its tenth session, held virtually on 26 and 27 August and 4 September 2020, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 10/112, in which it welcomed the report of the Group of Experts (see E/C.20/2020/34) and congratulated the Group of Experts on its efforts to develop a strategic plan and programme of work in a transparent manner and aligned to the priorities of Member States as well as the broader United Nations development agenda. The Committee reaffirmed the importance of a stronger relationship between the Committee and the Group of Experts to strengthen communication and collaborative activities between geospatial information management authorities and geographical names authorities at the national level and across themes, including creating awareness on toponymy and sharing guidelines, methods and practices on the standardization of geographical names.

2. The Committee supported the establishment of a liaison group between the Committee and the Group of Experts to act as a guiding mechanism to manage the flow of information between the two bodies and to continue to identify areas of mutually beneficial work, and welcomed the proposal to convene a joint meeting of the Bureau of the Committee and the Bureau of the Group in early 2021. Furthermore, the Committee supported efforts by Member States, the regional commissions and the regional committees to encourage and assist in the creation of geographical names authorities, particularly in African countries, and to strengthen and enhance the functionalities of the GeoNyms application for capturing and validating toponyms, so that geographical names authorities are recognized as the sole source of validated and approved names reflecting national cultural, social and historical heritages.

3. This present report contains an overview of the Group's second session, held virtually from 3 to 7 May 2021, and of its intersessional activities, including the development of its Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029, which is aligned with the larger policy framework of the United Nations, and its actions to encourage and assist in the creation of geographical names authorities. The Group also highlights the work being done to support efficient geographical names data management and emphasizes the importance of innovation in methodology and technology for the development of integrated national geographical names databases, web services and applications for a variety of purposes. 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

UNGEEN 2021/Second Session

4. The [2021/second UNGEGN session](#) was convened from 3 to 7 May 2021, with two meetings (9:00-11:00am and 3:00-5:00pm EDT) each day. This was done against the background of the ongoing extraordinary and unprecedented situation of the global pandemic and the continued risks and restrictions associated with international travel by representatives from capitals and quarantine requirements of the host country. All these factors made it necessary to convene the 2021/second session in an informal virtual format, with reduced meeting times and remote simultaneous interpretation in six official United Nations languages.

5. The virtual format and reduced meeting times necessitated introduction of new procedures. These included: the use of silence procedure, the submission of written statements prior to session start, and informing the UNGEGN Secretariat in advance of the meeting of the delegation's intention to speak per agenda item. The format of general discussions remained as with physical/in person meetings, which entailed the introduction of papers, followed by interventions from delegations and delivery of a summary of the statements and discussions by the Chair/presiding officer of the agenda item.

6. Given 10 meetings over five days, of four hours each day, with an average of 100 delegates on the Interprefy virtual platform, 54 of 130 working papers submitted were introduced and discussed. The session addressed the theme "Geographical Names Supporting Sustainable Development and Management of the Pandemic". This theme supports General Assembly resolution 70/1, which called for ECOSOC's inter-governmental bodies and forums to reflect the integrated nature of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) as well as the interlinkages between them. Discussions were supported by 101 written statements submitted by 22 countries, three divisions and one working group. Of particular note was the robust dialogue and interventions from the floor supported by an active chat stream.

7. Noteworthy highlights of the session included, (a) discussions on engaging online web map providers, to advocate the use and need for using standardized geographical names on their web maps, (b) the side event on "*Creating an Equal Society through Geographical Names*" which generated welcomed interest from 70 participants. It is expected that the Group of Experts will consider developing guidelines aimed at equality and inclusion in geographical names in harmony with the principles on restoring, protecting, and preserving cultural heritage, noting the contribution to relevant UN SDG's, and (c) approval of the Group's [Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029](#), which was developed over two years by UNGEEN's Bureau and Working Group Convenors with input from its membership through three global consultations and a side event to the 2021/second session. All these meetings and activities were done across many time zones, which is an indicator of the commitment and strong interest from delegates particularly those from Asia and the Pacific, in the work of UNGEEN.

8. Through consensus, the dates and provisional agenda for the 2023/third UNGEEN session, the procedural report and recommendations and decisions emanating from the session were successfully adopted under silence procedure effective 12 May 2021. At the end of the 2021/second session the Group invited delegates to complete its session evaluation survey and contact information for national geographical names authorities. The information generated from the session evaluation is used to improve the work of the Group of Experts and support planning of its next session. The UNGEEN 2021/second session report ([E/2021/69](#)) is now available in all six UN languages. The 2023/third session of UNGEEN is scheduled for 1-5 May 2023.

UNGEEN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029

9. A strategic plan coupled with its programme of work is designed to provide a forward and focused vision, enables increased operational efficiency, directs the prioritization of tasks, serves for the effective allocation of resources and importantly, supports the alignment of an organization's goals with that of its stakeholders. A strategic plan and programme of work were considered necessary in order to build on the advancements made in modernizing and making the Group of Experts operations efficient, to strengthen the Group's alignment with other expert bodies of ECOSOC and support ECOSOC's work on advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

10. Following the adoption of the Group of Experts report on its first session convened from 29 April to 3 May 2019 in New York, ECOSOC at its 36th plenary meeting on 23 July 2019 ([E/2019/99](#)), adopted Recommendation 1 ([E/2019/75](#)) which requested that the Bureau of the Group of Experts undertake the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work for the new UNGEEN, to be presented for consideration at its second session in May 2021.

11. In accordance with Recommendation 1, the Bureau and working group convenors with support of the UNGEEN Secretariat and Member State representatives undertook the preparation of the draft strategic plan and programme of work beginning in September 2019. An important element of the exercise was the engagement of Member State representatives through three global consultations. This facilitated Member State contribution and ensured a transparent document development process. The major features of the three global

consultations are shown in Table 1. Additional details on the global consultations is available on the UNGEGN web site at the [Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029 page](#).

Dates	Consultation Request	Output
1st Global Consultation September to December 2019	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.	The first version of the draft strategic plan outlining the vision, values, aims and five overall strategies was prepared based on feedback received.
2nd Global Consultation June to August 2020	Member States were invited to review and submit feedback/comments on the draft strategic plan.	The draft strategic plan was revised, and an accompanying programme of work prepared.
3rd Global Consultation February to March 2021	Member states were invited to review and provide feedback on a 38-page draft document, paying particular attention to each of the five strategies and related action items.	The second draft of the Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029 was prepared based on feedback received.

Table 1 Global Consultation Exercises

12. In addition to the three global consultations, a virtual side event to the 2021/second session was held on Thursday 25 March 2021, to provide UNGEGN representatives and stakeholders with a clear overview on the contents of its draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029. The side event was attended by 124 toponymic experts, cartographers, linguists, and other stakeholders from around the world. Topics covered at the side event included: (1) why a strategic plan? what are the benefits? (2) the development process (3) the structure and main contents of the plan and programme of work, (4) financing, implementation, monitoring and updating and (5) the way forward. This was followed by open discussions. Based on the comments received the document was further revised to create the final version which was submitted to the Group of Experts at its 2021/second session for adoption.

13. The Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029 and supporting documentation are available at [UNGEKN Draft Strategic Framework](#). The document is to be broken up into select relevant parts and translated into all UN languages. UNGEGN Working Groups have begun to plan, align and assign responsibilities for the implementation of the programme of work as per the five strategic goals. Over the next two years UNGEGN plans to focus on revitalizing its Divisions and establish a Trust Fund to support the implementation of its Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029, with special emphasis on capacity building across Member States. It is to be noted that the strategic planning exercise is an ongoing process and therefore UNGEGN's Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029 is to be considered a living document, subject to continued reassessment and revision. The UNGEGN Bureau noted that its work will be subjected to unanticipated opportunities and threats which will impact the strategies and programme of work, thus necessitating corresponding response and revision of the document.

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

14. 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. The cornerstones of the work of ECOSOC is the promotion of sustainable development, the implementation and evaluation of the 2030 Agenda and COVID-19 transformative recovery.

15. The United Nations system plays a critical role in supporting Member States' implementation of the 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, national to global COVID-19 recovery efforts and their contribution to the processes.

16. On 1 February 2021 two members of the UNGEGN Bureau, from France and the United States of America, remotely attended [the annual meeting of the Bureau of ECOSOC with the Chairpersons of the Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies](#). The meeting was well attended and focused on contributions of the ECOSOC eco-system to the 2021 theme of ECOSOC and the HLPF, "Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development". [UNEGN Chair's intervention](#) shared the technical importance of the Group's work, how it contributes to the 2030 Agenda, and what is being done to align its work to ECOSOC's vision and related resolutions. Some significant points shared were (i) The importance of standardized geographical names, given the current example of the naming of diseases or variants by geographical names, because this creates biases, discriminatory and xenophobic actions, and (ii) the upcoming session of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names would be held 3-5 May 2021, virtually under the theme "Geographical Names supporting sustainable development and management of the pandemic" which is aligned to the annual theme of the HLPF on Sustainable Development. The [Summary report of the 2021 joint meeting of the ECOSOC subsidiary bodies](#) highlighted six main takeaways and recommendations, some of which addressed the desire to foster an integrated and inclusive approach to building back better and leaving no one behind, ECOSOC's coordinating role is a powerful instrument to enhance collaboration and unlock synergies, and cooperation with other bodies within and outside the UN system is important.

17. UNGEGN was also invited by ECOSOC to provide substantive inputs to the thematic review of the HLPF on Sustainable Development. ECOSOC noted that the contribution could showcase the views and guidance of UNGEGN on those aspects of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the various measures and types of international cooperation that can control the pandemic and its impacts and put the world back on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030, within the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development. In March 2021, UNGEGN submitted its contribution to the 2021 HLPF, which were case studies provided by experts from Austria, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia on the importance of standardized geographical names in the management

of the COVID-19 pandemic. UNGEGN's contribution to the 2021 HLPF is available on the [Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform](#).

18. UNGEGN was also invited to participate in ECOSOC's Integration Dialogues, which were part of the preparatory process of the Integration Segment of the HLPF. The objective of the dialogues was to provide an opportunity to identify the key policy options to inform deliberations at the Integration Segment, and critical guidance on integration policies that should be implemented. The dialogues focused on identifying the most creative ideas emanating from the work of the Council's subsidiary bodies and the UN system to continue facing and recover better from COVID-19. **Dialogue 1** examined institutional strengthening, governance, inclusion and the rule of law (27 May 2021), **Dialogue 2** addressed building back better towards inclusive, sustainable, and just economies for recovery: Re-designing the contract between people and planet (3 June 2021) and **Dialogue 3**, focused on human well-being and capabilities: Building back more resilient, healthy, equitable and sustainable societies (10 June 2021). Due to competing events UNGEGN was only able to participate in Integration Dialogue 2 on 3 June 2021. This Dialogue focused mainly on - vaccine policy and ensuring that the peoples of the world are vaccinated, economic recovery post COVID 19, realignment to SDG's - getting back on track, climate change and the green economy- reducing carbon emissions. The integration dialogues were informal discussion sessions that were open to all Member and Observer States of the United Nations, as well as to all UN system and civil society. Each dialogue had a panel composed of representatives of subsidiary bodies of the Council and UN agencies, followed by an interactive discussion.

Some UNGEGN Bureau, Working Groups and Divisional activities

19. During the intersessional period the UNGEGN Secretariat planned and convened 5 expanded virtual Bureau (Bureau and convenors of working groups and task teams) meetings and two virtual core Bureau meetings. All meetings had approximately 80% participation from Bureau and Working Group members, which indicate the unwavering level of commitment and support from UNGEGN's leadership. Most meetings were operational rather than strategic, which accounted for durations of two to three hours. This demanded the resilience of members particularly those from Asia and the Pacific, given the significant difference in time with New York, USA. Table 2 shows the dates of seven virtual meetings convened from November 2020 to April 2021. The UNGEGN Expanded Bureau is scheduled to have its next meeting on 8 October 2021.

20. 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 2020 in Bali, Indonesia.

	Date of Meeting	UNGEKN Bureau
1	27 November 2020	Core Bureau
2	3 December 2020	Core Bureau
3	11 December 2020	Expanded Bureau
4	15 January 2021	Expanded Bureau
5	5 February 2021	Expanded Bureau
6	19 March 2021	Expanded Bureau
7	9 April 2021	Expanded Bureau

Table 2 List of UNGEGN Bureau virtual meetings 2020 - 2021

21. The UNGEGN Secretariat at the first session had announced the development of a World Geographical Names Database prototype GIS web application. This exercise has not progressed as much as had anticipated due to several factors. Notwithstanding, the UNSD and by extension the UNGEGN Secretariat recognizes the importance and use of the World Geographical Names Database, that was created in 2004, in accordance with Resolution IX/6 of the ninth Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, and remains committed to supporting this platform.

22. The UNSD is therefore currently updating the World Geographical Names Database to reflect prevailing information technology practices. These updates include added functionalities which enable multiple users to view and edit geographical names of cities and countries, add indigenous names, and link cities and countries to other external resources. The update to the map interface remains a challenge, given that Adobe Flash Player is no longer supported. This means that the existing interactive maps cannot be displayed, and in addition the world map has changed. The United Nations Clear Map (a background reference web mapping service) was identified as the best option to replace the existing outdated base map, however its use is further being explored to ascertain its applicability given the requirements of the UNGEGN user community.

23. Future work includes the UNGEGN Secretariat exploring the use of innovative technologies to enable the modelling of changes to toponyms over time and enabling the linking of geographical locations with toponyms. The UNGEGN Secretariat looks forward to continuing this work with the participation of relevant stakeholders over the coming months and years to ensure that the data contained within the database is up-to-date and reflects national perspectives.

III. Collaborative activities

24. 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) UNGEGN's participation in the tenth session of the Committee of Experts, and (ii) collaboration with the Regional Committee for UN-GGIM Americas for the Caribbean Geospatial (CARIGEO) initiative.

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

25. At the tenth virtual informal session of the Committee of Experts in August 2020, UNGEGN was represented by its Chair from France. The Chair presented the [report of the Group](#) under agenda item fourteen "Strengthening of collaboration with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names". Based on the paper presented, 12 statements were delivered. Eight were from the following Member States – in the order received, (Republic of Korea, Brazil, Argentina, United Kingdom, India, Ecuador, Sweden and Germany), three from the UN-GGIM Regional Committees for Africa, America and Europe and one from an Observer – Pan American Institute for Geography and History (PAIGH). The summary¹ and full report² are available on the UN-GGIM website.

¹ E/C.20/2020/34

² E/C.20/2020/34/Add.1

Collaboration with UN-GGIM Americas, CARIGEO initiative

26. 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 sustainable development. 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.

27. The Group of Experts [Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy](#) will be inviting geographers, geospatial professionals, cartographers, historians, names experts, academics and interested stakeholders to join them on 31 August 2021 to participate in a two hour webinar entitled "*Geographical names standardization supporting national development*". The webinar is being designed to improve awareness, increase knowledge and understanding and strengthen skills in the principles and techniques of geographical naming with a special focus on cultural heritage. UNGEGN 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

28. 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 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 call for the creation of a liaison body was further strengthened at the UN-GGIM tenth session. In the report [E/2021/46-E/C.20/2020/35](#) decision 10/112 supported the establishment of a liaison group between the Committee of Experts and the Group of Experts to act as a guiding mechanism to manage the flow of information between the two bodies and to continue to identify areas of joint work, and welcomed the proposal to convene a joint meeting of the Bureau of the Committee and the Bureau of the Group in early 2021. UNGEGN acknowledges with regret that it has proved an uphill task to implement this decision.

29. It is proposed that other strategies and approaches be adopted to generate the interest needed to strengthen the collaboration between both bodies.

30. 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; (iv) the Group of Experts contribute to the implementation of the data strategic pathway of the Implementation Guide of the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework and (v) the Group of Experts facilitate collaborations and workshops on Linked Data between national names authorities and Linked Data practitioners in order to provide practical guidance on organizational and technical issues and processes, to

continue to share information and case studies, to demonstrate the combined benefits of standardized geographical names management and Linked Data development, and to enable intercommunication of Linked Data, amongst others, providing an overview of ontologies.

V. Recommended for noting by the Committee of Experts

31. The Committee of Experts is invited to:

(a) Take note of the report of the Group of Experts, and suggestion to explore the feasibility of designing and developing collaborative project(s) aimed at supporting the work items being pursued by both bodies and aligned ECOSOC's work priorities;

(b) Urge Member States to strengthen and/or create awareness and encourage collaboration at the national level between national geospatial management organizations and national names authorities where relations do not currently exist, to share good practices and methodologies; and

(c) Encourage open and regular dialogue to identify synergies and opportunities for collaboration and learning between the Group and the Committee, and that these be reported formally at respective sessions, with accountability for actions and outcomes documented.