
Economic and Social Council

27 July 2018

Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management

Eighth session

New York, 1-3 August 2018

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 of the report

The present paper contains the report prepared by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names for consideration by the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management.

At its seventh session, held in New York from 2 to 4 August 2017, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 7/114, in which it welcomed the report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and endorsed the proposal to build a stronger relationship between the Group of Experts and the Committee to advance the cause of geographical names and geospatial information management, keeping the process technical and not political in nature. In addition, the Committee expressed support for the common principles of cooperation as a positive communication tool, a means for closer collaboration, and for the strengthening of arrangements in geospatial information management. Furthermore, the Committee recognized that the real benefits of cooperation and collaboration would need to be anchored at the national level and that it would be critical for national delegates from the Group of Experts and the Committee to establish and continue their outreach on an ongoing basis. In this report, the Group of Experts presents its activities undertaken at the global and national levels as part of its efforts to strengthen collaboration and implement the decisions made by the Committee at its seventh session. The report includes information on the first physical meeting convened between the two Bureaux, in August 2017; the contribution of the Group of Experts to the work on global fundamental geospatial data themes; an update on the modernization of its operations, including changes to the duration and frequency of meetings, and the drafting and approval of its new rules and procedures and draft agenda; an overview of its working groups and divisional activities and proposals for strengthening collaboration between both Bureaux for consideration by the Committee.

* E/C.20/2018/1

I. Background

1. At its seventh session, held in New York from 2 to 4 August 2017, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 7/114, in which it welcomed the report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) and commended its efforts to engage in dialogue with the Committee to define an effective and streamlined relationship between UNGEGN and the Committee. The Committee of Experts endorsed the proposal to build a stronger relationship between UNGEGN and the Committee, to advance the cause of geographical names and geospatial information management keeping the process technical and not political in nature, and supported the common principles of cooperation as a positive communication tool and a means for closer collaboration. The decision recognized that the real benefits of cooperation and collaboration would need to be anchored at the national level and that it would be critical for national delegates from UNGEGN and the Committee to establish and continue their outreach on an ongoing basis.

2. This report describes the activities undertaken by UNGEGN at the global and national levels as part of the efforts to strengthen collaboration and implement the decisions of the seventh session of the Committee of Experts, including a report on the first meeting of both Bureaux, and an update on the future organization and methods of work of UNGEGN. The Committee of Experts is invited to take note of the report and to express its views on efforts for the strengthening of collaborative relations with UNGEGN in the short and long terms.

II. Collaborative activities

3. The present section provides an overview of the activities, comprising joint meeting and participation across working groups, as part of efforts to build a stronger relationship between UNGEGN and the Committee. These collaborative activities include: (i) the Bureaux first face to face meeting, (ii) UNGEGN participation in the seventh session of the Committee of Experts, (iii) the Committee's participation in the 30th session of UNGEGN and the 11th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN), and (iv) UNGEGN's support to the Committee's work on global fundamental geospatial data themes.

Meeting of the Bureaux

4. The first UNGEGN and the Committee's Bureaux physical meeting was held on Saturday 5th August 2017 at United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD). The meeting was convened as a follow up to the Bureaux first virtual meeting held on 8th February 2017 in pursuant to decision 7/114 of the seventh session of the Committee of Experts. In attendance were five members of UNGEGN led by its Chair from Australia, four members of the Committee led by its co-Chair from the United States of America, and three members of the Secretariats.

5. The commonalities between UNGEGN and the Committee, coordination and communication mechanisms and the possible creation of a liaison group were discussed. The major points of agreement reached at this meeting were: (i) the first step towards collaboration should be communication followed by a joint project or initiative, (ii) Collaboration with UNGEGN is to be included on the Committee's annual session agenda and vice versa (iii) that representatives of UNGEGN and the Committee be encouraged to communicate and collaborate, particularly at the national level, make joint decisions and identify opportunities for working together, and (iv) coordination between UNGEGN and the Committee is best served at both the high management level globally, as well as at the operational level nationally.

6. In support of strengthening communication, the recommendations were: (i) articles, web links, newsletters and calendar of events should be shared and exchanged (ii) the resolutions or decisions should be shared between the two entities, and (iii) the creation of a liaison group of the Bureaux, consisting of three representatives from each entity. In addition, both entities were encouraged by its Secretariat to emphasize the purpose of, and support the global development agenda, with focus on security, humanitarian and disaster management, and align their work programs to that of the United Nations.

7. During the intersessional period the Secretariat for both entities implemented these recommendations, including the sharing of decisions of the Committee with UNGEGN, contribution of articles which have been issued in each entities' newsletters, and relevant links have been posted to each group's website.

8. The next virtual meeting of both Bureaux is expected to be held on the margins of the eighth session of the Committee of Experts.

Participation of UNGEGN at the 7th Session of the Committee of Experts

9. The Chair of UNGEGN presented its report¹ and supporting background document to the Committee of Experts at its seventh session. The thrust of the report was to raise awareness on the importance and value of geographical names to the geospatial community. The following messages were shared: (i) all features in the geographic information environment are important and each layer has a specific and important role to play, (ii) geographical names have a role both as a spatial data theme and for cross-referencing and linking between geospatial data layers, as well as being a bridge to aspatial data, and (iii) the absence of standardized geographical names limits the capability of geographic information systems to provide accurate and reliable decision and quality outputs. The Chair also shared the six common principles of cooperation, a list of immediate and long-term actions for collaboration and outlined UNGEGN's request to the Committee.

10. The Committee welcomed UNGEGN's reports and commended its efforts to engage in dialogue with the Committee of Experts. It also endorsed the proposal to build a stronger relationship between UNGEGN and the Committee to advance the cause of geographical names and geospatial information management, and expressed support for the common principles of cooperation as a positive communication tool and a means for closer collaboration.

Participation of the Committee at the 30th UNGEGN Session and 11th UNCSGN

11. The 30th session of UNGEGN and the 11th UNCSGN were held back to back from 7 to 18 August 2017. A total of 65 Member States represented by 253 delegates, mostly senior government officials from the national naming authorities or geospatial information agencies responsible for geographical names data production and services. The conference celebrated its 50th anniversary with an exhibition, 13 special presentations and six panel discussions. The special presentations are available on the conference website². In its official business the conference reviewed over 180 technical reports on topics such as 'toponymic data files and gazetteers', 'writing systems and pronunciations' and 'toponymic education'. Among the new substantive topics discussed were the relevance of standardized geographical names for the 2030 Agenda and the Sendai Framework, as well as the cooperation arrangements with the Committee of Experts.

¹ E/C.20/2017/17/Add.1 – submitted for the seventh session of the Committee of Experts, August 2017

² <https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNEGN/ungegnConf11Add.html>

12. The main outcomes of the meetings were: (i) a draft resolution to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on streamlining and reforming the working methods of UNGEGN, and (ii) adopting the Unified Arabic Transliteration System (Beirut 2007 system). The draft resolution, which was adopted on consensus by UNGEGN, proposed to simplify its structure by integrating the UNCSGN and the Session of UNGEGN, and changing to a regular meeting rhythm of five days every two years.

13. During the first session of the 11th UNCSGN, the co-chair of the Committee from the United States of America delivered a special presentation under the agenda item four, "Reflection of the past, present and future: the fiftieth anniversary of the UNCSGN". The Group of Experts invites official representation of the Committee at the Group's biennial plenary sessions; similar representation has been accorded by UN-GGIM to the UNGEGN Bureau at the Committee's annual plenary sessions.

Contributing to the Committee's work on global fundamental geospatial data themes

14. UNGEGN has two nominated experts participating in the Committee's Working Group on Global Fundamental Geospatial Data Themes and they have made considerable contributions to preparing the description of the theme "Geographical Names", one of the 14 adopted Global Fundamental Geospatial Data Themes. The contribution to this theme description focused on the essence of geographical names as a data theme, noting that this more than any other inter-relates across the themes. The theme will be presented to the Committee of Experts at its eighth session in August 2018.

15. UNGEGN also contributed to the work of the Working Group on Core Data³ of the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM: Europe) concerning "Geographical Names" and recommended two main use cases. The first was search criteria in geoportals, which require completeness, the second use case is mapping, for which population and true geometry (providing feature size) are useful selection criterion. UNGEGN's input largely focused on conveying the importance of geographical names as an indication of cultural heritage and history, and also demonstrating geographical names' uniqueness, which does not appear in imagery, however they are of vital importance in crisis situations.

16. At the plenary meeting of UN-GGIM: Europe on 6 to 7 June 2018, in Brussels, the Committee's Working Group on Global Fundamental Geospatial Data Themes conducted a workshop. The objective of the Workshop was to introduce to participants the work and output of the Working Group, to consider how the themes apply to the SDGs, how the work relates to existing work streams in Europe, and how Europe can take the themes forward. Concerning "Geographical Names" it was discussed whether they play a specific role for the SDGs⁴. Apart from the importance of standardized geographical names for the identification of the features, the cultural aspects and the language issues related to geographical names can become crucial.

³ Core Data (= Fundamental Data) has been defined as the geospatial data that are the most useful, either directly or indirectly, to analyse, to achieve and to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe (INSPIRE) constitutes an important foundation for the interoperability and harmonisation of geospatial data in Europe. This is why Core Data aims to complement INSPIRE by ensuring common (minimum) content for supporting SDGs.

⁴ More information can be obtained from the UNGEGN Bulletin No. 54 "Geographical names supporting sustainable development" which was published in June 2018.

Regional collaboration, geographical names database development for Africa

17. GeoNyms, previously called AfricanGaz is an open-source database application created by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to be used by national names and/or mapping authorities for the collection, validation, storage and dissemination of geographical names data and services within a national geospatial data infrastructure. It was envisaged that GeoNyms would motivate African countries to revitalize their geographical names authorities, or to establish them where none exist.

18. The Africa Gazetteer project has been a part of UNECA's work programme since its inception. It has been tested in Ethiopia and Botswana, and other Member States have expressed an interest to learn more about GeoNyms. The programme was bolstered by the Gaborone Action Plan on Geographical Names and has been one of the pillars for the implementation of the African Spatial Data Infrastructure. UNGEGN over the years has promoted the use of the GeoNyms database at meetings, conferences and toponymic training courses. It is noted that implementation of the project has lost pace due to lack of financial resources. There is need for additional effort to revamp the current version of the application and to organize training workshops to build capacity in Member States to use the application.

19. Based on interest expressed by Member States in Africa to have the GeoNyms programme revitalized, UNGEGN consulted with UNECA on the matter. The African Centre for Statistics has advised that UNECA will assist in the redesign and development of the functionalities to enhance the application, organize ad-hoc workshops on the sidelines of geospatial related events in Africa to present the application, and conduct advisory missions to African countries as needed.

20. UNGEGN strongly supports UNECA's proposal as it fits into the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework, and the work being done on Global Fundamental Geospatial Data Themes by the Committee. Considering that GeoNyms can be customized to meet individual country requirements, it is envisioned that it could also be used by other developing countries and small island developing states. UNGEGN awaits an update from UNECA on the restart of the GeoNyms programme, including a commencement date and a workplan.

III. Other UNGEGN areas of work

Modernization of its operations

21. Since the 1960s there have been 11 United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and 30 sessions of UNGEGN; the duration of the conference and the sessions, the agendas and organization of works, have been modified to meet the changing needs. After fifty years in keeping with advances in technology and the need for effective use of resources in both the Member States and the United Nations, the UNGEGN Bureau thought it was timely to review its processes and procedures and methods of work. Based on decision 29/101⁵ and a series of discussions within UNGEGN, the Bureau prepared a draft resolution, and under the leadership of Australia conducted two global consultations and informal discussions, which culminated in resolution E/CONF.105/L3, on 17 August 2017.

22. ECOSOC on 10 November 2017 adopted resolution 2018/2, "Future organization and methods of work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names". The resolution signifies a major restructuring of UNGEGN. The resolution:

⁵ Decision of 29 April 2016 (E/2016/66, sect. I.B.)

(i) discontinues the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in their current format, with the mandates retained by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, (ii) the body will convene biennial sessions, over a period of five days, beginning in 2019, and (iii) the rules of procedure are to be drafted by the Bureau and presented to ECOSOC for adoption in advance of the first session of UNGEGN scheduled for 29 April to 3 May 2019.

23. Pursuant to ECOSOC resolution 2018/2 of 10 November 2017, the Bureau of UNGEGN prepared its draft rules of procedure and draft agenda (which is a combination of the agendas from past UNCSGN and UNGEGN Sessions). This was done over a period of three months, with intensive virtual meetings and many e-mail exchanges, that reviewed and edited both documents. The Office of the Secretary of UNGEGN and the Office of Legal Affairs were consulted at each iteration, and contributed to the preparation of the documents to ensure that they were in accordance with the accepted standards of practices, procedures and language used by other bodies of ECOSOC. UNGEGN membership was also consulted, and the expanded Bureau reviewed the comments and recommendations from the global consultation, incorporated the suggestions that were deemed suitable and in keeping with the vision, mission and objectives of a “new” UNGEGN. The draft rules of procedure and draft agenda have been presented to ECOSOC Bureau for its consideration. Members of the ECOSOC Bureau consulted with Member States in their region, on whether there was a need to hold informal consultations in New York on the draft rules of procedure and draft agenda. Based on the consultation it was decided that a briefing on UNGEGN and informal consultations were needed. The chair of UNGEGN and the UNGEGN Secretariat delivered the briefing on 26 June 2018, and New Zealand facilitated two informal consultation sessions and negotiated the revised rules of procedure and draft agenda. Consensus on the draft rules of procedure and the agenda was reached on Tuesday 17 July 2018, and the resolution containing them E/2018/L.25 was presented and adopted at the 51st plenary meeting of ECOSOC on 24th July 2018.

UNGEKN Working Groups and Divisional activities

24. Several working groups have been created to consider topics and issues which cut across the Divisional structure of UNGEGN. In addition, UNGEGN has a Task Team for Africa and a Coordinator for Toponymic Guidelines who supports countries in developing their Toponymic Guidelines. Working groups may be formed and disestablished as needs and interests dictate. At present there are nine working groups that meet during UNGEGN sessions as well in the intersessional period. Working groups hold joint meetings to encourage and take advantage of a broader group of participants.

25. UNGEGN is composed of experts from various linguistic/geographical divisions that were established by UNCSGN. Member States decide the division(s) to which they wish to belong; some are members of more than one division. Currently, there are 24 divisions that guide the work of UNGEGN during and between its sessions.

26. UNGEGN Working Group on Country Names and the Working Group on Romanization Systems were invited by the National Geographic Information Council (CNIG), and held meetings at the CNIG and on the premises of the National Institute of Geographic and Forest Information (IGN), Saint-Mandé, Paris, France on 19 March and 20 March 2018, respectively. The Working Group on Country Names discussed updates to its List of Country Names document. The Working Group on Romanization Systems discussed developments in romanization systems for Arabic, Lao, Sinhala, Kazakh, and other scripts and languages.

27. The Working Group on Exonyms was originally established to promote the reduction of exonyms as part of the standardization process. Recently, the value of exonyms has been recognized as part of toponymic heritage of the receiver language, and manifestation of a close connection between the given geographical feature and the external community. The Working Group elaborates on reconciling the above aspects, and has been holding annual meetings, the next is scheduled for 24 to 26 September in Riga, Latvia.

28. The Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation updates the web-based database of UNCSGN resolutions; the four resolutions adopted at the 11th UNCSGN in 2017 will be added. The Working Group is also in the process of establishing an Arabic version of the database, in addition to the existing English, French and Spanish versions. A new scheme will be prepared to accommodate resolutions which will be adopted for UNGEGN from 2019.

29. The Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers conducted a panel discussion at the 11th UNCSGN in August 2017. As an outcome the Working Group has established an Online Discussion Forum on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda issues related to geographical names. This forum provides the Working Group with one platform for UNGEGN and other interested experts to discuss and consider these issues, that will be further streamlined at the next physical meeting of the Working Group in autumn 2018 in Brussels, and the next UNGEGN Session in April/May 2019 in New York. Some articles about the topic “Geographical names supporting sustainable development” have been published in UNGEGN’s Bulletin No 54.⁶

30. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the UN Statistics Division, and UNGEGN’s Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy, in collaboration with the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority of the Philippines (NAMRIA) designed, coordinated and conducted the first regional training course in toponymy including marine toponymy from 19-24 March 2018, in Makati City, Manila, Philippines. The course was attended by 50 participants from six countries in UNGEGN Asia South-East Division namely, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, who represented a cross section of names disciplines.

31. The six day course consisted of lectures, exercises, group discussions, and field work, and covered topics such as the principles and concepts of geographical naming and the standardization of a country’s toponyms, best practices in geographical names data collection including the use of GNSS receivers, place-names history in South East Asia, toponyms as cultural heritage, seafloor topography and sea and coastal naming, toponymic database building and the design and development of gazetteers. All material on the training are available on UNGEGN’s website.⁷

32. A joint meeting of the Dutch- and German-speaking Division and the Norden Division, along with meetings of the Working Group on Publicity and Funding, the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation, the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, and the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage will take place in Brussels, Belgium, 10-13 October 2018. In connection with the meetings, a scientific symposium will be held on the “Role and importance of expert knowledge in the standardization of geographical names”.

33. A course on Geographical Names was held from 25 to 29 March 2018 in the Arab Division of Experts on Geographical Names (ADEGN) in Jordan- Amman, in

⁶ https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/Bulletin/UNGEGN_bulletin_54_finalver.pdf

⁷ UNGEGN training Course- https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEGN/Toponymy_Training_Manila.html.

cooperation with the Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre (RJGC). In attendance were 15 trainees from Arab countries: Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates.

34. This course covered the following topics: geographical names and its importance, basics in Arabic language related with geographical names, collecting names both in office and field, rules of writing landmarks on maps, representing geographical names on maps digitally, Jordan's experience in the field of geographical names, gazetteers and public names in compound geographical names, origins and significances of the names of ancient sites, registering cultural sites on the global heritage list, and the Standardized Arab System of Romanization which was adopted at the 11th UNCSGN, in addition to practical exercises.

IV. The way forward

35. The benefits of collaboration are expected as being amongst others, improved sharing of knowledge, better innovation, and increased agility. These benefits are intangible and are consequently difficult to measure in quantifiable terms. In order to achieve better communication, as well as efficient work management and to establish a proper monitoring and evaluation relationship, UNGEGN Bureau has identified implementable measures.

36. The following immediate implementable measures in the short term are proposed to the Committee of Experts:

(a) UN-GGIM promotes UNGEGN issues for the Fundamental Data Theme - Geographical Names. The two UNGEGN experts will continue to work with the UN-GGIM Working Group on Fundamental Data Themes.

(b) UN-GGIM and UNGEGN will agree to discuss the need for a liaison group for both Bureaux, and if deemed useful will have it established.

(c) UN-GGIM and UNGEGN agree to discuss opportunities for UNGEGN to contribute to the Agenda 2030/SDG indicator discussions and monitoring, e.g. by

- Promoting the involvement of naming experts within the national SDG monitoring activities given that the national coordination bodies recognize the geographical names' topic.
- Inviting Members of UN-GGIM to the joint meeting of the Dutch- and German-speaking Division and the Norden Division in Brussels, Belgium, 10-13 October. At this meeting UNGEGN's contribution to the Agenda 2030/SDG indicator discussions and monitoring will be further discussed.

37. Inviting Members of UN-GGIM Working Group on Fundamental Data Themes to contribute to UNGEGN's Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers Online Discussion Forum on the SDG and 2030 Agenda issues related to geographical names as part of fundamental data themes.

38. The following implementable measures in the long term proposed to the Committee of Experts in 2017 are still valid:

(a) UN-GGIM and UNGEGN agree to work jointly to encourage and communicate the benefits of geographical names standardization and the importance of creating names authorities/committees.

(b) UN-GGIM and UNGEGN agree to develop a collaborative/integrated work plan and common agenda items.

V. Points for discussion

39. The Committee of Experts is invited to:

(a) Take note of the report and progress made by the Group of Experts on Geographical Names;

(b) Express its views on the way forward on building a stronger relationship between UNGEGN and the Committee; and

(c) Encourage participation in future UNGEGN biennial sessions, commencing in 2019.