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Collaboration with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

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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 eighth session, held in New York from 1 to 3 August 2018, the Committee of Experts adopted decision 8/114, in which it commended the efforts of the Group of Experts to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the Committee and to identify items for collaborative work. The Committee also welcomed the proposal to create a liaison group tasked with defining operational working relations and coordinating future collaborative work. The Group was also commended for modernizing its operations in line with Economic and Social Council resolution 2018/2 on the future organization and methods of work of the Group, and the Committee suggested that the collocation of the Group's meetings be explored as a possible cost-saving and further integration measure. In this present report, the Group of Experts presents its activities at the global and national levels as part of its efforts to collaborate on and implement the decisions of the Committee of Experts at its eighth session. The report includes information on the meeting convened in August 2018 between the Bureau of the Group of Experts and the Bureau of the Committee of Experts, and an overview of the decisions of the Group at its first session, held from 29 April to 3 May 2019, of which the major decisions were to undertake the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work, to review its procedures and timing for the preparation and submission of country reports and to review resolutions of the General Assembly and of the Economic and Social Council for their relevance to the work of the Group. In the report, the Group also highlights the collaborative initiatives that it has launched with various intergovernmental bodies, including the Committee of Experts, and its plans for considering other possible methods of cooperation.

* E/C.20/2020/1

I. Introduction

1. At its eighth session, held in New York from 1-3 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. This report describes the activities undertaken by the Group of Experts at the global and national levels to implement the decisions of the eighth session of the Committee of Experts, which includes a report on the meeting of both Bureaux on 2 August 2018. Also discussed in the report is an overview of the Group of Experts first session and the resulting decisions. The Committee of Experts is invited to take note of the report and to express its views on plans for other possible methods of cooperation. Points for discussion and decision are provided in paragraph 28.

II. The Renaissance of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

The first session (2019) of the “New” United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

3. ECOSOC, on 10 November 2017, adopted resolution 2018/2 entitled “Future organization and methods of work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names”. The resolution discontinued 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 transferred to the “new” United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. The first session of the new body was convened from 29 April to 3 May 2019 in New York, with the accompanying theme “Standardization of Geographical Names Matters.” The Session increased the awareness of geographical names standardization, shared the benefits that names provide to the daily functions in national economies and highlighted the role of geographical names as an enabler in preserving cultural heritage. Delegates were empowered to strengthen their efforts to collect, manage and disseminate geographical names and forge partnerships and alliances to advance geographical names standardization.

4. The session was attended by 264 participants representing 70 Member States, one observer state, and two inter-governmental organizations; the International Cartographic Association, and the International Geographical Union. All delegates responding to the session evaluation questionnaire indicated that the session met their expectations in: learning of other countries’ accomplishments and experiences,

¹ E/C.20/2018/17

providing information on their own progress, learning of updates on standardization issues and networking with other experts.

5. Prepared with a new agenda and 123 papers, participants discussed and deliberated on toponymic training and education, place names supporting sustainable development, toponymic data files and gazetteers, romanization systems, exonyms, geographical names as cultural heritage, and toponymic guidelines for map and other editors for international use. In keeping with its new status, a new UNGEGN website was launched and a prototype of the world geographical names database web GIS application demonstrated.

6. The week's activities included special guest presentations on: (i) the "UNGEKN, ECOSOC and 2030 Agenda" by the Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs; (ii) "Second Administrative Level Boundaries" by the Geospatial Information Section of the Office of Information & Communications Technology; (iii) "Experiencing Discrepancies in 'Reputable Data' in the Disaster Management Cycle" by the International Research Institute for Climate and Society, Earth Institute Columbia University; and "Indigenous Issues and Cultural Heritage" by a Vice President of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Also occurring during the week were side events featuring working group and divisional meetings, an orientation session for new attendees, special workshops on "Linked Open Data Developments" and "The Unanswered Questions Relating to Indigenous Toponymy" and a panel discussion with the United Nations Documentation Division on names standardization and ongoing collaboration.

7. To strengthen the representatives of Member States' understanding of UNGEGN and to encourage future participation in sessions and work items, a special welcome exercise was conducted. This included the preparation of welcome packages and assigning members of the expanded bureau based on language competencies, to welcome 19 Member States that were identified as attending the UNGEGN session for the first time, or had not attended for a few years. The exercise was deemed a worthwhile endeavour and the Bureau has agreed to continue the practice in future sessions. Importantly, expanded Bureau members were encouraged to continue interacting with their assigned Member State representatives during the intersessional period, to provide guidance and support on geographical names standardization.

8. The first session ended with the adoption of the draft session report including 6 recommendations and 15 decisions. Officers of the "new" UNGEGN were elected to serve for a period of 4 years as follows: Chair – Mr. Pierre Jaillard from France; the Vice Chairs – Mr. Hasanuddin Abidin from Indonesia and Mr. Sungjae Choo from the Republic of Korea; and the Rapporteurs – Ms. Wendy Shaw from New Zealand and Mr. Trent C. Palmer from the United States of America. The session also marked the farewell to Mr. William Watt of Australia, Chair of the Expert Group who was instrumental in leading the renaissance of UNGEGN. The second session of the Group of Experts is scheduled to be convened from 3 to 7 May 2021.

Resolutions from the first session

9. The Group of Experts agreed on 6 special recommendations to be presented to ECOSOC for adoption. The recommendations are as follows:

Recommendation 1

Undertake the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work for the new UNGEGN, to be adopted at its second session, which, among other items, should take into account:

- (a) The mandate and structure of the Group;
- (b) Support for the creation of new national geographical names authorities and strengthening the operation of existing ones;
- (c) The establishment of funding mechanisms (such as a Trust Fund) to support the implementation of the strategic plan;
- (d) Appropriate branding and publicity of UNGEGN;
- (e) The focus and core goals of its parent body, ECOSOC; and,
- (f) A suitable planning time frame.

Recommendation 2

Review the procedures and timing for the preparation and submission of country reports to the UNGEGN sessions, as well as facilitate interactive processes for presentation of the material contained therein.

Recommendation 3

The appropriate UNGEGN Working Groups (i.e., Evaluation and Implementation, Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage and Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers) shall review the United Nations General Assembly and Economic and Social Council resolutions noted in GEGN.2/2019/83 for their relevance to the work of UNGEGN, and submit the information report of their review, where appropriate, to the Group of Experts at its session for consideration.

Recommendation 4

The UNGEGN Bureau, through the Task Team for Africa, shall continue to urge the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to collaborate with UNGEGN, for example, on the development of the GeoNyms application and implementation of the Gaborone Action Plan as steps to achieve geographical names standardization in the countries of Africa.

Recommendation 5

Establish an ad hoc group under the umbrella of the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage to determine the benefits and scope of investigating the principles and methodology of writing geographical names emanating from unwritten languages.

Recommendation 6

Continue its ongoing liaison with members of the United Nations Documentation Division to help facilitate their work and their optimal use of geographical names, as a follow up to the discussion held between UNGEGN experts and staff of the Documentation Division.

Evaluation of the first session of the “new” UNGEGN

10. The Bureau of the Group of Experts was keen to gain feedback on the staging of the first session in comparison to previous sessions and conferences. Overall the responses were positive, they ranged from the more efficient use of time, the cost savings resulting from a five-day session to increased interaction among delegates. Conversely, there were some suggestions for better management of sessions, for example, balancing representation between Member States and divisions, proper consideration of country reports, and more efficient allocation of time over the five-

day period. The results of the evaluation exercise will be taken into consideration by the Bureau in its preparation for the second session in 2021.

Some UNGEGN Working Groups and Divisional activities

11. A scientific symposium and 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 took place in Brussels, Belgium, 10-13 October 2018. The symposium focused on the “Role and importance of expert knowledge in the standardization of geographical names”.

12. In keeping with the need to publicize the benefits of geographical names standardization and the proposal to UNGEGN in 2014, three events are noted. Canada held its first annual Geographical Names Day in November 2018, successfully launched with emphasis on Indigenous toponymy, by the Geographical Names Board of Canada and Natural Resources Canada as part of Geography Awareness Week. Latvia reported on its first regional Place Names Day (in Valka in October 2018), held in cooperation with the Latvian Language Institute and the Latvian Geospatial Information Agency, as a follow-up to the national Place Names Day devoted to collection, investigation and use of geographical names, held in Rīga in October 2017. Italy also held a Geographical Names Day in October 2017, organized by the Italian Geographical Military Institute in Firenze (Florence). Over 200 people participated in presentations and discussions about UNGEGN’s role, Italy’s standardization of geographical names, and the importance of toponymy in human activities.

III. Collaborative activities

13. 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 second physical meeting; (ii) UNGEGN’s participation in the eighth session of the Committee of Experts; (iii) the Committee’s participation in the first session of the “new” UNGEGN; and (iv) support to the Committee of Experts’ work on global fundamental geospatial data themes.

Meeting of the Bureaux

14. On Thursday 2 August 2018, both Bureaux convened a side meeting on the margins of the eighth session of the Committee of Experts. The meeting was attended by 20 participants from both Bureaux, the Secretariat and regional commissions. Three UNGEGN members participated via WebEx. Representatives from all five regional committees of UN-GGIM - Africa, the Americas, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe participated in the meeting.

15. Representatives of both expert bodies shared that a mix of global, regional and national activities were ongoing, such as the work being done on the UN-GGIM Fundamental Data Themes. Suggested action items emanating from the meeting included: (i) creating an inventory of institutional arrangements to be used to develop a typology of UN-GGIM and UNGEGN organizations, to be circulated to both bodies for discussion; (ii) exploring the possible collaboration with the UN-GGIM Academic Network to consider including geographical names in the delivery of GIS education and training; and (iii) pursuing the creation of a liaison group with representatives from both bodies to provide a regular flow of information between both expert bodies. The liaison group should also be responsible for taking the lead in deciding how the interaction between both bodies should be managed. Both Bureaux are to be consulted

to nominate representatives for the liaison group assuming that both Bureaux consider this to be an appropriate time to establish such a group.

16. During the intersessional period the United Nations Statistics Division, which serves as the Secretariat for both bodies, shared decisions coming out of the sessions of the Committee of Experts and meetings of its Bureau and other relevant information such as meeting announcements and invitations pertaining to the Group of Experts.

17. A meeting of both Bureaux is scheduled to be convened on the margins of this ninth session of the Committee of Experts.

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

18. At the eighth session of the Committee of Experts in August 2018, UNGEGN was represented by its rapporteur from the United States of America. He presented the report of the Group under agenda item sixteen “Strengthening of collaboration with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names”. The summary², full report³ and presentation⁴ are available on the UN-GGIM website.

Participation of the Committee of Experts at the first 2019 UNGEGN Session

19. The Committee of Experts was represented at the first session of the “new” UNGEGN, by a member of the UN-GGIM Secretariat, of the Statistics Division. The representative introduced the report of the Committee of Experts under agenda item 6(b), on behalf of its Bureau.

20. The Group of Experts, in its decision 1/2019/4⁵ recognized that it is important to maintain the relationship between the Group and the organizations with which it maintains liaison, welcomed the existing cooperation between the Group of Experts and the Committee of Experts, and encouraged Member States to endeavour, at the national level, to enable further such cooperation.

21. 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

22. UNGEGN had two nominated experts participating in the Committee's Working Group on Global Fundamental Geospatial Data Themes, making 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 theme, more than any other, inter-relates across all of the themes. The 14 fundamental data themes were adopted by the Committee of Experts at its seventh session in August 2017. At this ninth session recommendations will be proposed to the Committee of Experts to consider the future modalities of the Working Group.

² E/C.20/2018/17

³ E/C.20/2018/17/Add.1

⁴ <http://ggim.un.org/meetings/GGIM-committee/8th-Session/documents>

⁵ E/2019/75

Regional collaboration with UN-GGIM Africa

23. The African gazetteer project has been part of the programme of work of UNECA for many years. Since it began, several major steps have been achieved including the development of a web-based application (GeoNyms) for recording and validating geographical names. The application was tested and deployed in Madagascar (adoption), Botswana, Egypt and Ethiopia (data recording), Senegal (testing), Cameroon and Kenya (expression of interest). UNECA recognizes GeoNyms as one of the key pillars of work of the Regional Committee of UN-GGIM for Africa (UN-GGIM: Africa). However, for more than 5 years, progress has been slow, mainly because of the lack of financial resources to implement some of the activities that have been identified. Recent achievements include: (i) promotion of the significance of geographical names by putting the standardization of geographical names on the agendas of relevant meetings and conferences organized by UNECA; and (ii) presentations and awareness-raising for Member States. The coordinator of the UNGEGN Task Team for Africa represented UNGEGN at the fourth meeting of UN-GGIM: Africa, held from 1 to 4 October 2018 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He delivered a presentation on geographical names activities of the Task Team and urged and encouraged Member States to consider creating as soon as possible their national geographical names authorities.

24. UN-GGIM Africa at its fourth meeting recommended the following: (i) the establishment of a Task Team on the need for, use, and implementation of geographical names as part of the Fundamental Data Themes while taking into account the guidance, guidelines, and procedures from UNGEGN; and (ii) to increase the development of partnerships with regional and international organizations through contributions to, and participation in, several initiatives on geospatial information at national and sub-regional levels: Group on Earth Observation (GEO), UNGEGN, and others.

25. In its report⁶ to the Group of Experts, UNECA were of the opinion that although geographical names are critical in tracking and monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals, the sustained contribution from African countries to the activities of the Group of Experts needs to be improved. There is a need to develop strategic guidance on enhancing capacity-building efforts in Africa, together with increased advocacy and public outreach.

IV. The way forward

26. The Group of Experts has demonstrated its interest in strengthening relations with UN-GGIM through the 2017 paper “Relationship of UNGEGN with UN-GGIM-Building Bridges” tendered at the seventh session of the Committee of Experts. The paper defines three pathways to collaboration at the global, regional and national levels. The Group of Experts has also identified their liaison persons in fulfilment of decision 8/114 from the eighth session of the Committee. The General Assembly, in its resolution A/RES/72/306 encourages ECOSOC, the parent body of both UNGEGN and UN-GGIM, to create synergies and coherence among its subsidiary bodies. It is hoped that both bodies will be able to allocate human resources needed to further explore and identify potential areas for collaboration and joint activities. One possibility for collaboration may be the input and review of the data strategic pathway of the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework, Implementation Guide, which currently is in the drafting phase.

27. The following potential areas for collaboration are being brought to the attention of the Committee of Experts for their consideration: (i) at the national level where

⁶ GEGN.2/2019/58

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 preparation of the data strategic pathway of the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework, Implementation Guide.

V. Points for discussion

28. 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 the Group of Experts and the Committee; and**
- (c) Encourage participation in the second session of UNGEGN in 2021.**