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Coordination of United Nations activities related to geospatial information management

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Note by the Secretariat

Summary

The present paper contains the report of the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG) for consideration by the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management. A related background document prepared by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) is also provided.

At its third session, held in July 2013, the Committee of Experts, by decision 3/110, urged international organizations and agencies that collect geospatial data from countries to make them available in a transparent and coordinated manner; stressed the need for better coordination and clarification of the roles and responsibilities of geospatial information management activities, both within and outside the United Nations system; and requested the Secretariat and UNGIWG to work together and report to the Committee of Experts in that regard. The report of UNGIWG describes the activities of its members in fostering closer coordination with the Committee of Experts, commensurate with the initiatives of the Committee, and within the United Nations geospatial information community. The background document prepared by UNGEGN reflects an initiative of that community, which had voiced the need to work closely with the Committee of Experts.

* E/C.20/2014/1.

I. Activities on geospatial information management within the United Nations system

At its third session, held in July 2013, the Committee of Experts considered the report prepared by the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG) and requested to consider the following decision 3/110:

- (a) Thanked the United Nations Geographical Information Working Group (UNGIWG) for the report on activities related to geospatial information within the United Nations system.
- (b) Urged international organizations and agencies, within and outside the UN system, which collect geospatial data from countries to make them available in a transparent and coordinated manner, while respecting the need to keep the efforts technical in nature, so as to not raise political concerns.
- (c) Stressed the need for better coordination and clarification of roles and responsibilities of geospatial information management activities, both within and outside the UN system, and requested the Secretariat and UNGIWG to work together and report back to the Committee.

1. The first report introduced by UNGIWG to the Committee of Experts in 2013 focused more on the background and implementation of the United Nations Spatial Data Infrastructure (UNSDI) project (E/C.20/2013/12/Add.1). In response to the above request, this report intends to provide an overview of efforts by UNGIWG in the past year, and also emphasising the increasing collaborative relationship that is building with UN-GGIM.

2. The United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG) is a voluntary network of United Nations professionals formed in 2000 and working in the fields of cartography and geographic information science. UNGIWG addresses common geospatial issues - maps, boundaries, data exchange, standards - that affect the work of United Nations Organizations and Member States. UNGIWG also maintains connections and liaisons with nongovernmental organizations, research institutions and industry to develop and maintain common geographic databases and geospatial technologies to enhance normative and operational capabilities. UNGIWG reports periodically or on request to the United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) which brings together the executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations System on progress made, and on priority issues.

3. As of June 2014, a number of 35 UN Departments, Offices, Programmes and Specialized Agencies as well as other UN entities are members of UNGIWG. Over 500 geospatial experts are registered on the Working Group's mailing list from the above-mentioned member entities¹. Current Co-chairs for the Working Group, until

¹ UNGIWG also maintains a separate mailing list for its external partners (partners@ungiwg.org) where about 160 participants requested to be added to date. UNGIWG welcomes any new subscription request from the GGIM community on this partners mailing list.

March 2015, are the Department of Safety and Security (DSS) and the Office for Outer Space Affairs (OOSA) of the United Nations Secretariat.

4. The Fourteenth UNGIWG Plenary meeting was held in New York from 14 to 16 May 2014 and the following action points were agreed upon by the Plenary participants¹: (<http://ungiwg.org/meetings/14th-ungiwg-plenary-meeting>)

- Agreed to build on the existing collaborative relationship with UN-GGIM and strengthen it. As an initial collaborative effort, the UNGIWG Secretariat prepared this report for the Fourth Session of Committee of Experts meeting and submit the UNGIWG 14th Plenary meeting report as a background paper.
- Agreed to collaborate closely with the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) Secretariat to foster increased geospatial data interoperability, one of the key focus areas by the UNGIWG community.
- Agreed that the UNSDI will from now on refer to the “United Nations Spatial Data Initiative”, as an indication of the refocused approach in implementing this project by building on collaboration and data sharing on a priority basis.
- Agreed to continue implementation of a United Nations Spatial Data Initiative (UNSDI) as a project within UNGIWG to further foster collaboration and improve geospatial data sharing within the United Nations System.
- Agreed that two Special Interest Groups: Core Datasets and Remote Sensing will continue their work in the upcoming period, and there was a suggestion of re-establishing the Group on GNSS to address the Global Navigation issues, in view of the increased activities by the International Committee on Global Navigation Satellite Systems (ICG) and the debates surrounding the global geodetic reference frame by the UN-GGIM. Other Task Groups and Special Interest Groups as mentioned in the last year’s report have either completed their activities or were inactive in the past period. A further review of the Task Group and Special Interest Group structure will be done during the next Plenary meeting.

5. As an update since last year’s report presented during the Third Session of Committee of Experts, the Office for Information and Communications Technologies (OICT) of the United Nations Secretariat has informed the UNGIWG Secretariat that it is no longer able to provide a leadership role in the implementation of the UNSDI efforts². This, combined with reaching the end of the first term of UNSDI Steering Committee, led to the agreement by the UNGIWG Plenary participants to re-brand and re-focus the UNSDI project in the coming period.

6. The Plenary also agreed to take further steps in reviving efforts to continue the development and maintain the global Second Administrative Level Boundaries (SALB) dataset, as this was agreed in 2004 as a standard and fundamental dataset for the UNGIWG community. Notably, the Department of Field Support (DFS), the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the Economic Commission of

² UNGIWG is in the process of requesting OICT on the status of the UNSDI Trust Fund and consideration of redeployment of the remaining funds.

Africa (ECA) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) are working closely to collect, update and maintain selected SALB datasets. This data should be considered as one of the fundamental global dataset to also contribute in developing the Global Map for sustainable development, and in-kind contributions and data contributions by Member States are continuously encouraged. The UNGIWG community noted that these items of fundamental global dataset and Global Map for sustainable development are building blocks the Committee of Experts envision as their contribution to the post-2015 development agenda.

7. Several efforts are also ongoing in the UNGIWG context for improving shared access to very high resolution (commercial) satellite imagery data, as well as to high-resolution digital elevation models (DEM) with global coverage. For example, a special UNGIWG meeting was convened in May 2013 by International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in cooperation with OOSA to address the DEM needs of the UNGIWG community, and to identify possible ways to license such data on a cost-sharing and common basis. These efforts will continue in the coming period, with the aim of ensuring more shared access to highly-relevant geospatial datasets for all UNGIWG member entities, by also establishing the required system-wide licensing agreements where needed.

8. During the recent UNGIWG Plenary, the Core Datasets Special Interest Group also held discussions, addressing recent developments and individual agency needs in terms of core geospatial datasets. This discussion built on past deliberations of the Core Datasets Task Group, as well as on the list of Core Datasets for UNGIWG as identified in 2004-2005 by earlier UNGIWG Plenary meetings. That list was also published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) at that time (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/008/a0118e/a0118e00.htm#Contents>). As these discussions reflect continued geospatial data needs within the United Nations system as well, they could be further coordinated with the UN-GGIM efforts in establishing similar requirements outside the United Nations system, especially those related to global fundamental datasets and Global map for sustainable development.

9. UNGIWG, its Co-chairs and its Secretariat remained active on inter-agency cooperation efforts in the past year, addressing within available capacities a number of issues of importance to the community. In that context, the Inter-agency coordination activities of the UNGIWG Secretariat for 2013-2014, as also reflected in the UNGIWG Plenary presentation, can be summarised as follows:

- Attended the Meeting on Global High Resolution DEM for the UNGIWG community - hosted by ITU and UNOOSA in May 2013 in Geneva
- Organized the teleconferences of the UNSDI Steering Committee when required
- Organized the election process of UNSDI Steering Committee members and UNSDI Co-chairs
- Discussed with the UN High-Level Committee on Programmes of the CEB (HLCP) for the UNSDI Center of Excellence (CoE) and its funding proposal in March 2013
- Communicated and discussed with CEB Secretariat on the CoE and its funding proposal during March 2013

- Communicated with CEB following request for information on the geospatial resources within the UN system in April 2014
- Coordinated to attend the Chengdu Forum on UN-GGIM in April 2013, forum ultimately postponed due to the major earthquake in the region
- Prepared and conducted a survey for UNGIWG members for follow-up on the action items identified in its first 10 Plenary meetings, starting in May 2013
- Presented UNGIWG/UNSDI progress report at the Committee of Experts on GGIM: Cambridge, in July 2013
- Communicated with OICT on the status of the UNSDI Trust Fund
- Organized the fund pooling for the UNGIWG Open Geospatial Consortium (OCG) membership renewal effort
- Interviewed the UNSDI Coordinator temporary position candidates as requested and provided a recommendation for selection to OICT
- Submitted a letter to National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA, United States) to request the full release of the SRTM 30m DEM dataset, in September 2013
- Presented UNGIWG/UNSDI at the GSDI 14 and Africa GIS Conferences hosted by UNECA in Addis Ababa, in November 2013
- Provided inputs on the ICA report on the Map Use in the United Nations system during January 2014
- Provided inputs on the Report of the Secretary-General on the Coordination of Space-related Activities within the United Nations system in January 2014
- Attended the UN-GGIM Secretariat meetings to discuss collaboration between UN-GGIM and UNGIWG, when invited, during 2014
- Organized the UNGIWG 14th Plenary Meeting at UN Headquarters in New York in May 2014

10. As noted above, UNGIWG members also participate in other related collaborative efforts, one of them is the UN-Space, the formal inter-agency coordination mechanism on space-related activities. UN-Space produces an annual United Nations report of the Secretary General and this year's report titled "Coordination of space-related activities within the United Nations system: directions and anticipated results for the period 2014-2015 - addressing the post-2015 development agenda" (http://www.uncosa.unvienna.org/pdf/reports/iamos/AC105_1063E.pdf), reflected the unilateral interest in the post-2015 development agenda also by the space-related community. This report highlighted the activities along the four main themes of (1) environmental sustainability, (2) inclusive social development, (3) inclusive economic development and (4) promotion of international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space. The contributions made by the United Nations entities who many are also members of the UNGIWG, illustrated a commonality in increased employment of space-derived data to monitor processes and trends to meet their respective mandates by the Member States and United Nations entities at national, regional and international levels.

11. The UN-Space Secretariat (OOSA) and UNGIWG have agreed in the past to try and hold the two meetings back-to-back when possible in order to maximize presence of UN entities at both. As such, the UNGIWG 14th Plenary was held in combination with the thirty-fourth session of UN-Space, in New York, offering the opportunity to UN participants to also engage with Member States and inform them of their space-related activities at an Open Session normally held on the last day of the UN-Space meeting. The Open Session at the UN Headquarters was unfortunately attended by a limited number of Member States, despite the wide promotion of the event with Permanent Missions, indicating a possible lack of awareness in such topics still.

12. Participants to both the UNGIWG Plenary and the UN-Space session agreed to continue with the option to have back-to-back meetings in the future, and to better inform the members of UNGIWG about UN-Space, its background, mandate and formal processes. The “Report of the Inter-Agency Meeting on Outer Space Activities on its thirty-fourth session” (http://www.uncosa.unvienna.org/pdf/reports/iamos/AC105_1064E.pdf) outlined the aspirations of UN-Space community through Member States and United Nations entities who pursue the goals to (1) enhance awareness of potential contribution of space-derived data and information for development, (2) developing capacities in terms of discovery of, access to and process and use of space-derived data and information, (3) strengthen institutional frameworks to facilitate the use of remote sensing data and information, (4) support standardization and updating of geospatial information, with a view to eliminate duplication and overlap, and enabling its use for multisectoral use in a harmonised manner, and (5) promoting international cooperation for increased use of space-derived data and information and decision-making processes. Many of these elements are items which the geospatial community are also aspiring to, and hence, the inter-agency coordination and collaboration between the space-related activities and geospatial activities should be increasingly be harmonised to ensure synergies in overall contribution to achieve the post-2015 development agenda.

13. The UNGIWG community is cognisant the opportunity in engaging directly with the UN-GGIM. The UNGIWG Plenary provided an opportunity to identify the different activities carried out by the different United Nations entities and will be developing its workplan.

II. Collaboration, cooperation and coordination of geospatial activities with external partners, in the context of UNGIWG

14. The importance of collaboration, cooperation and coordination not only within the United Nations system but also with outside partners and entities was highlighted during several sessions of the UNGIWG Plenary. Presentation made by Economic Commission on Africa illustrated the challenges of identifying place names across multiple United Nations agencies and their operational datasets in conflict areas like Somalia, reminding and emphasising the need for working as “One United Nations”. The presentation by the Regional Advisor of UN-GGIM provided the overall framework and updates of the UN-GGIM activities since the

Third Session of Committee of Experts, whilst the presentation by Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC) reminded the importance of standardisation, an issue which the UNGWIG community has been grappling with continuously through its inter-agency coordination and collaborative efforts in terms of data and information exchange.

15. Presentations and subsequent discussions highlighted that the responsibilities and roles within the UNGIWG community are very clear, and often emanate from concrete and formal mandates. However, more collaboration and coordination would ensure shared use of data and resources, as well as avoiding unnecessary duplication in data development or acquisition between individual agencies, often still the case. However, the UNGIWG Plenary noted that through the UN-GGIM collaboration, they would have opportunities to further elaborate and clarify the respective roles and functions as the United Nations System as needed.

16. In the presentations, it was further recognized that UN-GGIM play a leading role in setting the agenda for the development of global geospatial information and provide a forum to liaise and coordinate among Member States, and between Member States and international organizations.

17. Therefore, given that UNGIWG is the coordination body within the United Nations system to address common geospatial issues, a regular and closer interaction and collaboration between UN-GGIM and UNGIWG efforts would ensure a much more effective geospatial information management effort within and outside the UN system.

18. It was also agreed that given the role of the Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC) as an international industry consortium that develops publicly available geospatial standards, an active engagement between UNGIWG and OGC could also contribute to the above-mentioned joint efforts. UNGIWG remains appreciative of the significant efforts made by OGC in the 2001-2003 period in researching and developing a key document for the United Nations, entitled “Geographic Information: A Strategic Plan for the United Nations”, and notes that a number of those recommendations remain valid and even more important today, as the reach of geospatial information and its acceptance has grown tremendously World-wide.

19. In that respect, UNGIWG will also continue to maintain its Class A Liaison status with ISO/TC211, as well as its linkages with CEOS, GEO, GSDI and other international standardization bodies, and will continue to promote the United Nations specific requirements in seeking their support.

20. Based on the conclusions and key messages from the presenters and following discussions, the UNGIWG Plenary concluded by acknowledging the need to focus on interoperability to foster better collaboration, cooperation and coordination amongst Member States, the private sector and the entities of the United Nations system.

21. In quoting David Schell, OGC Founder and Chairman Emeritus, the President of OGC gave the UNGIWG Plenary participants and the wider UNGIWG community the best indication of what to focus on in the coming period:

“Interoperability seems to be about the integration of information. What it’s really about is the coordination of organizational behaviour.”

22. For interoperability to become a reality, it is critical that relevant policies and open standards are developed, adopted and consistently applied. It is therefore logical that the all stakeholders, including those enumerated above, collaborate closely to achieve this. The UNGIWG community remains open to that collaboration, and stand ready to engage.

III. Points for discussion

23. The Committee is invited to:

(a) Take note of this report, of the challenges and possibilities identified, and provide its view or comments on the elaboration of better coordination and clarifications of roles and responsibilities of geospatial information management activities both within and outside the UN system.

(b) Consider means to concretely support the SALB dataset development through geospatial information provision, validation of the SALB dataset and in-kind contribution

(c) Consider supporting the UNGIWG efforts in building up its authoritative global geospatial datasets (Core Datasets), to further address operational requirements