



UNITED NATIONS  
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS  
STATISTICS DIVISION

**Twenty-third session of the United Nations Group of Experts  
on Geographical Names  
Vienna, 28 March – 4 April 2006**

### **Opening Statement**

Paul Cheung, Director  
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Distinguished Delegates and Observers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the Twenty-third Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. The fact that 200 experts from about 50 countries have come together here underscores the importance of the issue of Geographical Names, both at the national as well as the global level.

The Eighth Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in Berlin in 2002, as well as the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of UNGEGN, held in New York in 2004, adopted resolutions and agreed on a set of recommendations that recognize geographical names as part of a nation's cultural and historical heritage as well as a fundamental component of the national spatial data infrastructure. Member states were encouraged to intensify both the systematic collection of geographical names and its dissemination to the public at large, and to strengthen cooperation with cartographers and other users, including the international organizations.

A review of the agenda for the current session shows the broad reach and importance of standardizing geographical names and their consistent use in addressing critical national and global issues, such as peacekeeping, economic and social development, as well as humanitarian assistance. I believe that this Session, gathering experts on geographical names from all over the world, provides the opportunity to review and assess the progress made thus far and to identify the impediments and barriers that still exist, with a view to finding appropriate solutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset of this 23<sup>rd</sup> session may I draw your attention to what I believe to be some key trends and important shifts which currently influence the development of standardization of geographical names, in an attempt to better frame the issues that you have before you on your agenda

First:

The recent technological developments, including new High-resolution Sensors, Global Positioning Systems (GPS), Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and Web-based tools are revolutionizing cartography, surveying and mapping in fundamental ways: geographic data is easily collected, accessed and manipulated by multiple users; its integration with a variety of other data, including socio-economic data, helps create relevant information for better decision-making.

Geographical Names Databases, GIS-based Gazetteers, Digital Atlases and Geographic Information Portals are indeed a growing activity with applications in many sectors: regional planning, land management, environment and natural resources, humanitarian operations and disaster management, as well as in most of the service sector activities.

Second:

Most studies show that geographical names constitute one of the most important components of reference data in the context of a National Spatial Data Infrastructure. Moreover, Geographical names are considered to be the main search item/keyword within GIS and search engines for spatially-referenced information.

Indeed, standardizing geographical names at national level and using consistent names will better facilitate the availability and access to spatial data for governmental organizations, the private sector, universities and citizens in general. In this context, National Geographical Names Authorities need to consider their position in the spatial data community particularly regarding supply of and access to geo-spatial data.

It is becoming clear that the major barriers and impediments to harnessing geographic names will not be technical ones but rather institutional and organizational ones like the ability to cooperate with one another, create, share and disseminate geographical names and related standards.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the Secretariat of this expert body, the UN Statistics Division is committed to providing professional and administrative support to your work. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to inform you of some of our activities over the past two years. I will not provide you with a comprehensive account, for that I refer you to the report prepared by our office. I would rather like to highlight some of the key elements of our work.

- The UN Statistics Division is working to forge ties between the UN Regional Cartographic Conferences, the Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) and the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG), advocating that cartography, GIS and Geographical Names are crucial to the promotion of geographic information. For example, resolutions were adopted at recent regional cartographic conferences, recognizing the importance of standardized and consistent geographical names as a fundamental component of national spatial data infrastructures.
  
- The Statistics Division also promotes the use of geographical names through publications and support for training courses. In this context I am pleased to announce the recent release of the English version of the Manual for the national standardization of geographical names. With respect to training activities, the United Nations Statistics Division helped the Africa South Division and Mozambique National Directorate of Geography and Cadastre organize a course on toponymy in Maputo, from 17 to 24 September 2004, and supported ten participants and two experts in order to provide a field work-oriented course on toponymy for an audience of 36 participants from Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Egypt.

- We are, furthermore, promoting a better integration of statistical and geographical information. As you may know our office is also the Secretariat of the United Nations Statistical Commission, which is the intergovernmental body responsible for international standards in statistics. This includes the body of statistical classifications, of which the most relevant for your work, to cite only one example, is the so-called M.49 – “Standard country or Area Codes for Statistical Use”. Over the past 50 years the UN Statistics Division has contributed significantly to the harmonization of the global statistical system. There are certainly synergies to be explored between the two professional groups. We are convinced that by combining statistical with geographic information, including geographical names, we will be able to present a more comprehensive picture of the complex realities, especially in developing countries, which will in turn provide policy decision makers with a more solid information base upon which to base their decisions in the field of social and economic and ultimately human development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the professional expert group responsible for the Standardization of Geographical Names, you are facing important challenges: the massive use of Internet and associated multimedia tools to disseminate information, and increased demand on cartographic services and products. The opportunities for geographic data to be so widely accessible should encourage all countries to make accurate, up-to-date geographical names data available through standardization processes. In addressing the many specific technical issues on the agenda of this Session, you will help us all to make an important step into that direction. I, therefore, wish you great success in your endeavors. Thank you very much for your attention.