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DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
STATISTICS DIVISION

**The Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names
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Opening Speech

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first warmly welcome you on behalf of UN and DESA colleagues to this Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Being held at UN Headquarters offers me an opportunity to personally greet all of you and it is a privilege for us to benefit from advice of over 200 experts from more than 80 countries.

In midst of the global crisis, the significance of good information has been further underscored. Timely and reliable data are critical to ensuring empirical analysis and policy making in the fast moving age of globalization. With the UN now at the centre stage of enhancing the Post 2015 agenda which would lay out the architecture for sustainable development including the MDGs, the role of national agencies producing information and their professional guidance will be critical for how far we can go in measuring and monitoring sustainable development for the people at large. Accurate and consistent geographical names are vital at the local, national and global level for sustainable planning strategies, for environmental management, for the delivery of emergency services, for trade, for tourism and for global communication etc.

Recounting the professional history, the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names was held in 1967 in Geneva. The pioneers of this Conference were indeed visionary, when they recognized the need for regular global meetings on the Standardization of Geographical Names. You can look back very proudly on more than fifty years of work in this highly specialized field: Ten conferences were held, supported by 27 Expert Group sessions as well as by countless thematic working group and language division meetings.

Over this period, with your drive and support, global recommendations were formulated for standardization, for instance those that ensure that geographical names are uniformly romanized. This work has been accompanied by the development of good practices on how to collect and store information on geographical names and how to best exchange these data items; and in the spirit of global solidarity and mutual support,

publications and training programmes were developed to help all member states to establish their own national standardization programmes.

Going forward, the United Nations Rio+20 summit has emphasized the importance of geospatial information to support sustainable development policies. In an increasingly globalized world, new challenges are being added to the agenda. The Internet has put geographical information and geographical names at the fingertips of users around the world. As professional providers of official information, this body would need to guide the promotion of authoritative and reliable information and to assist users to put this data in an appropriate context. Geographical names like other geospatial information would need to be integrated with other types of information, such as economic, social and environmental data. It is encouraging to learn that you as an expert group have not only worked well together with the newly established UN Committee on Global Geospatial Information Management, but that your successful *modus operandi* over the past 50 years has inspired the functioning of this new direction. Nurturing common and practical goals is critical.

To conclude, I would like to recognize our colleagues from the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, who have served as the Secretariat for this Conference and of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names. Director Mr. Paul Cheung and his staff have provided the necessary leadership and support for the various expert group meetings. UNSD manages and maintains the geographical information website, publishes technical manuals as mandated by this body, and regularly disseminates promotional material. Since the last conference, UNSD has added a significant amount of new material to the web site: the UNGEGN World Geographical Names Database with more than 9000 entries of names, an online training course on toponymy and a press kit - all under your diligent guidance.

I wish you useful deliberations, and your fruitful discussion will once again confirm the constructive outcomes of the UN's convening power for the exchange of national knowledge and experiences for the benefit of all.

Thank you very much for your attention.