



UNITED NATIONS
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
STATISTICS DIVISION

**27th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
New York, 30 July and 10 August 2012**

Opening Statement

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Distinguished Delegates and Observers,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you here in New York for the 27th Session of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names. It has been five years since I last welcomed this distinguished Group to the UN Headquarters at the opening of the 24th Session in 2007. In between, in a significant move, you met for the first time on the African continent in Nairobi in 2009 and in Vienna last year.

One of UNGEGN's core mandates is to undertake preparatory work for the periodic international conferences on the standardization of geographical names, to provide continuity for activities between the conferences and to provide leadership in the implementation of resolutions adopted at the conferences.

The Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names will start tomorrow. Judging by the number of papers and documents which have been prepared, you will certainly have an interesting and busy two weeks ahead of you. Before you start your work, please permit me to share with you some reflections on the importance of geographical information, on recent accomplishments as well as on future challenges ahead of us.

In 2007, when I addressed this distinguished body, I mentioned the issue of combining and integrating statistical and geographical information as one of the great challenges ahead of us. I said then "combining detailed and high quality geographic information systems with economic, social and environmental data, will provide powerful tools for analysis and policy making." Today, five years later, I can repeat this with even more emphasis and conviction than ever before. I can also report that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), in recognition of the importance of authoritative and sustainable geospatial information, has created the UN Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management – known already better under its acronym UNCE-GGIM. The key objective here is to create a community of practice around the globe that will address the key issues regarding geospatial information management in a continuous manner. I understand that you will receive a more detailed briefing on the GGIM Committee, but I would like to thank the UNGEGN representatives who have been actively following this new initiative and

generously sharing their advice, based on your more than 50 years of work. I encourage you to continue working closely with the new Committee.

Distinguished Delegates,

Your Committee has done a great deal of work over the past five years. Please allow me to highlight some of the important work undertaken in close cooperation with the Secretariat.

1. The restructured and enhanced geographical names website

The UNGEGN Secretariat, with the help of the UNGEGN Chair has improved the geospatial information website to facilitate information sharing with member states and experts. In 2010 we completely restructured the website, providing UNGEGN with its own web portal to reflect the importance of this Group and its work. We have restructured the material to make it more accessible and we have made available more documents from past sessions and conferences. This work continues, and I have been told that some of you have brought additional documents to this meeting so that we can complete some documentation gaps on the website. I am very grateful for this collaboration.

2. The World Geographical Names Database

Based on recommendations of the 22nd Session and subsequently by the 9th Conference, the Secretariat developed the World Geographical Names Database to collect, manage and disseminate names of countries and major cities with a population of more than 100.000. The database currently stores and displays more than 8,500 geographical names, of 193 countries and more than 3000 cities. In order to assist users with the pronunciation, sound files are available for more than 800 city names. We are committed to continue updating this database on a periodic basis and encourage you to send us more material for inclusion and to promote the use of this database.

3. Production of promotional material

As you know, a Working Group has been formed to address the issue of publicity. This group has worked hard on this, and together with the Secretariat, it has produced an impressive list of material: brochures, posters, a press kit and 3 postcards. I have also been told that once again you have organized an exhibition in this conference center.

4. Capacity building

In the past 5 years, the Secretariat has supported a number of workshops and courses especially in Africa and I am particularly pleased to mention that an online training tool has been developed under the diligent professional guidance of your Chair. I understand that there will be a live demonstration of this web-course later in the afternoon.

Distinguished delegates,

I have described only some of the projects that we have been working together in recent years. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your continued cooperation, for being a strong and reliable partner in these undertakings. I can assure you of our continued commitment to be your partner in the future endeavors.

Before I conclude, let me briefly mention two specific challenges which I believe this meeting faces:

(i) Maintaining the technical focus of the Conference and the UNGEGN work

As mentioned above the Conference and the UNGEGN have made important technical contributions to the global process of standardization of geographical names. It is important that this body maintains its technical focus. There are of course political forces at work and we need to be aware of them. But I would stress that the mandate for this body and for the UN Conference is to address professional issues and to provide the best technical advice. We should leave political issues to the political arena.

(ii) Keeping the working methods efficient

UNGEGN, like other ECOSOC bodies, has evolved its working methods in recent years to increase the efficiency of the meetings. I have heard very positive reactions from many experts on the shorter and more efficient sessions. The 26th Session in Vienna last year was the first to use a 5-day schedule and I understand that you are satisfied with this arrangement. I encourage you to bear this innovative spirit when we consider the working methods of the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographic Names and to make it more efficient. The Secretariat will gladly share its own experience with other bodies and is ready to assist UNGEGN and its Bureau in this endeavor.

In concluding, I would like to take this opportunity to say a special word of thanks to our UNGEGN Chair, Ms. Helen Kerfoot, who unfortunately cannot be with us today. She has served the Committee diligently and effectively for the past 10 years. We at UNSD continue to be impressed by her knowledge and dedication, by her experience and professionalism. I would also like to thank all other experts who have worked hard in one way or another to prepare for the conference. I wish you all a very fruitful UNGEGN Session and Conference.

Thank you very much for you attention.