

**Twenty-ninth session
Bangkok, Thailand, 25 – 29 April 2016**

Item 2 of the Provisional Agenda

Report of the Chair

UNGEGN Operational Modalities *

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UNGEGN Operational Modalities

Introduction

When I started my interaction with UNGEGN in 1987 there were two public facing means of communicating spatial data. Hard copy maps and directional signage.



Gazetteers at this stage were often either hard copy publications or card indexes, providing the general community with only a limited scope of use.

Updating of the maps, signs and printed gazetteers was on a pre-determined cyclic basis and there were definite limits as to how much information could be shown on the map face, depending on the scale of the published maps.

When I first attended an UNGEGN meeting in 2002, geographic information systems and databases contain place names were in use but the use of the data was in the realm of the specialists and technicians who interacted with this data and produce the standard outputs that we were all very familiar with at that time.

That situation has changed dramatically in the last 14 years. Now there are literally thousands of applications that use locational information as the basis for providing information or services, including the following:

- On line mapping
- GIS software and data portals
- Apps to
 - Find your friends
 - Track you runs, walks or cycle riding routes
 - Find the shops for your specific purchases
 - Locate medical support
 - Tourist sites
 - Recreation facilities
 - Live music venues
 - Places of worship
 - Swimming pools
 - Effective use of public transport
- In-car and on-phone navigation systems.
- Emergency service response methodology.

All of the above have one basic and very important similarity. They all use place names as the initial entry tool for the operation. Users interact with the app by entering a feature of interest or an address to find what they want. Place names data is the foundation for the effectiveness of such applications.

Though many are not aware, many of the people in the world are becoming spatial data users, interacting with the spatial data with what is by far the most commonly used spatial identifier – a place name (given that addresses are composed in part of place names).

Although I am not overtly concerned if people want to use application with inaccurate data to find out where they can get a car part or find the nearest golf course or music venue, I do have concerns that some of the applications are being developed for community activities such as hazardous waste, emergency and disaster management and access to medical facilities. In South Australia, there have been some developed that are using outdated information and this can result in significant and unacceptable risk.

Therefore, the accuracy and available place names data will determine the effectiveness of the application. It is one of our roles to promote the use of accurate and comprehensive data, and to find ways to facilitate the use of data in a cost effective and timely manner for all users for the benefit of the general community.

Considerations

As we met in Copenhagen last year and discussed this situation, we considered the following points.

- We are living in a time of rapid technical changes, and the use of spatial data is accelerating in a manner that was unprecedented just a few years ago.
- Presently, UNGEGN has a five year gap between the conferences. As the conferences are the venue for setting the strategic directions, this results in a gap between such strategic sessions that is perhaps not keeping pace with the technical changes and advancements in data use that has an impact on place names usage and processes.
- There is a body in the UN, UNGGIM, that is dealing with spatial data in a holistic and strategic manner, to set standards for data use for sustainable development and humanitarian relief needs. As place names are one of the foundation data sets in any spatial data infrastructure, the strategic directions established in UNGGIM may have an influence on UNGEGN.

Suggestions

After lengthy discussion, the following suggestions were established to be presented to this body for discussion and consideration.

Suggestion 1

Alter the current meeting schedule from the five-year cycle of:

Conference – Session - Session – Conference

to a four-year cycle of:

Conference – Session – Conference.

Benefits

- Reduce the time between the strategic conferences allowing for a more rapid response to developing issues.
- Align UNGEGN reporting to ECOSOC with its meeting schedule.
- Reduce the financial burden on the UN

Suggestion 2

Consider the holding of the Conferences on a back to back scheduling with the UNGGIM meetings.

Benefits

- Reduce the cost for countries where the representation at UNGEGN and UNGGIM is the same.
- Provide better opportunities for UNGEGN to be appropriately represented at the UNGGIM meetings and to make specific presentations regarding its work and the issues that are relevant to UNGGIM.

Suggestion 3

Develop a stronger working relationship with UNGGIM

Benefits

- Increase the understanding of the mandate that each organisation has.
- UNGGIM is in a position to assist UNGEGN to fulfil its mandate by ensuring full recognition of the need for an effective place names program in each country to provide the public interface into spatial data.
- UNGEGN is in a position to ensure that the issues associated with place names programs are fully understood in relation to the overarching foundation spatial data themes.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to engender thought processes. No action will be take until the 2017 Conference if a change is determined to be suitable and it will not come into effect until 2021.

Please take the time to consider what is suggested. As a bureau, we would invite any comment, be it in support or opposed to these suggestions or putting forward alternatives that have not yet come to light.