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of Geographical Names**

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**Reflection on the past, present and future: the fiftieth anniversary
of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization
of Geographical Names**

Perspectives on the Future Operations of UNGEGN

Submitted by UNGEGN Chair

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Summary

Following on from the discussion at the 2016 Session of UNGEGN, the Bureau and working group convenors have been discussing the future operations of UNGEGN.

This paper summarises the discussion and the outcome, outlining the reasons for the proposal **presented here**, what is changing, what may be lost and what will be gained.

It also refers to the resolution that will be presented at the end of the Conference.

1. Introduction

Following on from the discussion at the 2016 Session of UNGEGN, the Bureau and working group convenors have been reviewing the current operations of UNGEGN discussing the future operations of UNGEGN.

At the 2016 session, there was a presentation that outlined some concerns about the current operational modalities of UNGEGN. It was determined that the Bureau would review the operations and report back to the conference.

Given this is the 50th anniversary it is appropriate to recognise the efforts that have been made by made by our colleagues over this period. Past efforts have developed a foundation that has proved to be resilient and appropriate, and most of the structure is to be retained. It must be stressed that the changes that are being proposed should not be seen in any way as detracting from the incredible foundation that has been laid for us.

2. Why Change?

There are a number of reasons why a change to the operations has been suggested, summarised as follows:

- a. In the past our organisation established the conferences as the place where directions were set by the passing of resolutions while the sessions were to report on the progress made by countries in relation to the resolutions. In recent years, there has been a blurring of these roles to the point that some delegates are not aware of or perhaps 'do not fully understand' or 'do not fully appreciate' the differences between the conferences and sessions.
- b. The time frame between establishing strategic directions, being the 5-yearly conference cycle, is too large a gap in this modern spatial world. It was suitable for a situation when the main method of communicating place names data was through published mapping, which often had a 5 – 10 yearly republishing cycle. However, this is not now the case, where up-to-date data is now the major requirement. The rapid increase in the use of spatial data for a range of general community functions has led to a situation where decisions and directions need to be set more rapidly.
- c. There are increasing cost pressures both in the United Nations and in our respective countries. The proposal will save the UN between \$250 000 and \$630 000 over a 10-year period, with a comparable saving to all delegates for accommodation, meals, absence from work place etc.
- d. With the emergence of UNGGIM as a major player from a UN perspective in the spatial data environment, there is a need to align our directions with those of UNGGIM to ensure that there is maximum benefit derived from a synergistic relationship between the two bodies.

3. What is Proposed?

The proposed operation structure is summarised as follows:

- a. A two-yearly meeting cycle of 5 days per meeting.
- b. These meetings will combine both the ability to set directions and pass resolutions with the reporting functions.

4. What is Lost

With any changes in process, there are some aspects that can be regarded as being lost. In this proposal, the following have been identified:

- a. **Time** – in summary, we will have a reduction of 20 days meeting time over the 10-year period. This will require us as delegates to use what time we have as wisely as possible. To assist in this, some suggestions have been made in Point 7 below.
- b. **Use of the term Conference as a regular part of our meeting schedules** – this is the aspect that proved to be one where a full consensus of the bureau and working group convenors was not achieved. However, the majority was in favour as retaining the term “Session” for the meetings. This is in harmony with the general practice across UN bodies, with conferences only being used for very special meetings. It does not preclude the option of conferences being set in the future, but not for the regular meeting structure.

5. What Stays the Same?

As mentioned above, the majority of the organisational structure and operational methodology will not be altered. The following aspects will be retained:

- a. **Divisions** - the Divisional Structure will be retained, with the current emphasis to encourage divisions to be active in supporting and encouraging countries on a regional or linguistic basis to further the work of standardization. There will still be the flexibility for countries to determine their divisional affiliation and UNGEGN to respond to alterations in divisional structures with the creation of new divisions or merging of existing divisions.
- b. **Working Groups** – similar to divisions, this will be retained. The concept of working groups has proved to be sound, being to provide a point of focus for specific naming issues. Again, as has been past practice, working groups can be established or disbanded as required and their terms of reference can be altered when deemed appropriate by UNGEGN. Each

working group can still determine its leadership, including term of office of the convenors.

- c. **Resolutions** – the ability to pass resolutions will be retained. This will be a change in the session meeting structure. We will continue to add any resolution passed in the future to the same body of information compiled in recent years for the resolutions. It should be noted that the use of the term resolutions is internal to UNGEGN reference.
- d. **Meeting Structure** – In general, the meeting structure as currently used in sessions will be followed, being seated in Divisions and the working group convenors leading the consideration of the papers submitted under the specific topics. However, for the last section of the meeting we will adopt seating by countries for consideration of the resolutions and the report of the session.
- e. **Location** – It is still proposed to alternate the venue of the meetings between New York and another location, as has been done in the past, subject to the appropriate approvals.
- f. **Special Presentations** – these have proved a successful method of broadening our perspective on issues, and bringing insight into how other organizations view both the work of UNGEGN and the outputs that flow from the standardization processes.

6. What is Gained?

There is at times a potential during an episode of change to focus more on what is altered. Rather, the focus should be put on what we can gain from the proposed changes. To re-emphasize and perhaps enlarge on some of the aspects mentioned in point 1 above, the following is suggested:

- a. The ability to achieve cost savings at a time of diminishing resources is a benefit to both the United Nations and the participating countries. As mentioned, there will be a cost saving to the United Nations that is dependent on where we hold the meeting. There will also be a cost saving to delegates. I have been advised that there are some delegates who are unable to stay for all of this conference because of the costs involved, so a cost saving will probably enable more delegates to attend and stay for the full session.
- b. The ability to set timely strategic directions is one of the most important gains that is achievable. As we consider the capability for accurate spatial data to provide a valuable role in decision making in a wide circle of activities, and further consider the role that place names have in a spatial data environment, then we must recognise that this UNGEGN body plays a significant role in providing direction, experience and structures that can assist in this very necessary endeavour.

- c. Adjust the meeting structure to remove the lack of clarity as to the purpose of the different meetings. This is unclear for those outside of UNGEGN and also for some delegates. Each meeting will then have the stated purpose of improving the level of the standardization of geographical names, passing resolutions as required and reporting on the progress of efforts and identification and discussion of emerging issues and problems.
- d. Be able to respond in a timely manner to any strategic initiative flowing from the work of UNGGIM.
- e. This opportunity also provides an incentive to consider a strategic vision for UNGEGN over the next few years, setting goals or targets that we can use as a measurement of our efforts

7. What Do We Have to Do?

For the proposed transition into the new structure, the following points are given as suggestions that can assist us:

- a. Review of the mandate and rules of procedure – a task that could be undertaken by the bureau with a report to the delegates at the next meeting.
- b. Be prepared to adjust to use the time available in our meetings to maximum efficiency, considering the issues that need to be discussed as a priority. Included in such adjustments could be:
 - i. A template concept for both country and division reports, with the focus on these reports as general reports on operations of the work within the divisions and countries. These reports can be structured to discuss the routine workings, and may also allude to the issues for discussion, but these latter matters should be the subject of specific papers. Division and country reports would then be presented for information only.
 - ii. Focus the papers for discussion on such matters as the rationale behind legislative changes or alterations to jurisdictional structures, database design and content, new ways of dealing with identified issues and concepts as to how to deal with emerging issues and problems.