

UN experts meet in Nairobi to discuss the benefits to be gained from the national standardization of geographical names

NAIROBI - From 5th to 12th May 2009 the 25th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) will be held at the United Nation's African headquarters in Nairobi. The meeting is organized by the Statistics Division (UNSD) of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Experts from all corners of the world will discuss ways in which the standardization of place names is being advanced for the benefit of governments, non-governmental organizations and the general public.

One of seven expert bodies of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the UNGEGN continues the essential work of geographical names standardization begun nearly 50 years ago in 1960 when the first Experts group met in New York with a view to promoting more effective communication world wide. Between the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names held at five-year intervals, the UNGEGN holds its own sessions and carries out its work through the activities of 23 linguistic/geographical Divisions and 10 Working Groups. By bringing together names experts from UN member states and by encouraging the national collection, storage and authorization of names, the UNGEGN is able to facilitate the development and dissemination of principles, policies and methods suitable for resolving the problems of consistency in the use of geographical names.

The availability of accurate, clear and unambiguous nationally approved geographical names is basic to national and international communication, particularly in the modern digital world where names are distributed on the internet and where names are used to link geo-referenced data sets. Geographical names are fundamental to almost every aspect of the life of a nation, from the creation of national data infrastructures in support of planning, economic development and communications systems to tourism, environmental management, natural hazard prediction and the coordination of emergency services.

Two important new databases to be accessible on the UNGEGN website will be presented at the 25th Session of the UNGEGN in Nairobi. The first is a database for searching the 195 UN resolutions on the standardization of geographical names. The second is the first phase of the UNGEGN World Geographical Names database, a multilingual and multi-scriptural database that will include countries, capitals and major cities geo-referenced to a world map base.

In continuing the work of names standardization that began nearly half a century ago, this Session of the UNGEGN is the first to be held in Africa. The reason for this was noted by UNGEGN Chairperson Helen Kerfoot who said "that it was clear that the time had come for UNGEGN to meet in Africa with a view to supporting and promoting the administration of geographical names among countries of the African continent – hence the recommendation to hold this session in Nairobi." In collaboration with UNSD, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa will organize during the meeting an exhibition of posters on geographical names with focus on Africa.

For more online information:

UNGEGN website: unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo

UNGEGN Secretariat (United Nations Statistics Division/DESA): geoinfo_unsd@un.org