

UNITED NATIONS



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**28th SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES**

New York, 28 April - 2 May 2014

Opening Session

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Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Excellences,

Distinguished Delegates and Observers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my new capacity as Acting Director of the United Nations Statistics Division, I am delighted to welcome you, here at the United Nations headquarters in New York for this 28th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). It is also my pleasure to convey to you the greetings and best wishes for this meeting by our Under-Secretary-General Mr. Wu Hongbo, who due to prior commitments cannot unfortunately be with us during this opening session.

In my involvement with UNGEGN over the past years I have always been impressed by the level of professionalism and personal dedication of the experts from around the world. Here at the Secretariat, we often refer to this group metaphorically as the UNGEGN family. How much this group actually deserves this term was particularly apparent again in the past weeks, when we were preparing for this global gathering, in which experts from close to 50 member states from around the world participate. Your elected Chair, Mr. William Watt from Australia has been leading the work of UNGEGN for the past 2 years and, in particular, has been leading many aspects of the preparations of this session. When it became clear, that he would, unfortunately, not be able to travel to New York at this time, your elected Vice-Chairs Mr. Ferjan Ormeling and Ms. Naima Friha stepped in at very short notice to accept chairing responsibilities for this 28th Session. In the case of Ferjan this is indeed the 2nd time he is doing this, so he is quickly becoming one of the busiest Vice-Chairs at the United Nations. Many of you also accepted additional tasks in the form of chairing

specific topics, serving as rapporteurs, organizing side-events, contributing to the exhibition etc. I would like to take this opportunity to put on record from the Secretariat-side our deep appreciation for all your collective and cooperative support and we are certainly looking forward to working with you throughout this week in this same spirit. Especially as we are convening in our refurbished conference facilities here at the heart of the United Nations conference building, which, I hope you would agree, are quite modern and comfortable.

Distinguished Delegates,

UNGEEN as a body of technical experts has served the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and the global community at large for over fifty years now. It has done so through the provision of accurate, consistent geographical names in support of almost all our socio-economic activities, such as sustainable planning and development, search and rescue operations, safety and security, emergency aid and disaster relief. All of which are critical and current to national, regional and global priorities; for this you must be congratulated.

In continuation of your work, I wish to bring to your attention a number of United Nations initiatives in order to inform you of the policy context, within which your work is taking place and to invite you to reflect on the synergies that exist, with UNGEEN's agenda. From 30 June through 9 July 2014 the second meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development will be held, under the theme of achieving the Millennium Development Goals and charting the way for an ambitious post-2015 development agenda. One of the objectives here is to enhance the integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. In September 2014, the United Nations will organize its Third International Conference on Small Island Development States. In the same month the Secretary General has invited Heads of State and Government along with business, finance, civil society and local leaders to a Climate Summit here in New York. And then, there are the currently ongoing efforts of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development and of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing to formulate a new United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, with sustainable development at its core.

The many environmental, developmental and humanitarian challenges we are facing today, make it increasingly apparent that location matters. Thus, information on location, including correct and unambiguous naming of location, that is geographical names, is a fundamental dataset that supports information management, which in turn underpins decision making, policy formulation and monitoring, all critical to the post 2015 sustainable development agenda.

I wish to encourage the continued work of the group of experts in supporting the standardization of geographical names and the establishment of geographic names authorities in developing Member States, particularly those in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean still needing to do so. It is recognised that these regions are largely susceptible to natural and manmade hazards which often times devastates the environment, and lead to social and economic hardships for the people. It has been proven that the use of geospatial information and the fundamental data layer of geographical names provide the input needed to manage, monitor and mitigate against hazards. While we recognise that geographical names in and of itself does not solve these issues, it is however a fundamental variable in the equation that solves sustainable development problems.

I am pleased with the collaborative initiatives being engendered across United Nations bodies such as the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, and the wider toponymic community in academia, business and civil society. The United Nations provides the leadership, and has the convening power required to create and to strengthen truly global partnerships. Please use this session to continue forging the partnerships required to integrate work programmes and advance the standardization of geographical names.

Distinguished Delegates,

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 leadership in the implementation of resolutions adopted at the conferences. I note that at the 10th Conference in 2012, it was resolved, among other things, that a process would have been initiated to reflect on how to improve the working methods of the Conference.

This is a welcomed initiative as it is recognised across all intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations that global needs and requirements, in tandem with technology are continuously evolving and changing. Therefore, there must be a commensurate change in our operations, particularly given existing resources. We look forward to your deliberations and recommendations on how your work can be made more effective and efficient. In this context, the Bureau has already discussed how to streamline the reports of the UNGEGN sessions and to make them more action- and decision oriented, in line with good practices of other UN bodies. The Rapporteurs will make a streamlined proposal for the session report on Friday for your consideration. The Secretariat will continue to share its experience and assist UNGEGN and its Bureau in this endeavour.

At this point, please allow me also to recall that history has shown that this Group of Experts works best when it maintains its technical focus. There are of course political agendas and a political context, and we all need to be aware of these. However, I would like to stress that UNGEEN's mandate is to address professional issues and to provide the technical advice. Therefore, political issues are best left to the appropriate political arena. I am confident that, in this spirit, all delegates will be focused and concise in their contributions and interventions and that you will co-operate with your session chairs.

Our Division, the United Nations Statistics Division, as the substantive Secretariat of this body, provides support in various forms. From the planning of the next conference or session, the maintenance and updating of the website, including the Geographical Names Database, the production of technical and/or promotional material to the sponsoring of countries for training workshops. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my staff, in particular Ms. Cecille Blake and Ms. Sabine Warschburger, who will accompany you through this session. I would also like to assure you of our Department's continued commitment to be your partner and to support the various UNGEEN endeavours.

Distinguished Delegates,

In closing, I am pleased to recognise and thank again the Chair, the Vice Chairs, all the conveners and leaders of the divisions and working groups, the authors of documents and the rapporteurs, without whose essential contribution, a meeting of this size would not be possible. I thank you all for coming to New York from different places around the world, to continue the important work of this Group of Experts.

I wish you all a productive, but also enjoyable session in the presence of your professional peers.

Thank you.