

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

Item 3 on the Provisional Agenda

Report of the Secretariat of the Group of Experts

Report of the UNGEGN Secretariat *

* Submitted by the UNGEGN Secretariat

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1. Introduction

This report summarizes the major activities carried out by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) Secretariat during the period June 2014 to March 2016. The UNGEGN Secretariat, of the United Nations Statistics Division continues to provide the support required to progress the important work of promoting the standardization of geographical names. The report highlights the actions undertaken in pursuance of resolutions and recommendations of the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN), and the twenty-eight session of UNGEGN both held in New York in July 2012 and 2014 respectively. In addition, it also focuses on forging stronger relations between UNGEGN and UN-GGIM, the review of UNGEGN operating modalities, the delivery of toponymic training workshops, and the management and maintenance of the World Geographical Names Database.

2. UNGEGN Publications

(a) **UNGEGN Information Bulletin:** Three issues of the UNGEGN Information Bulletin (Nos. 47- September 2014, 48- May 2015 and 49- November 2015) were prepared, circulated to the UNGEGN mailing list and published on the website¹. The 50th issue of the Bulletin is to be issued in June 2016. The feedback received from readers suggests that the improved look and appeal of the Bulletin is welcomed.

(b) **Additional Promotional Material:** The existing store of promotional material is being increased with the design and printing of an UNGEGN post card in recognition of the 29th Session being held in Bangkok, Thailand. This was made possible with assistance from the Royal Thai Survey Department who provided the map of central Bangkok, Working Group conveners who gave the word Bangkok in different languages and the UN Graphics Design Unit who designed the card.

(c) **Social Media:** In an effort to increase UNGEGN's visibility, a twitter account was created. It is hoped that the toponymic community and delegates attending the 29th Session will be tweeting, retweeting and following using @UNSD_GEGN.

3. The UNGEGN Website

The Secretariat continues to maintain the UNGEGN website² and repository of technical documents on the standardization of geographical names. This is being done

¹ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/bulletin.html>.

² <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/default.html>

through the collaborative efforts of the members of the group of experts and Ms. Helen Kerfoot, former UNGEGN chair. With Ms. Kerfoot's and other Experts support, session documents are being scanned and uploaded to the UNGEGN website. Work continues with the search, collation, scanning and uploading of Conference documents beginning with the most recent, and working backwards to past years. Currently there are over 1,700 technical documents related to early meetings of the UNGEGN Expert Group and UNGEGN Sessions, and some 1,800 Conference documents. This ongoing exercise continues to strengthen UNGEGN's central repository of technical documents and on-line offerings.

The number of visitors to the UNGEGN webpages is also monitored. For the 24 month period from April 2014 to March 2016, there have been 9,899 visits to the UNGEGN website; that is approximately 412 visits per month. Most visits were from users in the United States, Spain, Russia and the United Kingdom.

4. Capacity Development

Faced with shrinking budgets and financial constraints the UNSD endeavours to continue to support UNGEGN capacity development initiatives such as: training workshops, preparation of training and publicity material and sponsoring the participation of experts to UNGEGN sessions.

(a) **Training workshops:** The Statistics Division in collaboration with The Centre National de la Cartographie et de la Télédétection (CNCT) supported the delivery of an UNGEGN training workshop from 12 to 16 January 2015, in Tunis, Tunisia. Three experts and participants from two countries were provided travel support. An important outcome of the workshop was the definition and drafting of a road map for the creation and functioning of the African national names bureaux.

(b) **Session Participation:** Four experts from Botswana, Loa People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar and Sri Lanka have been supported to attend the current 29th Session of UNGEGN in Bangkok, Thailand.

(c) **On Line Web Course in Toponymy:** With support from the Chair of the Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy the web-based course in toponymy hosted on the UNGEGN web site³ was amended. The edit was made to the map in lesson S02 *The Naming process*, that shows sea name categories. The objectives of the UNGEGN-ICA web course on toponymy are to meet the growing need for training qualified personnel to undertake toponymic tasks, particularly in countries not having geographical names authorities and lacking expertise needed to deliver training courses locally.

³ http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/_data_ICAcourses/index.html.

The link to the on line training course has been added to the front page of the UNGEGN website to increase its visibility as a major resource provided by the group and to allow for greater accessibility.

5. The UNGEGN Geographical Names Database

The UNGEGN Secretariat continues to maintain and support the Geographical Names Database⁴ that was developed in 2004, in pursuance of resolution IX/6 of the ninth Conference on the standardization of geographical names.

Users are able to access short and full names of countries (193 UN Member States), their capitals, and the major cities (population over 100,000) via the World Geographical Names Database web application. Authoritative city endonyms are provided mainly by national name authorities and sound files are being added to assist users with pronunciation of city names.

The database is currently updated quarterly, and as at 7, April 2016 had 6,203 geographical names, an addition of 372, consisting of 193 countries and 3,430 cities, an increase of 87. There are also 1,100 sound files and increase of 126. The Secretariat appreciates all past submissions and greatly encourages experts to send additional material or corrections. The progress in this activity is largely made possible through the persistence and work of past Chairperson Helen Kerfoot.

6. Consultations and Queries

Members of the Bureau and Working Group Conveners provided technical support to the secretariat in responding to place name queries from seven Member States.

7. Strengthening UNGEGN Relations

(a) **Bureau and Working Group Meetings:** During the 29th Session of UNGEGN a special meeting of the Bureau and Working Group Conveners was held that examined operational improvements of UNGEGN. One of the decisions taken at this meeting was to increase communication within the UNGEGN structure by convening quarterly teleconference meetings of the Bureau and every six month of the Working Group Conveners.

Four meetings have been held since April 2014, the first in November 2014, then in April 2015, May 2015 and February 2016. The main items addressed were operation modalities of UNGEGN vis a vis UN-GGIM, arrangements for the 29th Session, publicity and the newsletter, operations of the Working Groups, divisional matters, succession planning and training coordination.

⁴ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/geonames/>.

This new strategy of joint Bureau and Working Group meetings have largely been successful in maintaining communication and focus within the intersessional period, notwithstanding the challenges of bringing together over 10 countries in different time zones across the world.

(b) **UNGEGN – UN-GGIM Relations:** Increasingly members of the UNGEGN Bureau and Working Group Conveners have called for strengthened relations and joined coordination with the Committee of Experts on UN-GGIM particularly in terms of working together on the agenda item, of fundamental data themes. The process has started with the Chair and the Vice Chair attending and delivering presentations at the annual sessions and high level forums of UN-GGIM. In addition, during the latter half of 2015 and early 2016, UN-GGIM prepared a five-year review of all aspects of the Committee’s work and operations from 2012-2016. This review report was explicitly mandated by ECOSOC in the resolution that established UN-GGIM in 2011 and was prepared in close consultation among Member States. The UNGEGN Bureau was invited to provide inputs to this process, and supported the direction that UN-GGIM is taking in relation to spatial data management and use, and reiterated its intent to work side by side with UN-GGIM in order to achieve best practices in spatial data use. Further at UNGEGN’s Bureau and Working Group Convenor meeting in February 2016, a call was made to have the Group of Experts represented at all annual sessions of UN-GGIM. It is recognised that the work done by each body mutually reinforces the other.

8. Review of UNGEGN Operations

The Secretariat invited and engaged the Bureau and Working Group Conveners to examine and review UNGEGN’s working modalities and its operations, taking in to consideration its mandate, overall objectives, present structure and the frequency and timing of Sessions and Conferences. Further the Secretariat encouraged the leadership of UNGEGN to have discussions and design proposals/options for moving forward.

This work has started and is to continue with the reviewing and streamlining of UNGEGN’s structure and operations, to make the group more efficient and effective. The ultimate decision on UNGEGN’s reform should be made at the 2017 conference and the impact becoming effective in 2022.

9. Future Activities

The UNGEGN Secretariat remains committed to advancing the standardization of geographical names and supporting the Group of Experts. In doing so, it will seek to strengthen interaction with the Bureau, Divisional Chairs and Working Group Conveners and the Committee of Experts on UN-GGIM. Some specific activities of importance are; continued improvements to the contents of the website, processing submissions and updating the World Geographical Names Database in a timely manner, employing

strategies to make sustainable capacity development for toponymists and also provide advice on forging the partnerships required to advance its work programmes.