

29th SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

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Opening Session

Stefan Schweinfest

Director, United Nations Statistics Division
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Excellences,
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very pleased to be in this privileged position to welcome you here at the United Nations in Bangkok. I am particularly happy to see so many familiar faces. As many of you know, I have been working for a long time at the United Nations, in the Statistics Division, which is responsible for providing Secretariat Services for this body - UNGEGN.

Over the years I have come to learn, that this is what the United Nations does best: The United Nations is normally not a very powerful organization but has one unique “power”: the convening power of bringing communities together - and that is exactly what is happening here. So, I certainly did not want to miss this meeting and I am very happy I am here. Unfortunately, I will not be able to stay with you for the entire week, as I will have to travel on in two days to another meeting. But, of course you are in good hands, as Ms. Cecille Blake here from my office, who is after all anyway the heart and the mind of the UNGEGN Secretariat, will be with you the whole week.

There are two things that are really special about this meeting: first, as was already mentioned, it is the first UNGEGN meeting in Asia and the Pacific, which is quite astonishing because we have a fifty year history with this body. It was Bill Watt, who is of course from the region, who brought this up and said, I want to bring UNGEGN to Asia! It wasn't easy but we did it in the end, and I am very pleased as I think it is very important that we work with and in the regions. Just like a few years ago, we worked very hard to bring UNGEGN to Africa, for the first time, in 2009 to Nairobi, Kenya.

The other reason why this meeting is special, is because of the policy context. At the United Nations these days, the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals are the central theme of conversations. And in this context, people talk predominantly about information, statistical information, data in general, and geospatial information including geographical names. We, the information – managers, used to be in a “technical corner”, but this is no longer the case.

We suddenly find ourselves at the center of attention, and it is an excellent opportunity for our professions that we talk about “information systems”. There is, as I said, statistical information, geospatial information including names and other types of information; and the question is how can all of these information elements best support the policy of governments and of course the main themes of the United Nations which are development, peace and security and humanitarian affairs. Our work is very important for all of those themes. We have the challenge and the opportunity to show how all these information systems are related to each other and how these information systems are related to policy; how they support what needs to be done at the country level, at the regional level and at the global level. I think this is a very critical moment and I hope I have whetted your appetite, as tomorrow I will make a special presentation on this topic and I will elaborate these issues a little bit further.

Now when I was reflecting what I was going to say to a conference of ‘names’ experts, the sentence “What’s in a Name?” came to my mind. We are, of course, in very good company regarding this reflection, because that sentence “What’s in a Name” is from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. The famous quote: “What’s in a Name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” was written 400 years ago. The question is important: What is in a Name? The conclusion is not like it may appear, that a name is not important. On the contrary: Names are extraordinarily important. They bestow meaning and identity on persons and on objects. They give us the ability to actually reflect on something and to communicate and they allow a degree of consistency and constancy overtime and over space. Consistency over space is exactly what we are working on here at the United Nations. Understanding names across different languages and different cultural boundaries. This is really the heart of the work of UNGEGN. I was also very pleased to find, that when you put in the expression “geographical names” in Google, UNGEGN shows up on the first page – which is of course a modern measure of success!

UNGEGN has a very proud history: You will find the first reference in an ECOSOC Resolution in the year 1959, which talks about standardization of national and international names. This is really the core mandate; and the resolution also mentions dissemination and Romanization, all the way back then! The first session of UNGEGN - UNGEGN 1 so-to-speak (we are UNGEGN 29 today) - took place from 20th of June to the 1st of July 1960. When I saw those dates, I thought this is really personal for me because when the first UNGEGN meeting met, I was exactly four days old! The first conference took place in 1967 from the 4th to the 22nd of September. That means, next year, we will celebrate the official 50th anniversary of United Nations Conference on Standardization of Geographical Names.

So I think, this is an opportune moment to look back on the accomplishments, and to also look forward to the opportunities ahead. I remember, my first involvement with UNGEGN lies now about 15 years back. I must confess that when I first saw the UNGEGN agenda I found it rather scary. There were quite a number of words that I did not understand. At that time, fortunately, I had Helen patiently helping me to get acquainted with all the wonderful work that is being done. I was very impressed, and I soon discovered that this community is very well organized: 24 divisions and 10 working groups are preparing the meetings and it is all based on voluntary work. So many of you do extra hours and I recognize that. This

reflects a personal level of dedication to the topic that you are bringing to the United Nations, for which we are all very grateful.

I was also always impressed by the scientific and technical focus of your work. I think this is very important, especially if you work in a political environment. The Chair already mentioned that as one of the strengths of UNGEGN, over its 50 year history.

So, looking forward, what are the opportunities ahead of us? The technological environment is changing very fast and so is the policy environment. As I just mentioned before, different types of information sets play a critical role for different policy areas. The United Nations has also become much more operational. It is not only about standardization and normalization. It is also about working at the country level. I think this is something that we need to reflect upon: how can we strengthen the capacity building element even more in the future? UNGEGN has been very active in training but more can always be done.

So my invitation to you is that UNGEGN should give itself a 50th anniversary birthday present next year by reflecting not only on your many accomplishments, but also look forward and ask for instance: “What is the best way of operating”? “What is the vision ahead”? “Where would we like to be in 5 years or 10 years from now”? I think that would be an extraordinary birthday present. And you can certainly initiate the reflection right here. I know that the Bureau has already taken the leadership on these questions, and I’m confident this will be discussed further. The Secretariat will fully support you in this work.

As I will not be here on Friday, allow me to use your time and your patience and conclude by expressing some ‘Thank you’s’, thanking first our brothers and sisters here in ESCAP for hosting us. When the idea first came up to hold this UN Conference in Asia, they were the first ones we called, because they have the facilities and the infrastructure and we were very pleased to work with them. Thank you also to Thailand. I think we have many smiles here on our faces being in your beautiful country. I would like to thank the Bureau. I know how hard the Chair and all the Conveners of working groups and divisions are working. Many people have to work very hard to make a meeting like this one happen. I also want to thank my own UN colleagues: in particular Cecille, and others in New York who worked very hard to prepare for this event.

I wish you not only good deliberations for this week, I wish you also a good and productive process of reflection over the next year leading up to the 50th anniversary. And I am certainly looking forward to welcoming you all next year to our Conference in New York.

Thank you very much.