

**2019 Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names**  
New York 29 April 2019

**Opening Remarks**

By H.E. Kira Christianne Danganan Azucena (The Philippines)  
delivered on behalf of the President of the Economic and Social Council  
H.E. Inga Rhonda King (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines)

Excellencies,  
Members of the UNGEGN Bureau  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Do you know that the oldest city of South Africa is Cape Town? It is also Kaapstad (*Kap-shtut*), eKapa (*e-ka-pa*), Le Cap (*le kap*), Kapstadt and Kapkaupunki. Which of these names is correct? Which are in current use? In China alone, rapid development is generating more than 20,000 new urban names every year. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the government had to embark on an intensive 13-year geographical names standardization program to standardize the names of approximately 9,634 of their 17,504 islands. In 2017, they reported that they had standardized 14,341 names of islands and created an inventory, that is, a gazetteer for their management. This is important for Indonesia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, economy, and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, there remains a significant number of islands that do not have names. Standardizing geographical names does matters.

On behalf of Her Excellency, Inga Rhonda King, President of the Economic and Social Council, I am delighted to welcome you to the first session of this "new and revived" United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, and to deliver opening remarks.

ECOSOC serves as the principal organ to coordinate the economic, social, and related work of the United Nations. It is the central platform for fostering debate and innovative thinking, forging consensus on ways forward, and coordinating efforts to achieve internationally agreed goals. ECOSOC links a diverse family of United Nations entities dedicated to sustainable development. This family consists of thirty subsidiary bodies, of which, three are managed by the Statistical Division, namely, your body, the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names, the Statistical Commission and the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management. Our work in ECOSOC is accomplished through you, our subsidiary bodies. Your work on geographical names standardization is critical, hence the theme of the session, "Standardizing Geographical Names Matters".

Distinguished delegates,

Allow me to provide you with some highlights on ECOSOC's work this year.

The high-level political forum on SDG follow-up and review is one mechanism of the United Nations that seeks to encourage agencies and entities to participate and present the alignment of their work with the SDGs and their contribution to the process. This year, there are two high-level political forums on sustainable development – the first in July and the second in September.

The July high level political forum, under the auspices of ECOSOC, will focus on “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”. It will review SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, SDG 13 on climate change, and SDG 16 on peaceful societies, justice and strong institutions along with SDG 17 on global partnerships. This year, 48 countries will present their Voluntary National Reviews.

The September event, under the auspices of the General Assembly, is at summit level. It will focus on ways to accelerate progress towards all the SDGs. Members within the United Nations system are encouraged to showcase how they have implemented the General Assembly's views and guidance on those aspects of their work related to the SDGs and the theme of the summit, and particularly on the SDGs and respective targets reviewed by the high-level political forums that are most relevant to its mandate.

Distinguished delegates,

On behalf of the President of ECOSOC, I applaud the UNGEGN, ably led by its Bureau over the past three years, for successfully undertaking a meaningful introspection and making recommendations to change its operational modalities in order to create a new efficient and agile body. This is a significant milestone for the Group of Experts, as it heralded not only its rich history and numerous achievements but also its determination to create a new and modern UNGEGN. We at ECOSOC welcomed this exercise as it is in line with our objectives to improve the outcomes of ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies to make them more relevant, coherent and solution-oriented to address implementation challenges.

A core mandate of ECOSOC is the promotion of international cooperation on economic, social and cultural issues through technical advice and standard setting. I was pleased to learn that the UNGEGN actively contributes to regional and national capacity building, technical advice and norm setting initiatives. In March 2018, my country, through the Philippine national mapping organization, in collaboration with the Statistics Division and the UNGEGN Working Group on

Training Courses in Toponymy, organized and delivered the first international training course in toponymy including marine toponymy in Manila. Fifty-two participants from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines benefited from this intervention. This capacity building intervention was made possible by the UN's collaborative and convening power that brought together an international group of expert facilitators with specialized knowledge and skills in a mix of disciplines that were needed to satisfy the geographical standardization names requirements of the participating countries.

Distinguished delegates,

I note that encouraging geographical names standardization at the national level is a key mandate of the Group of Experts. I further note that as of July 2016, 93 countries have declared that they have an authority responsible for geographical names standardization. In pursuit of the Group's mandate and in support of the session theme, I encourage Member States not having a national names authority to consider creating one. The group has existing resources, guidelines, manuals and best practices to support the creation of national names authorities. Please access and use them. The benefits accruable from names standardization are immeasurable.

In closing, I wish to make two important points.

One, be assured that the President and the Bureau of ECOSOC are strongly committed to strengthening the role of ECOSOC in guiding the work of its subsidiary bodies to enhance their contribution to implementing the 2030 Agenda. We are also dedicated to strengthening the role of the subsidiary bodies, including the Group of Experts on Geographical Names in the work of the United Nations; and

Two, if there is one take-away from this speech, let it be that the work of UNGEGN and the general United Nations system is achieved by collective action. You, our delegates, the representatives from capital and the missions in New York and all related stakeholders, constitute the United Nations. It is with your contribution and collective effort that our work agenda and the SDGs will be achieved.

I wish you productive deliberations and a successful first session as the "new" UNGEGN. Thank you.