

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

**MS. MARIA FRANCESCA SPATOLISANO
ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL POLICY COORDINATION
AND INTER-AGENCY AFFAIRS**

Opening Remarks

2019 Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

New York, 29 April 2019

Members of the UNGEGN Bureau,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Chair,

Distinguished delegates,

Dear Colleagues,

I am delighted to be with you on this auspicious occasion, the opening session of the “new” group of experts on geographical names. On behalf of Mr. Liu Zhenmin, Under Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, I extend a warm welcome to you all.

The standardization of geographical names is one of the many subjects for which the Department of Economic and Social Affairs is responsible. It is not often in the limelight, yet, geographical names are “sine qua non” to every facet of our lives. Whatever we do, names of places surround us, they provide us with a sense of place, they help us to locate and communicate, and provide a reference point of our language and our identity.

I understand that this session brings together a unique group of experts with a very proud 50 plus year history, that focuses on the standardization of geographical names. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs welcomes the opportunity to address the session on its theme “Standardizing geographical names matter”. I think this theme is not only important but also applicable, as the body begins a new phase of its journey.

Distinguished delegates,

The work you do, the authoritative naming of locations, is vital to the functioning of governments and all sectors of society, including: regional and local authorities, legal institutions, statistical bureaus, tourism authorities, public works departments, transportation companies – air, land and sea – national security agencies, disaster management authorities, users of the internet, businesses and the public in general. They provide context and a framework to support the administration, management, governance and critical analysis of the environment and its resources.

Geographical names do not exist in a vacuum, they reflect human occupancy, they provide important information concerning politics, local history and culture. Place names are historical monuments that transmit a multifaceted picture of older generations’ experiences and insight into the interplay between people and nature. The names of places also belong to a nation’s linguistic heritage. They are part of the dialects and usually follow the same phonological development as other words. They are therefore an integral and irreplaceable part of the vocabulary of local communities.

Distinguished delegates,

Your work is also a key element of the communication and data needed to enable the United Nations to be an effective broker for international cooperation on peace, sustainable development, migration, indigenous peoples, refugee resettlement, human rights and the environment. Many programmes and bodies within the United Nations system, such as UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Food Programme and the UN Refugee Agency, rely on available and accurate geographical names in the execution of their mandates.

And as the development pillar of the UN Secretariat, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs provides a broad range of analytical products, policy advice and technical assistance, helps to translate global economic, social and environmental commitments into national policies and actions, and plays a key role in reviewing progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Distinguished delegates,

To make the 2030 Agenda a reality and implement the Sustainable Development Goals, it is important that all stakeholders engage in collaborative partnerships. I am pleased to note that UNGEGN has added supporting sustainable development to its “first” session agenda, and will be having a special guest presentation on the SDG’s from DESA. I encourage you to consider how your Group of Experts can contribute to the overall sustainable development efforts of the United Nations.

I also note with interest the collaborative initiatives and relationships the Group of Experts have forged, ranging from its GeoNyms project with UNECA¹ - to expert services to support the preparation of the minimum list of global fundamental geospatial data themes, spearheaded by the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management. Geospatial data is key to supporting the monitoring of sustainable development goals and therefore the relevance of the geographical names theme.

And, with the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues currently in session, allow me to share the following: In 2007 the General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 13 (1) states, and I quote: “*Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.*” Unquote. Thus, this article is relevant to your work and we at DESA welcome, of course, that during this coming week a dialogue between members of the Forum and experts of UNGEGN is being planned.

Distinguished delegates and observers,

In closing, please join me in congratulating Mr. William Watt and the members of the UNGEGN Bureau for successfully leading the transition process to the “new” UNGEGN and its first session. The DESA family thanks Mr. Watt for chairing the Group of Experts for six years.

¹ The creation of a database application to be used by national names and /or mapping authorities in Africa, for the collection, validation, storage and dissemination of geographical names data and services.

DESA and by extension the Statistics Division will continue serving the Group of Experts on Geographical Names with utmost commitment. I wish you productive discussions and I look forward to the outcomes of this 2019, first session of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

Thank you very much.
