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United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

2021 session

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Item 3 of the provisional agenda*

Reports of the Chair and the secretariat

Report of the Chair**

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names will hold its second session in 2021, in its new configuration. One of the goals of the 2017 reorganization (see Economic and Social Council resolution [2018/2](#), paras. 5 and 6) had been to strengthen its integration with United Nations institutions, in particular the Economic and Social Council, and its links with other United Nations bodies, such as the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management.

With the focus placed on this new approach, the Group of Experts has been able, since its first session, held in 2019, to prioritize the development of the strategic plan for the period 2021–2029, from among the activities of the Bureau, and to continue making progress towards its integration with United Nations institutions.

I. Prioritizing the development of the strategic plan

The first session of the new Group of Experts, held in 2019, concluded with the approval of six proposed recommendations, which were subsequently adopted by the Economic and Social Council. However, while the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has not prevented the Bureau of the Group of Experts from continuing to operate normally, by videoconference, it has had a profound effect on the functioning of the Group's working groups, whose meetings have had to be cancelled since the spring of 2020. Under these unique circumstances, the Bureau has prioritized the development of its strategic plan.

A. Strategic plan and work programme for the period 2021–2029

In its recommendation 1 of 2019 (decision 2019/230), the Economic and Social Council decided that, in consultation with Member States, the Bureau of the Group of Experts should undertake the development of a draft strategic plan and programme

* [GEGN.2/2021/1](#).

** The document was prepared by Pierre Jaillard, Chair, United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.



of work to be adopted at its 2021 session. The Bureau made that important task a priority.

We saw to it that the drafting process, in which the Bureau and the secretariat were very much involved, was as collaborative as possible. Member States were invited to share their expectations for the document and their comments on the successive drafts prepared on the basis of their initial responses. The working group coordinators contributed to the drafting of the parts related to their mandates.

The timeframe and strategies for the strategic plan were aligned, to the extent possible, to those of the current United Nations policy for sustainable development, now covering the period up to 2030. Five strategic themes were set out in the plan:

- Technical expertise
- Relationships, links and connections
- Effective work programmes
- Recognition of culture, heritage and language
- Promotion and capacity-building

In drafting the strategic plan, the Group of Experts also took into account a dozen General Assembly and Economic and Social Council resolutions, which the relevant working groups were to review pursuant to recommendation 3 of 2019, in order to assess their relevance to the work of the Group of Experts (Council decision 2019/232).

B. Organization of the second session

The COVID-19 pandemic has also changed the conditions for the organization of the second session. Like other meetings held recently, it will be held entirely online, in accordance with a protocol established by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. This should allow more experts to take part in the session, but it will also constrain the organization of the debates, the duration of which will be reduced by one third, compared with sessions held in person, given the time differences between participants' locations and the working conditions of interpreters. The theme for the second session is "Geographical names supporting sustainable development and management of the pandemic". This is in line with the theme of the high-level political forum on sustainable development: "Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development".

However, the prolonged uncertainty over these conditions has prevented the Bureau from following recommendation 2 of 2019 (Council decision 2019/231) as much as it would have liked. The recommendation was to review the procedures and timing for the preparation of country reports and their submission to the sessions of the Group of Experts, as well as to facilitate interactive processes for presentation of the material contained therein. Minor adjustments will be made pending further consultation with Member States on the issue in preparation for the third session.

C. Other 2019 recommendations

Contacts between the Bureau and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management were focused more on the organization of the second session

than on the work of the Documentation Division, in terms of helping it to facilitate the optimal use of geographical names, as called for in recommendation 6 (Council decision 2019/235). However, the staff of the Division were able to find the necessary assistance in this regard directly from the respective language services.

Two final recommendations could not be implemented in practice:

- Recommendation 4, to urge the Economic Commission for Africa to collaborate with the Group of Experts in order to achieve geographical names standardization in the countries of Africa (Council decision 2019/233)
- Recommendation 5, to establish an ad hoc group to determine the benefits and scope of investigating the principles and methodology of writing geographical names emanating from unwritten languages (Council decision 2019/234)

II. Strengthening the integration of the Group of Experts with United Nations institutions

The goal of achieving better integration with the United Nations system was meant as an honour to the very foundation of the Group of Experts (Council resolution 2018/2) and as a basic debt of gratitude to the United Nations Secretariat for the support it has provided to our work. This integration, already enhanced at the institutional level, should be further strengthened in the future.

A. Significant progress in institutional integration

Since 2020, the Bureau of the Group of Experts has been called upon to contribute annually to the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the annual meeting of the Economic and Social Council with the functional commissions and expert bodies. The Group of Experts uses both forums to explain how the standardization of geographical names can contribute to the broader goals of the United Nations, and to raise awareness of the value of its work among a wide range of participants. The support of the Group of Experts for its reorganization has been facilitated by the Council's current policy for sustainable development and by the alignment of some of its objectives in that regard with those of the Group. The focus is thus on the contribution that a proper standardization of place names can make to target 11.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, aimed at strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

However, more specific collaboration has been confirmed with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management. Two heads of the Group of Experts' working groups had participated in the work that led the Committee of Experts to adopt a global statistical geospatial framework in 2019,¹ which includes geographical names as one of 14 fundamental geospatial data themes. It has since been developing an integrated geospatial information framework² that encourages national geographic institutes to integrate national geographical names authorities into their processes. In return, our Bureau has since suggested to the Committee of Experts that the Group could make significant contributions in two particular areas:

- Upgrading the world geographical names database, as envisaged in the action plan of the Working Group on Geographical Names Data Management. Our

¹ *The Global Statistical Geospatial Framework*, available at https://ggim.un.org/meetings/GGIM-committee/9th-Session/documents/The_GSGF.pdf.

² Available at <https://ggim.un.org/IGIF/>.

secretariat is working on this upgrade and is expected to have completed it by our second session.

- Codifying recommendations that are currently spread among more than 200 resolutions into a coherent and hierarchical whole, organized by subject, resolving the contradictions that have arisen over time and making the whole more accessible and usable. This project is still at a preliminary stage.

B. For a real diplomatic consideration of toponymy

We therefore still have some progress to make for the standardization of geographical names to be more widely recognized, not only as a technical component necessary for the proper functioning of geographical tools – which in itself is not negligible – but even more so as an issue in its own right.

In concrete terms, this is above all a condition for the proper functioning of the Group of Experts. Under the unique conditions of online meetings, the conclusions (final report, proposed recommendations and decisions) will be subject to a new silence procedure, which has two significant unique features: it requires unanimity; and it can only be implemented by the permanent representatives of the Member States that give us our mandate as experts. It is therefore important that none of our permanent representatives raise any objections or reservations; this means that the participants at the session will have to inform them of their agreement with the conclusions, and that they will have to be made aware of the specific issues raised.

Regarding the latter issue, the Bureau's efforts within Economic and Social Council bodies would be better disseminated with enhanced communication between the members of the Group of Experts from each country and their respective permanent missions to the United Nations, including prior to the session. The final challenge in standardizing geographical names is entirely political: to avoid the risk which the French philosopher Albert Camus summed up as follows: "To name things wrongly is to add to the misfortune of the world".³

III. Acknowledgements

The author of this report should and would like to emphasize that what he describes herein is the result of close cooperation within the Bureau and with the secretariat, despite many challenges (languages, time differences, etc.). He would like to thank everyone sincerely and warmly. The two Vice-Chairs and two Rapporteurs, as well as the former Chair and the heads of the working groups, who are invited to participate in the frequent enlarged meetings of the Bureau in addition to carrying out their work as facilitators, made a significant contribution to the work of the Group of Experts. We would not have been able to successfully complete the work, or even to move it forward, without the invaluable assistance of the two members of the Secretariat dedicated to the work of the Group of Experts, under the leadership of the Director of the Statistics Division. I thank them all very much!

³ Albert Camus, "Sur une philosophie de l'expression" (1944), in *Œuvres complètes*, (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, volume I, 2006), p. 908.