
**United Nations Group of Experts On
Geographical Names
2021 session
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Item 3 of the provisional agenda *
Report of the Secretariat**

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Submitted by UNGEGN Secretariat

Summary **

In keeping with the practice of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and in accordance with the draft agenda approved by the Economic and Social Council in its decision 2018/264, and pursuant to the resolutions and decisions adopted at the eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the 2017 session of the Group, the Secretariat prepares a report detailing the activities undertaken by the Group during the intersessional period. The Group is invited to review the report and to provide comments.

The full report provides a summary of the main activities conducted by the Group of Experts, such as the preparation of the draft strategic plan and programme of work. Other activities included coordinating the work of the Bureau and working groups, conducting publicity and awareness-raising activities, supporting capacity development, strengthening relations with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, maintaining and upgrading the Group's web pages, managing the World Geographical Names database and coordinating preparations for the Group's 2021 session. Based on the findings made while preparing the draft strategic plan and programme of work, the report also features issues and recommendations related to further strengthening the Group's operations and its functioning in delivering on its core mandate.

I. Introduction

1. This report summarizes the major activities carried out by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) secretariat during the intersessional period May 2019 to April 2021. The UNGEGN secretariat of the United Nations Statistics Division, of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, continues to provide the support required to progress the important work of promoting the standardization of geographical names. The report highlights the major activities conducted in pursuance of recommendations and decisions of the first session in 2019 of the “new” UNGEGN held in New York in 29 April to 3 May 2019. In addition, it also looks at the further strengthening of the group’s operations in delivering its core mandate.

II. Preparation of Draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work

2. For the past four years the Group of Experts has been evolving and modernizing its operations. The major work item conducted by the UNGEGN Bureau and its secretariat during the intersessional period has been the preparation of its draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029. The draft Strategic Plan is an outcome from a series of activities which began in 2017 at the 11th conference and 30th session. On 17 August 2017 the Group of Experts agreed by resolution E/CONF.105/L3, to restructure its operations. Subsequently, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on 10 November 2017 adopted resolution 2018/2, “Future organization and methods of work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names”. This resolution approved the discontinuation of the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, with the mandates retained by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. The resolution also approved the convening of UNGEGN biennial sessions, over a period of five day, beginning in 2019. Further actions included the preparation and approval of the new UNGEGN rules of procedure and draft agenda by ECOSOC on 24th July 2018. In continuation of its modernization process, at its first session in April 2019, the Group of Experts adopted Recommendation 1, which requested the Bureau of the Group of Experts to undertake the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work for UNGEGN, with a view for it to be presented for consideration at its second session in May 2021.

3. During the intersessional period the UNGEGN Secretariat actively supported the Expanded Bureau with the development of the draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work. Supporting activities included: i) convening and management of 14 Bureau meetings between June 2019 and April 2021(see table 1), ii) organizing and conducting three global consultations, iii) convening a virtual side event on 25 March 2021, that shared the draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work, iv) keeping all stakeholders informed about the plan preparation process via emails, letters and special focus webpages prepared, populated and maintained https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/UNGEGN_Draft_Strategic_Framework/ that shared the document as it evolved throughout its development process, and vi) management of all files and documentation relevant to the exercise including responses from the global consultation.

4. The secretariat notes that with the approval and implementation of the draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work, the Group of Experts will have a strengthened, forward and focused vision, a guide to direct the prioritization of activities, and a tool to strengthen the group’s accountability, and deepen the impact of its work. It is also expected that the Group of Experts will realize increased operational efficiencies and more effective allocation of

resources. Importantly, national geographical names authorities may consider using UNGEGN's Strategic Plan and Programme of Work as a guide to fashion the preparation and alignment of their own plans and work programmes.

5. Noting that the draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work is a living document, it is acknowledged that over the next two years its refinement, implementation, monitoring and evaluation will be required. The UN Statistics Division is committed to continue providing guidance and support to the Group of Experts on this activity. In addition, the Division recognizes the drafters and UNGEGN stakeholders for their commitment and diligent work done to prepare, review, and finalize the Strategic Plan and Programme of Work.

III. Coordination of Bureau and Working Group Meetings

6. During the intersessional period the secretariat planned and convened 12 expanded Bureau (Bureau and convenors of working groups and task teams) meetings and two core Bureau meetings. All meetings had approximately 80% participation from Bureau and Working Group members, which indicate the unwavering level of commitment and support from UNGEGN's leadership. The meetings were mostly working ones, with a duration of two to three hours, which demanded the resilience of members particularly those from Asia Pacific, given the significant difference in time with New York, USA. The following table shows the dates of 14 meetings convened from June 2019 to April 2021. The Expanded Bureau is scheduled to have its next meeting before the 2021 session on 30 April.

	Date of Meeting	UNGEGN Bureau
1	12 June 2019	Expanded Bureau
2	18 September 2019	Expanded Bureau
3	17 December 2019	Expanded Bureau
4	7 May 2020	Expanded Bureau
5	14 February 2020	Expanded Bureau
6	7 May 2020	Expanded Bureau
7	10 July 2020	Expanded Bureau
8	27 November 2020	Core Bureau
9	3 December 2020	Core Bureau
10	11 December 2020	Expanded Bureau
11	15 January 2021	Expanded Bureau
12	5 February 2021	Expanded Bureau
13	19 March 2021	Expanded Bureau
14	9 April 2021	Expanded Bureau

Table 1 List of UNGEGN Bureau meetings 2019 - 2021

7. With able leadership from the UNGEGN Chair, and strong support from the Expanded Bureau, the development of the draft strategic plan and programme of work was the main focus of these meetings. Other operational and management issues addressed during the meetings were:- de-briefing of the first/2019 UNGEGN session, participation in the ninth and tenth sessions of the UN Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM), contribution to ECOSOC 2020 and 2021 High Level Political Fora, participation in the 2020 and 2021 meetings of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies, and

preparations for the second UNGEN session, in addition to general housekeeping matters. Notably the Bureau invited UNGEGN experts to support its work when the need arose.

8. The number and duration of Expanded Bureau meetings over the reporting period has been recording breaking. This may be attributed to the need to have the draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work prepared for submission to the 2021 UNGEGN session, and the onset of the pandemic which halted the convening of in person meetings. Under normal circumstances the Expanded Bureau would have met at the joint UNGEGN Working Groups meeting which was planned to be held in July 2020 in Suwon, Republic of Korea and then in October 2020, in Sweden, at the Cultural Heritage and Commercialization of Geographical Names UNGEGN Symposium and Joint Working Group and Division Meetings. Both events were cancelled.

9. In continuation of the thrust to increase communication and engender greater participation across the UNGEGN structure, the Secretariat encourages the Bureau to consider convening at minimum two virtual meetings per year with the Bureaux of its 24 linguistic and geographical divisions. Should the meeting size be thought to be too big, consideration could be given to dividing the divisions into two groups - eastern and western hemispheres. Therefore, four meetings would be held each year, two for each hemispheric divisional groupings. This suggestion is strongly supported, given that currently there is no formal mechanism for divisional interaction with the UNGEGN Bureau outside of sessions. This mechanism would ensure that all actors within the UNGEGN structure would be able to collectively plan, design, decide, implement and monitor the Group's work programmes within the intersessional period.

IV. Publicity and Awareness

10. **UNEGN Information Bulletin:** With the support of the Working Group on Publicity and Funding four issues of the UNGEGN Information Bulletin were prepared, circulated and published on the UNGEGN website. Table 2 below lists the dates the Bulletin was issued, the theme and the number of articles contributed by Member States and divisions.

Bulletin No.	Date of Issue	Theme	Number of articles contributed from	
			Member States	Divisions
56	June 2019	Curiosities of geographical names	9	2
57	November 2019	Communication strategies for encouraging the implementation of standardized geographical names	8	-
58	May 2020	Issues and experiences in the standardization of geographical names	8	1
59	November 2020	Geographical Names and Sustainable Tourism	12	2

Table 2 UNGEGN Bulletin - dates, themes and number of articles

11. There has been continued interest and contribution to the special feature section of the Bulletin. The number of articles contributed remained relatively the same, however there

was a decrease in the contribution of articles from linguistic and geographical divisions. This also supports the recommendation to strengthen communication across and among divisions by convening regular meetings.

12. Member States, divisions and working groups are encouraged to contribute articles to the Bulletin. The representative of Cyprus is recognized for his unwavering support to the UNGEGN Bulletin, not only with his well-written and informative articles, but also for designing the cover of all four Bulletins issued within the reporting period. An online form was prepared and posted to the UNGEGN webpage to garner new subscribers for the Bulletin. Between June 2021 to 20 April 2021, 74 requests were received from readers (CEO's, Director Generals, Diplomats, Divisional Heads, Researchers and Students) in 50 countries. This should increase the circulation and geographical uptake of the Bulletin and thus raise awareness about the work of the Group of Experts.

13. **Promotional Material:** In response to the increased number of virtual meetings and to enhance the UNGEGN brand, three backgrounds (digital picture files) for virtual meetings were prepared and posted on the website for downloading and use by UNGEGN representatives.

14. **Social Media:** The active use of social media, including the timely posting of tweets remain a challenge. It is hoped that with the approval and implementation of the draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work, a communication strategy and a proactive approach will be employed to strengthen the Group's social media presence and engagement.

V. The UNGEGN Website and World Geographical Names Database

15. The Secretariat continued to maintain the UNGEGN website and repository of technical documents on the standardization of geographical names. Incremental changes have been made to the website. More work is to be done to migrate data and files from the previous website to the current one. This is however constrained given the small size of the secretariat and its competing and priority operational requirements.

16. The UNGEGN website is one of the most comprehensive global repositories on geographical place names. In order to main its status and remain current, Working Groups, Divisions and Member State representatives are encouraged to actively use and provide updates to the secretariat to maintain the website.

17. The UNGEGN secretariat at the first session had announced the development of a World Geographical Names Database prototype GIS web application. This exercise has not progressed due to a number of factors. Notwithstanding, the UNSD and by extension the UNGEGN secretariat recognizes the importance and use of the World Geographical Names Database, that was created in 2004, in pursuance of resolution IX/6 of the ninth Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, and remains committed in supporting this platform.

18. The UNSD is therefore currently updating the World Geographical Names Database to reflect prevailing information technology practices. These updates include added functionalities which enable multiple users to view and edit toponyms of cities and countries, add indigenous names, and link cities and countries to other external resources. The update to the map interface remains a challenge, given that Adobe Flash Player is no longer supported. This means that the existing interactive maps cannot be displayed, in addition the world map has changed, and a number of national borders are in dispute. The United Nations Clear Map (a background reference web mapping service) was identified as

best option to replace the existing outdated map, however its use is further being explored to ascertain its applicability given the requirements of the UNGEGN user community.

19. Future work includes the UNGEGN secretariat exploring the use of innovative technologies to enable the modelling of changes to toponyms over time and enabling the linking of geographical locations (including maritime) with toponyms. The secretariat looks forward to continuing this work with the participation of relevant stakeholders over the coming months to ensure that the data contained within the database is up-to-date and reflects national perspectives.

VI. Capacity Development

20. The UNSD is mandated to develop and implement standards and methods, which are achieved through its training and capacity building programme. Notwithstanding its shrinking budget and financial constraints, the UNSD continues to support UNGEGN's capacity development training workshops, the preparation of training and publicity material and sponsors the participation of experts to UNGEGN sessions.

21. DESA, UNSD had scheduled the support of a one-week toponymic training session in Bali, Indonesia for the Asia South East Division in 2020. This training intervention was cancelled given the ongoing serious and unprecedented health crisis.

22. It is recognized that there are perennial challenges in the delivery of toponymic training across Member States. One such challenge is acquiring sustainable funding at all levels (national, regional and global) to support training, education and public education and awareness. Another is that the training programmes (short courses) undertaken by UNGEGN reaches a restricted number of people and, there is a mix of toponymic training requirements at the national, regional and global levels, for which a single model or approach, will not be able to satisfy. Notwithstanding that an UNGEGN internet course has been developed, as well as manuals for self-study, other modern training delivery solutions should be employed. Technologies such as digital video conferencing, audio conferencing, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, simulation, and multimedia can all be employed to change training delivery methods. It is therefore recommended that the Group of Experts consider identifying resources to be used to develop e-learning toponymy platforms to sustain its capacity development offering.

VII. Strengthening Relations with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management

23. Members of the UNGEGN Bureau and Working Group Convenors have called for strengthened relations and joined coordination with the Committee of Experts on UN-GGIM and has worked together on the agenda item, fundamental data themes.

24. During the intersessional period the UNGEGN Bureau participated in the ninth and tenth sessions of UN-GGIM held in August 2019 and August-September 2020 (virtual) respectively. At both Sessions a representative of the Bureau introduced UNGEGN's paper on "Collaboration with the United Group of Experts on Geographical Names", a standing item on the UN-GGIM programme of work.

25. The main decisions from the 2019 UN-GGIM session as included the report ([E/2020/46-E/C.20/2019/19](#)) were:- (a) acknowledged the importance of regular communications between the Bureau of the Committee and the Bureau of the Group of

Experts to support the development of their respective strategic plans and the creation of geographical names authorities where they do not presently exist; (b) noted that strengthened collaboration and mutual representation between the Committee and the Group of Experts was most effective at the national level, and encouraged increased communication between geospatial information management authorities and geographical names authorities; and (e) Suggested for consideration possible areas of collaborative work at the global level, which would include supporting the development of relevant strategic pathways of the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework, capacity-building, and education and research initiatives, including with the United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management Academic Network.

26. At the [tenth session of the Committee of Experts](#), based on the paper presented, 12 statements were delivered. Eight were from the following Member States – in the order received, (Republic of Korea, Brazil, Argentina, United Kingdom, India, Ecuador, Sweden and Germany), three from the UN-GGIM Regional Committees for Africa, America and Europe and one from an Observer – PAIGH.

27. The main decisions as included in the UN-GGIM tenth session report [E/2021/46-E/C.20/2020/35](#) are as follows: - (a) Supported the establishment of a liaison group between the Committee of Experts and the Group of Experts to act as a guiding mechanism to manage the flow of information between the two bodies and to continue to identify areas of joint work, and welcomed the proposal to convene a joint meeting of the Bureau of the Committee and the Bureau of the Group in early 2021; (b) Supported efforts by Member States, the regional commissions and the regional committees to encourage and assist in the creation of geographical names authorities, particularly in African countries, and to strengthen and enhance the functionalities of the GeoNyms application for capturing and validating toponyms; and (c) Commended the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for the Americas and the Group of Experts on their partnership through the CARIGEO initiative, which sought to create national geographical names authorities and define standardization procedures for the Caribbean Member States. Follow-up actions are to be pursued to implement these decisions. This however will only be possible with the full support and engagement of both Bureaux.

VIII. The Second Session/2021 UNGEGN Session

28. The 2021/second session is being organized against the background of an ongoing extraordinary and unprecedented situation of the global pandemic, the continued risks and restrictions associated with international travel by representatives from capitals, quarantine requirements of the host country, which makes it necessary to react responsibly. Considering the limitations, the session will be convened in an informal virtual format with remote simultaneous interpretation in six official languages.

29. The virtual format and reduced time have necessitated introduction of new procedures. These include: - use of the silence procedure, the submission of written statements, and informing the secretariat in advance of the meeting of the delegation's intention to speak per agenda item. The format of general discussions will continue to remain as with physical meetings. Therefore, for each agenda item, the chair will invite pre-identified representatives to introduce their papers, followed by interventions from delegations who informed the secretariat of their intention to speak under that agenda item. The Chair/presiding officer of the agenda item will then deliver the summary of the discussion.

30. As a follow up to the need to strengthen the involvement and contribution of UNGEGN data on divisions were collected for seven sessions, to determine the level of compliance in submitting reports to each session. Table 3 shows that there has been an incremental, but not significant decline in the number of reports submitted by divisions.

Division	Divisional report						
	25th Session	26th session	28th Session	29th Session	30th Session	1st Session	2nd Session
1 Africa Central Division		submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
2 Africa East Division		submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted		
3 Africa South Division		submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted		
4 Africa West Division	submitted	submitted		1			
5 Arabic Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
6 Asia East Division (other than China)	submitted		2				
7 Asia South-East Division			submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
	submitted	submitted					
South West Pacific Division			submitted				
8 Asia South-West Division (other than Arabic)	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted			
9 Baltic Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
10 Celtic Division			3				
11 China Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
12 Dutch-and German-speaking Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
13 East Central and South-East Europe Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
14 Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
15 East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic)			4				
16 French-speaking Division	submitted	submitted		5	submitted	submitted	submitted
17 India Division			6				
18 Latin America Division		submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted		submitted
19 Norden Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
20 Pacific South-West Division			7				submitted
21 Portuguese-speaking Division	submitted	submitted		8	submitted	submitted	submitted
22 Romano-Hellenic Division			submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted
23 United Kingdom Division		submitted	submitted	submitted			
24 USA/Canada Division	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted	submitted		
	10 did not	6 did not	8 did not	7 did not	10 did not	13 did not	12 did not

Table 3 Report submitted by divisions between 2009 and 2021

31. A review of the secretariat’s records showed that four division are inactive and are without Chairs, and of the 24 divisions, eight have divisional websites of which two are not operational. The secretariat calls upon States Members representatives to resuscitate inactive divisions, and if guidance is needed, the assistance of the UNGEGN Bureau should be sought.

32. Document management remains a challenge as in previous years, given the volume of documents that had to be processed. For this the 2021 session, as at 15 April, 217 summaries and full reports have been received, processed and uploaded to the UNGEGN session webpages. Of the 217 documents received 125 are full reports, 92 are summaries and 29 reports are to be presented for discussion. Table 3 shows the number of participants attending the past two sessions, number of Member States participating, and number of papers submitted. The number of participants has remained on average the same in 2017 and 2019 and this has also been the same for the number of papers submitted for the first and second sessions. The expectation is what will be the number of participants for 2021 given the virtual format.

Session	Year	Country	City	Total participation	Member States	No. Papers
2	2021	Virtual				125
1	2019	USA	New York	264	70	123

30	2017	USA	New York	278		
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Table 4 UNGEGN Sessions, participation and reports

IX. Issues for Consideration

33. The UNGEGN secretariat remains committed to advancing the standardization of geographical names and supporting the Group of Experts. In doing so, it will continue to work with the Bureau, Divisional Chairs and Working Group Convenors to implement the decisions of past and current sessions. The past intersessional period proved to be hectic and resulted in development of a draft Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021 to 2029. To build on the advancements made in modernizing and making its operations efficient, and to strengthen its alignment with other expert bodies of ECOSOC, the Group of Experts may consider refining other areas of its operations.

34. The Group of Experts may wish to consider evaluating and discussing the organization and operations of its working groups and task teams. The Group may also consider whether additional working groups or task teams are to be created and or existing ones are to be merged or disbanded, identifying officers to fill vacant positions, designing succession planning strategies and creating measures to revitalize inactive work items. The need to pursue these activities is of importance given the pending presentation of the draft the Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021 to 2029 for approval.

35. National names standardization is a core objective of the Group of Experts. Whilst it can be plausibly argued that all working groups are tasked to contribute to this objective, there remains a need to have a specific country/regional/divisional focus on supporting national names standardization. It is therefore suggested that the group consider creating a working group on National Names Standardization which could incorporate the Task Team for Africa. This working group would focus on encouraging/facilitating Member States with the creation of national names authorities and addressing their challenges with names standardization. This working group would also interact with experts from the other working groups as deemed necessary. In addition, the working group would also need to work closely with divisions and this arrangement should assist with the revitalization of those that are inactive.

X. Point for discussion

36. The Group of Experts is invited to express its views on the report and discuss the issues raised in support of strengthening the operations and work of the Group of Experts.