

United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names Contribution to the 2020 High Level Political Forum

“Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) works towards every country having globally aligned guidelines, standards, frameworks and the capacity to enable them to decide on their own nationally standardized geographical names through the creation of national names authorities or recognized administrative processes. Countries are also encouraged to create national geographical names databases and web-based geographical names applications and products that disseminate and provide easy access to geographical names for national and international use and the preservation of their culture, heritage, language and identity.

Standardized geographical names (the names of places and features) are not often in the limelight, yet, they are “sine qua non” to every facet of our lives and are vital keys to existing in our digital world. Geographical names are an indispensable locational component of many information systems supporting mission critical operations across every sector of business and government. Accurate and standardized geographical names are, therefore, more than just place names on a map, they are a fundamental means of communication, aiding cooperation among local, national and international organizations. They are a key component of addressing and therefore critical for emergency management and disaster response. Geographical names constitute a fundamental data set that permits the integration of disparate digital data sets which are powerful decision-making tools for governments seeking to formulate policies and strategies, and prepare, implement and monitor development plans and projects. Moreover, geographical names is an integral referencing component that underpins a nation’s geospatial information management, which is needed to contribute even more to the work of the United Nations, especially in the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Key policies and measures

In 2017 UNGEGN successfully changed its operational modalities to create a new efficient and agile body, that aims to be more relevant, coherent and solution oriented. The Group meets on a two-year cycle and its next session is to be convened in May 2021.

The Group of Experts in 2019 decided on the development of a draft strategic plan and programme of work that will be in alignment to the 2030 Agenda. Within the current intersessional period, the Bureau of the Group of Experts supported by contributions from

Member States are preparing its draft strategic plan and programme of work which is scheduled to be adopted at its 2021 session.

Since its inception to date key policy measures to guide governments in the form of resolutions adopted by the Group of Experts in support of data (geographical names) collection, management and dissemination included:

- i. the recommendation that each country should have a national geographical names authority consisting of a continuing body, or coordinated group of bodies, having clearly stated authority and instructions for the standardization of geographical names and the determination of names standardization policy within the country;
- ii. the collection and standardization of geographical names including those used in multilingual areas;
- iii. names authorities produce, continually revise and disseminate appropriate outputs of all its standardized geographical names.

Achieving these recommendations has remained a challenge. An assessment done in 2016 revealed that 93 countries have a geographical names authority responsible for geographical names collection, standardization, management and dissemination. This means that there is a need to support over 50 percent of the Member States to implement robust standardization practices for the collection, management and dissemination of geographical names. The Group of Experts intends to design collaborative strategies aimed at increasing the number of national geographical names standardization bodies and therefore the creation of geographical names databases, services and web-based applications.

UNGEEN's contribution to accelerated action and transformative pathways

Place names/geographical names data (for example, names of natural or man-made features such as: rivers, lakes, glaciers, waterfalls, oases, hills, mountains, plateaus, settlements, roads, dams, municipalities, states, districts, boroughs, grazing lands, fishing areas and sacred sites) constitute an integral data set needed for reporting across nearly all goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda.

Over the years, UNGEEN has adopted a number of resolutions which supports achieving the sustainable development goals. For example, in regard to goal 11: *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable* and target 11.4 “*strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural heritage*”, the following resolutions supports:- Resolution VIII/I promotes the preservation of indigenous and minority groups geographical names; Resolution IX/4 encourages national bodies to identify toponyms that meet the criteria for application of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; Resolution IX/5 promotes the recording and use of indigenous, minority and regional language group geographical names and; Resolution X/3 recommends the criteria for establishing and evaluating the nature of geographical names as cultural heritage. Many Member States have adopted and continue to apply and implement these resolutions which make geographical names an essential referencing component to their national geospatial data

infrastructures and support the preservation and respect of their indigenous cultures and minority languages.

UNGEGN actively contributes to regional and national capacity building, technical advice and norm-setting initiatives. Capacity building interventions have been made possible by the United Nations collaborative and convening power that brings together an international group of expert facilitators with specialized knowledge and skills in a mix of disciplines that are needed to address the geographical names standardization requirements of developing countries and those with special capacity requirements. The Group of Experts has produced guidelines, technical manuals and best practices to facilitate geographical names standardization initiatives as well as the establishment and maintenance of geographical names databases at the national level.

Geographical names is a key element of the communication and data needed to enable the United Nations to be an effective facilitator for international cooperation on peace, migration, and refugee resettlement. 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. The Group maintains and updates on an ongoing basis a world geographical names database in pursuance of resolution IX/6. The database has a total of 6,800 name records including names for 3,443 major cities in 193 countries. There are also 1,219 sound files for city names in 44 countries. The multilingual and multi-scriptural database includes romanized forms based on 51 romanization systems. The Group of Experts has established the need to create a modern web geographic information system application to provide stakeholders and users with easier access to UNGEGN's world geographical names database.

Members of the UNGEGN Bureau and Working Group Convenors are collaborating with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) on strengthening relations between the two bodies and have successfully contributed to the framing of the fundamental data themes for geospatial information management. Further, the Group of Experts also recognizes the need to develop strategic guidance on enhancing capacity-building efforts in Africa, together with increased advocacy and public outreach. Collaborative efforts have been initiated with UNECA to support the development of the GeoNyms application and implementation of the Gaborone Action Plan on Geographical Names Activities in Africa.

Recommendations for accelerating progress

Access to accurate and timely geographical names data and efficient and effective data management practices and procedures are fundamental to policy formulation, project and programme development, and implementation leading to sustainable development. To achieve accelerated action and transformative pathways, the focus should be placed on encouraging

efficient and effective geospatial, earth observation and statistical data collection and dissemination procedures and practices in support of policy development and thus informed decision-making. The use of standardized geographical names as a referencing component and for orientation is crucial. Informed decision making based on earth observation or statistics is impossible without standardized geographical names data, as “Everything happens somewhere!”.