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## United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

**2019 session**

New York, 29 April–3 May 2019

Item 4 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports of the Chair and the Secretariat**

### Report of the Chair

#### Summary\*\*

##### A time of change

I have taken some time recently to reflect on the past two years from a United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names perspective and recognize that we have reached a significant milestone in the successful history of this body.

Although I will continue to stress that the aims and focus of the Group of Experts have not changed, how we will set about achieving our goals has changed to a degree. I recognize that being comfortable with change is not something that all of us can achieve immediately, but I do believe that the change was required for a number of reasons, and as we progress together through this and possibly the next session of the new United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, I am sure that we can continue the successes of the past 50 years.

As this change process was undertaken, there were a number of people who were instrumental to what I see as a successful outcome, one that could not have happened without the strong support that was forthcoming.

The first group that needs to be acknowledged in this process is the body of the Group and the willingness of all to accept the need to pursue different options for our future operational methodology.

Second, the work of the Bureau and the working group convenors need to be recognized for the many hours spent considering the options for the future of the Group and reviewing and amending the statute, rules of procedure, mandate and agenda documents, which was a tremendous effort.

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\* [GEGN.2/2019/1](#).

\*\* The full report was prepared by Bill Watt, Chair, United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. The report will be available at [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/1st\\_session\\_UNGEGN.html](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/1st_session_UNGEGN.html), in the language of submission only, as document GEGN.2/2019/4/CRP.4.



Third, the support from the Statistics Division, particularly the Group's secretariat and other United Nations staff, was essential to the outcome, and their impact cannot be underestimated.

The fourth group I would like to acknowledge is a group that does not usually sit in the spotlight with regard to Group matters, and they are the staff of the United Nations missions and of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in a number of countries whose input and support were also of great benefit. Even though at times we approached the situations from different perspectives, their input was vital for the ongoing operational stability of the Group.

#### **A time of stability**

As mentioned above, the aims and objective of the Group of Experts have not been altered.

We still have the same responsibility to:

(a) Emphasize the importance of the standardization of geographical names at the national and international levels and to demonstrate the benefits to be derived from such standardization;

(b) Collect the results of the work of national and international bodies dealing with the standardization of geographical names and to facilitate the dissemination of those results to States Members of the United Nations;

(c) Study and propose principles, policies and methods suitable for resolving problems of national and international standardization;

(d) Play an active role, by facilitating the supply of scientific and technical help, in particular to developing countries, in creating mechanisms for the national and international standardization of geographical names;

(e) Provide a vehicle for liaison and coordination among Member States, and between Member States and international organizations, on work associated with the standardization of geographical names;

(f) Implement the tasks assigned as a result of the resolutions adopted by the former United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and by the new United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names;

(g) Emphasize, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, respect for equality among languages and the significance of geographical names as part of the historical and cultural heritage and identity of nations.

The only change to these responsibilities I have identified is that the urgency to accomplish them has strengthened since the creation of the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management and the focus that organization brings to the pressing need for accurate and comprehensive spatial data, of which geographical names are a very important component.

I also recognize that we need to consider our work in line with the mandate of the United Nations and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Fundamentally, though, I see that the aim and focus of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and the outcomes we are trying to achieve are very stable.

#### **A time of commitment**

I have mentioned this before, and must emphasize again that, throughout the years I have been involved with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical

Names, I have seen considerable evidence of what I regard as the Group's greatest strength, and that is the active involvement of individuals from a wide range of government, academic and professional backgrounds.

This active involvement has been evident in the following areas:

(a) The time taken to prepare the papers that we discuss at our meetings. I can state from my own experience that such preparation takes time, and I can add that I have personally benefited from hundreds of such papers;

(b) The willingness of individuals to voluntarily accept roles within the organization that are in addition to their normal work. This includes accepting positions in the Bureau, as working group convenors and as active members of the working groups.

The challenge that the Group now faces is to ensure that this active involvement continues. In the recent past we have seen many of the stalwart members of the Group retire, and that is to be expected in any organization, but we do feel of the loss of many years of positive involvement by these individuals.

So I ask all of you to consider your current involvement and encourage that level of active involvement, as shown by past delegates, from as many of our current and future delegates as possible to ensure that the future of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names will be as successful as its past.

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