
19 March 2019

English

**United Nations Group of Experts On
Geographical Names
2019 session
New York, 29 April – 3 May 2019
Item 4 of the provisional agenda *
Report of the Secretariat**

Report of the Secretariat

Submitted by UNGEGN Secretariat**

Summary

In keeping with the practice of the Group of Experts 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 thirtieth session of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names, the Secretariat prepares a report detailing the activities undertaken by the Group during the intersessional period. The Group of Experts on Geographical Names is invited to review the report and to provide comments.

The full report provides a summary of the major activities conducted by the Group of Experts, such as a review of its working methods and rules of procedure. Other activities include coordinating the work of the Bureau and working groups, conducting publicity and awareness 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 convening of the 2019 session of the Group of Experts. The report also provides details of the activities carried out in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the Group of Experts. Owing to the creation of the "new" Group of Experts in August 2017, the report includes issues and recommendations in support of further strengthening the operations and function of the Group in delivering its core mandate, which is to develop procedures and establish mechanisms for the standardization of geographical names in response to national requirements and specific requests. Recommendations include streamlining the Group's programme of work with the preparation, approval and implementation of a strategic plan.

*GEGN.2/2019/1

**Prepared by the UNGEGN Secretariat

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 September 2017 to April 2019. The UNGEGN Secretariat of the United Nations Statistics Division 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 resolutions and recommendations of the Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN), and the thirtieth session of UNGEGN both held in New York in August 2017. In addition, it also looks at the further strengthening of the group's operations in delivering its core mandate.

II. Revision of Working Methods and Rules of Procedure

2. Since the 1960s there have been 11 UNCSGN and 30 sessions of UNGEGN; the duration of the conference and the sessions, the agendas and organization of works, have been modified to meet the changing needs. After fifty years in keeping with advances in technology and the need for effective use of resources in both the Member States and the United Nations, the UNGEGN Bureau thought it was timely to review its processes and procedures and methods of work. Based on decision 29/101¹ and a series of discussions within UNGEGN, the Bureau prepared a draft resolution, and under the leadership of Australia conducted two global consultations and informal discussions, which culminated in resolution E/CONF.105/L3, on 17 August 2017.

3. 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". The resolution signifies a major restructuring of UNGEGN. The resolution: (i) discontinues the UNCSGN and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in their current format, with the mandates retained by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, (ii) the body will convene biennial sessions, over a period of five days, beginning in 2019, and (iii) the rules of procedure are to be drafted by the Bureau and presented to ECOSOC for adoption in advance of the first session of UNGEGN scheduled for 29 April to 3 May, 2019.

4. Pursuant to ECOSOC resolution 2018/2, the UNGEGN Bureau prepared its draft rules of procedure and draft agenda (which is a combination of the

¹ Decision of 29 April 2016 (E/2016/66, sect. I.B.)

agendas from past UNCSGN and UNGEGN Sessions). The revision and editing of both documents were done over a period of three months, with intensive virtual meetings and many e-mail exchanges. The Office of the Secretary of UNGEGN and the Office of Legal Affairs were consulted at each iteration and contributed to the preparation of the documents to ensure that they were in accordance with the accepted standards of practices, procedures and language used by other bodies of ECOSOC. UNGEGN membership was also consulted, and the expanded Bureau reviewed the comments and recommendations from the global consultation, incorporated the suggestions that were deemed suitable and in keeping with the vision, mission and objectives of a “new” UNGEGN. The draft rules of procedure and draft agenda were then presented to ECOSOC Bureau for its consideration. Missions to the United Nations in New York thought that it was important that they should be briefed on the work and the revision of UNGEGN operations modalities, and in keeping with resolution 2018/2 that informal consultations be held. On 26 June 2018 the chair of UNGEGN, via WebEx and the UNGEGN Secretariat briefed mission representatives. In addition, New Zealand facilitated two informal consultation sessions and negotiated the revised rules of procedure and draft agenda. Consensus on the draft rules of procedure and the agenda was reached on Tuesday 17 July 2018. At its Coordination and Management Meeting on 24th July 2018 ECOSOC decided on the rules of procedure and draft agenda for the first session of the “new” UNGEGN ([2018/264](#)).

5. The revision of the group’s operations, its new mandate and rules of procedures were major work items and significant achievement of the UNGEGN Bureau and the Secretariat during the intersessional period. The benefits to be gained from the new body includes: cost savings from an overall reduction in meeting days; more timely strategic direction-setting; better clarity on the purpose of meetings; and closer alignment of the methods of work with other intergovernmental bodies of ECOSOC. These resolutions also provided the mandate and the agenda need for convening the first session of the new Expert Group.

III. The First Session/2019 Session of the “New” UNGEGN

6. A new Expert Group connotes not only new and improved rules of procedures, but also efficient and effective operations, and revised or updated objectives, strategies and work plans that are in line with Member States requirements. The transitional Bureau, the Office of the Secretary and the Secretariat have been working towards introducing new features and practices to align the Expert Group’s methods of work with other bodies of ECOSOC. The following are some of the changes that have been introduced:

i) an annotated provisional agenda has been introduced, which replaces the previous provisional agenda; ii) the organization of work and documentation for the session have been translated in all languages of the United Nations. Previously these documents were only available in English and the organisation of work was generally posted a few days before the start of the session; iii) the structure and format of the organization of work has also been modified, where previously the documents to be considered were included in this document, they are now included in the annotated provisional agenda; iv) secretariat services under e-deleGATE have been made available to the Group of Experts and v) UNGEGN has been branded with a generic logo.

7. Document management has been a challenge, reason being over 90 summaries submitted by Member States, Divisions and Working Groups had to be reviewed, edited and translated within defined organizational time frames. This is being brought to the attention of the Bureau for their review of the document submission and management process for future sessions.

8. **Introduction of e-deleGATE** - In 2015 the Department for the General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM) launched a secure online portal for delegates, “e-deleGATE”. It provides effective and timely secretariat services to Member States. The e-deleGATE portal automates and digitizes: accreditations, correspondences, announcements, inscription on the list of speakers, co-sponsorship of proposals, shares Committee documents, and allows for the submission of the composition of delegations, and provides links to other important resources. The project is also eco-friendly and will contribute to reducing organizational costs, preventing human errors and building institutional memories.

9. For the first time in many sessions and conferences there will not be an exposition. Over 15 side events are scheduled, featuring a mix of working group and divisional meetings and a few technical workshops. As requested by the Bureau UNGEGN sessions retain the feature of special guest presentations.

IV. Publicity and Awareness

10. **UNGEKN Information Bulletin:** With the support of the Working Group on Publicity and Funding three issues of the UNGEGN Information Bulletin were prepared, circulated and published on the UNGEGN website. The table below gives an overview on the dates 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
53	November 2017	50 years of UNGEGN and UNCSGN	12	2
54	May 2018	Geographical Names Supporting Sustainable Development	8	3
55	December 2018	Legislation on Geographical Names	10	3

11. Member States, divisions and working groups are encouraged to contribute articles to the Bulletin. It is noteworthy that Cyprus, New Zealand, and the Arabic Division submitted articles for all three issues. With more effort being expended to prepare the Bulletin there is a need to monitor its uptake and geographical reach. This will be done by generating statistics on the number of visits to the Bulletin's webpage biennially.

12. **Promotional Material:** An UNGEGN post card and lapel pin were prepared in recognition of the Group's fiftieth anniversary, 1967 to 2017.

13. **Social Media:** The Group has not been actively engaged in the use of social media, specifically Twitter. A Twitter account was created in 2016 and since then there has been 82 tweets and 111 followers. A communication strategy and a proactive approach is needed for optimal social media engagement. It is hoped that the Working Group on Publicity and Funding will make social media engagement a priority work item. The Group of Experts Twitter handle is @UNSD_GEGN and the hashtag for the 2019 session is #2019UNGEGN.

V. The UNGEGN Website and World Geographical Names Database

14. The Secretariat continued to maintain the UNGEGN website and repository of technical documents on the standardization of geographical names. For the reporting period the most visited webpage was the World Geographical Names Database, which saw 14,668 visits. The top 10 users of UNGEGN's website were the USA, United Kingdom, Ukraine, Germany, Spain, Greece, Russia, Czechia, Italy and France.

15. The Secretariat is pleased to announce the creation of a redesigned UNGEGN website and users are invited to test the World Geographical Names Database prototype GIS web application. As a new body, it was befitting to create a new website. The website was designed to be in conformity with that of the United Nations Statistical Division and general United Nations guidelines and also took into account the requirements of the geographical names standardization user community.

16. The Secretariat thanks the core group of UNGEGN experts who worked in collaboration with the UNSD's technical team, providing them with mock-up boards, design ideas, structure, organization and style to support the creation of the new website.

17. The UNGEGN Secretariat continued to maintain and support 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.

18. The database is currently updated quarterly, and as at 26, February 2019 it had a total of 6,800 name records including names for 3,443 cities in 193 countries. There are also 1,219 sound files for city names in 44 countries, an increase of 119 since 2017. The multi-scriptual database includes romanized forms based on 51 romanization systems. The Secretariat appreciates all past submissions and greatly encourages experts to send additional data and or updates. The Secretariat acknowledges past Chairperson Helen Kerfoot, Canada for her continued interest and support in maintaining the database.

19. 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 new UNGEGN website.

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, supported the design, coordination and delivery of the first regional training course in toponymy including marine toponymy from

19-24 March 2018, at the Dusit Thani Hotel in Makati City, Manila, Philippines.

22. In its efforts to improve geographical names standardization capacities in Member States, particularly in developing countries, for the reporting period the UNSD funded 17 persons. In August 2017 three delegates from Egypt, Laos and Uruguay were sponsored to attend the thirtieth session of UNGEGN and the eleventh UNCSGN. In March 2018 seven participants from Cambodia, Laos, Viet Nam, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and four resource persons were supported to participate and deliver the training course in the Philippines. Five delegates from Egypt, Jamaica, Laos, Peru and Uruguay will be supported to participate in the 2019 session of UNGEGN.

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

23. Increasingly 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 particularly in terms of working together on the agenda item, fundamental data themes.

24. During the intersessional period several collaborative activities to strengthen collaborations were done by both bodies. Collaborative activities included i) two face to face joint meetings between the bureaux, ii) each body has an agenda item on the other agenda which requires the preparation of reports and presentations to be made at each body's plenary meeting and iii) UNGEGN's experts have been supporting the work of the UN-GGIM committee's work on global fundamental geospatial data themes. This working group has completed its work.

25. At the second joint meeting of the Bureaux in August 2018 the major decision taken was to pursue the creation of a liaison group with representatives from both bodies; to be done without being forced. The status on this decision is that UNGEGN has identified its representatives and for UN-GGIM, no member of their Bureau has volunteered to be the liaison person. It is recognized that no significant activity has occurred at the global level to move forward with collaboration between the Expert Groups. However, at the joint bureaux meeting in August 2018 it was noted that collaboration at the national level was being pursued in a few countries, whose geographical names body and national geospatial information management body resided within the same entity/ministry. The outcomes of this collaborative initiative are largely dependent on the interest and actions of Member States.

VIII. Recognizing the 50th Anniversary of UNCSGN

26. In recognition of the 50 years of the UNCSGN, 1967-2017 the group prepared and staged several activities at the eleventh conference in August 2017. Agenda item 4, “Reflection on the past, present and future” was dedicated to the 50th celebration, which featured papers and presentations such as “Milestones of actions at the Conferences and in the work of UNGEGN: creation of UNGEGN divisions and working groups”, “A reflection of UNGEGN capacity building programme and communication and publication activities”, and “50 years of UNCSGN: Honouring some of those who got us here”.

27. A special logo and post-card were prepared in commemoration of the Group’s anniversary. In addition, a special poster exhibition was mounted that featured the capacity building work done in Africa, the publications prepared and published on geographical names standardization, the major milestones of the group, the advances made in national standardization, the participation of women in UNGEGN and the work done in connecting with other relevant organizations, such as the International Cartographic Association and the International Hydrographic Organization. The anniversary celebrations continued with the UNGEGN Bulletin, issue number 53 of November 2017, that featured 50 years of UNGEGN and UNCSGN. It featured the geographical names standardization journey of a few Member States, focused on women in UNGEGN and a double spread of candid photographs of UNGEGN experts at work and play and an excerpt of “On recognizing UNGEGN stalwarts”.

28. The celebrations were at an opportune time as it heralded the end of half a century of work and ushered in a new period of work to be done by the “new” UNGEGN body with new methods of work and rules of procedure.

IX. Bureau and Working Group Meetings

29. During the intersessional period the expanded Bureau, that is the core Bureau and convenors of the working groups met five times, three were via WebEx, in March and July 2018 and February and March 2019 and one was face to face in October 2018 in Brussels, Belgium.

30. The main focus of these meetings was in fulfilment of ECOSOC resolution 2018/2 which required the Bureau to draft the “new body’s rules of procedure that included the identification of the structure of the Bureau, election methods and terms of service, operational structure of the group, the development of the draft agenda for the first session and participation. In

addition to the WebEx meetings were intensive and frequent e-mail exchanges among the members of the Bureau.

31. The United Nations Statistics Division thanks the members of the Bureau and the Member State representatives who participated and contributed to the consultations in New York, for the leadership, time, dedication and work done to successfully prepare and have approved the UNGEGN rules of procedure and agenda for the first session in April 2019. The Division also wishes to acknowledge the Chair for leading the group over the past four years through a period of significant changes, which required expert diplomacy, patience, keen listening skills and fixity of purpose. The Chair demits office at the end of the session.

32. The Secretariat also wishes to recognise the contribution of members of the Bureau and Working Group Convenors who provided technical support in responding to place name queries from Member States and entities within the United Nations system.

33. In 2014 at the twenty eighth session of UNGEGN, the Bureau had agreed that increased communication was needed, and this should be addressed by convening quarterly teleconference meetings of the Bureau, and every six months of the Working Group Convenors. It has proven to be a challenge to abide by this decision within the intersessional period, given competing work commitments of Bureau members and bringing together over 16 countries in different time zones across the world. It is hoped that the new Bureau and Working Group convenors will endeavour to maintain momentum in the execution of its work programme within the intersessional period.

X. Issues for Consideration

34. 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 significant milestones and changes in the working methods and operations of the Group of Experts. 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. The Group of Experts may wish to consider the following issues, which are being brought to their attention.

35. **Strategic Plan and work programme** – the next step, post new working methods and rules of procedure, could be an examination of the overall strategic direction and work programme of the group. In the coming period, the group may consider asking the Bureau and Working Group Convenors to develop a strategic plan and refined work programme taking into consideration, rapid technological developments, the priority geographical names standardization requirements of Member States and supporting its parent body work on advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. An UNGEGN strategic plan is important as it would align the work of the nine working groups, two special teams and 24 divisions around a common vision and goals, it would allow for more effective communication within the group and across its constituents, it would also strengthen the groups accountability and deepen the impact of its work.

36. **Documentation preparation and management** – a major objective of the group is its ability to bring experts in the field of geographical names standardization together to promote collective action. One mechanism for achieving this is through technical paper presentations and statements delivered from the floor. The Group of Experts prepares and submits an average of 90 summaries and papers for processing (editing and translation in all United Nations languages) for each session. The management of the quantum number of documents requires an equal outlay of resources on the part of the Secretariat, the Bureau and the working group convenors to review, organize and prepare for presentation and discussion.

37. Greater efficiencies should be achieved with a review of the document preparation, management and presentation processes. This exercise would feed on the outcomes from the strategic plan and work programme, and should include a review of the provisional agenda, documentation requirements, the structure and form of technical documents, the types of documents – national reports, divisional, and working group reports, and consideration for documents to be presented for information, discussion or as a background document. To enliven the sessions and increase interaction among delegates, the format of the meetings could be reviewed. In the current format, for each agenda item papers are introduced, discussed and a summary presented, in addition to special guest presentations. Additional forms of interaction and information sharing, and exchange may be considered, for example agenda item 6 (GEGN.2/2019/1), cooperation with liaison with other organizations could take the form of a panel discussion, instead of having their reports presented. Panel discussions were done during the eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in August 2017 and were welcomed favourably by delegates.

38. **Communications strategy and programme-** concomitant with the status as a new body is the need to strengthen the brand and profile of the Group of Experts. This work has started with the creation of a new website and the redesign and development of a web GIS world geographical names application. To expand the reach and increase the understanding and benefits of geographical name standardization, a clear strategy and programme of work is required. Therefore, it is suggested that the Working Group on Publicity and Funding be tasked to have prepared a smart UNGEGN Communications Plan, that outlines the Group's communication objectives, its audience, the key messages, a list of proposed activities and strategies that are achievable given existing resources, monitoring and measuring mechanisms and the use shared and owned media. Integral to the communication strategy should be the increased use of Twitter, emphasis on content creation and maintenance and importantly increased connection and outreach to the Expert Group stakeholders.

39. The Group of Experts is being encouraged to actively support the secretariat in maintaining the website and world geographic names database through content creation and updates. This entails submitting to the secretariat your working groups', divisions' and national announcements, updates on representatives, standardization achievements, guidelines and standards among other items. The content may take the form of short videos, blogs, one-page infomercials among others.

40. **Maintaining communication and activities during intersessional period** – it is recognised that the work of the Group of Experts is in addition to the responsibilities of existing national job functions of its experts, Bureau members, working group convenors and divisional chairs. Given the preceding, it is often difficult to maintain focus and momentum on the Groups work particularly outside of the two to three months prior to session start. It is therefore proposed that a system of communication including defined schedules and modes be designed and implemented, that ensures that all actors within the UNGEGN structure can collectively plan, design, decide, implement and monitor the Group's work programmes within the intersessional period. Currently the Bureau and working group convenors have teleconferences on an ad hoc or as needed basis. Consideration may be given to convening meetings with divisional chairs as currently there is no formal mechanism for their interaction with the core Bureau outside of sessions. Another consideration for maintaining the groups work and momentum could be convening a forum/symposium sponsored by a Member State within the intervening biennial period.

XI. Point for discussion

41. 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.