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## United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

2023 session

New York, 1–5 May 2023

Item 3 of the provisional agenda\*

Reports of the Chair and the Secretariat

### Towards better integration within the United Nations\*\*

#### Report of the Chair

The main goal of the reorganization of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in 2017 was to strengthen its integration with United Nations institutions, in particular the Economic and Social Council, and its links with other subsidiary bodies of the Council, such as the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management.

This approach, which has the support of the Council, as it has reaffirmed on several occasions since then, was meant to honour the very foundation of the Group of Experts and as a basic debt of gratitude to the United Nations Secretariat for the support it has provided to our work. It is also in the interest of the Group of Experts, which deals with a profoundly political subject, as can be seen from the very origins of its establishment, but it does so, paradoxically, in a context of relative indifference on the part of certain delegations, which should be encouraged to take an interest in its work through continual reminders of what is at stake.

For six years, this approach has remained fundamental to the work of the new Group of Experts; it has already been translated into action and this must continue in many ways.

## I. Six years of progress already made

### A. Governance of the Group of Experts

#### 1. Reorganization of the Group of Experts

I must first acknowledge the impetus given to this approach by Bill Watt (Australia) throughout his chairmanship (2012–2019), which he exercised in the light of experience with the Group of Experts that dated back to 1987. His chairmanship

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\* [GEGN.2/2023/1](#).

\*\* Document prepared by the Chair of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Pierre Jaillard.



obviously led to successful reorganization of the Group of Experts in 2017<sup>1</sup> and the adoption of its rules of procedure in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Renewal of the Bureau

Mr. Watt also knew that he would have to retire in 2019, and I am deeply grateful to him for the confidence he placed in me at that time by proposing that I succeed him, and to you for your willingness to adopt this proposal. The Bureau, which was thus renewed and given continuity, has sincerely endeavoured to implement the direction he provided for moving forward, with which we sincerely concur. The composition of the Group of Experts for the periods 2017–2019 and 2019–2023 is set out in the table below:

	<i>2017–2019</i>	<i>2019–2023</i>
Chair	Bill Watt (Australia)	Pierre Jaillard (France)
Vice-Chairs	Naima Friha (Tunisia) Hasanuddin Abidin (Indonesia)	Hasanuddin Abidin (Indonesia), then Susan Birtles (Australia) Sungjae Choo (Republic of Korea)
Rapporteurs	Trent Palmer (United States of America) Sungjae Choo (Republic of Korea)	Trent Palmer (United States of America) Wendy Shaw (New Zealand)

I would like to warmly thank the members of the Bureau for their outstanding commitment to the Group of Experts, and the team within the United Nations Secretariat for its ongoing and fully professional support.

## B. Institutional integration within the Economic and Social Council

### 1. Economic and Social Council

In accordance with the new status of the Group of Experts, its Bureau has since 2020 been called upon to contribute to several of the Council's forums, including the high-level political forum on sustainable development and various meetings organized by the Council with its thirty subsidiary organizations. On each of these occasions, the representative of the Group of Experts took the opportunity to explain and illustrate how the standardization of geographical names can contribute to the broader goals of the United Nations, in order to raise awareness of the value of its work among a wide range of participants.

The Council also had all its subsidiary bodies undergo an audit that was conducted in 2022, which noted and welcomed the more specific collaboration already established with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management.

### 2. Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management

This collaboration with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, another subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council, has indeed been affirmed and confirmed.

<sup>1</sup> Economic and Social Council resolution 2018/2, paragraphs 5 and 6.

<sup>2</sup> Economic and Social Council decision 2018/264, annex I.

Two heads of working groups of the Group of Experts had participated in the work that led the Committee of Experts to adopt a global statistical geospatial framework<sup>3</sup> in 2019, which includes geographical names as one of 14 fundamental geospatial data themes. The Committee of Experts has since then been developing an integrated geospatial information framework<sup>4</sup> that encourages national geographic institutes to include national geographical names authorities in their processes.

In 2022, our Bureau proposed working together with the Committee of Experts to identify and promote good practices in this area. This collaborative project was very well received by the Committee of Experts. It is still seeking the necessary organization and resources to enter the operational phase.

### 3. Economic Commission for Africa

In accordance with recommendation No. 4 of 2019 (Economic and Social Council decision 2019/233), the Group of Experts urged the Economic Commission for Africa to work with it. This was reflected in the participation of the Commission in the discussion of agenda item 9 of the 2021 session on the standardization of geographical names in Africa, and in the effective action taken by the Commission to have toponymy included on the agenda of the eighth session of the Regional Committee for Africa of the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management in 2022 in Addis Ababa.

## C. Strategic plan and programme of work

From 2019 to 2021, the aim of greater integration within the United Nations was reflected in the priority given, among the Bureau's other activities, to the development of the strategic plan and programme of work for 2021–2029, in consultation with Member States, in accordance with Council decision 2019/230 (recommendation No. 1), and given final approved at the 2021 session. The Bureau and the Secretariat were deeply engaged in the collaborative drafting process. 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.

### 1. Understanding the standardization of geographical names

This important document aims to give the Council not only full transparency on the real activities of the Group of Experts, but above all the keys to understanding what motivates it and what is at stake. Its readability is enhanced by the fact that the time frame 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. The plan has established five strategic themes that are linked in different ways to the missions and objectives of the United Nations and in particular of the Council:

(a) Technical expertise, whose mobilization was at the very origins of the establishment of the Group of Experts by the Council;<sup>5</sup>

(b) Relationships, links and connections, especially among United Nations bodies and more particularly the bodies of the Council;

<sup>3</sup> See *The Global Statistical Geospatial Framework*, available at [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/The\\_GSGF-E.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/The_GSGF-E.pdf) and *The Global Fundamental Geospatial Data Themes*, available at <https://ggim.un.org/documents/Fundamental%20Data%20Publication.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://ggim.un.org/IGIF/>.

<sup>5</sup> Economic and Social Council resolution 715 A (XXVII).

(c) Effective work programmes, in anticipation of the audit requested by the Council for its subsidiary bodies in 2021 and 2022;

(d) Recognition of culture, heritage and language, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 11;

(e) Promotion and capacity-building, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 17.

## **2. Effectiveness and cohesion of the Group of Experts**

This document also aims to increase the effectiveness and cohesion of the Group of Experts by enabling it to set itself a mandate for action during and between sessions, in particular for the Bureau and the specialized Chairs and coordinators, who act on mandates from the Group, but also for the linguistic or geographical divisions, which provide a link with the national delegations, and, where appropriate, to guide the action of national authorities on the standardization of geographical names.

## **II. Working methods better suited to the requirements of the Council**

The integration of the Group of Experts within the United Nations, already enhanced at the institutional level, should be further strengthened in the future, and in particular by the end of the strategic plan and programme of work, scheduled for 2029, six years from now. In order to contribute to this integration in the future, I believe it is advisable to adopt some good practices in our organization and in how we function.

### **A. Properly calibrate the work products of the Group of Experts**

The request addressed by the Council to its subsidiary bodies to be more decision-oriented can only be to our benefit. This means that only those matters that truly merit it should be called decisions, not mere statements of intent.

#### **1. Prioritize our work products at three or four levels**

The new status of the Group of Experts enables it to adopt three levels of texts. Decisions adopted by the Council based on recommendations of the Group of Experts have the highest authority. Texts that the Group of Experts adopts on its own initiative, either in the form of decisions or in the final report of each session – a form that has been somewhat neglected and could be better utilized – have a lower level of authority.

I believe it would be desirable to specify the types of decisions that should be covered in each of these types of texts. It seems to me that Council decisions should be solely for the final conclusions of the Group of Experts on a given subject (as could be the case this year with the draft decision on exonyms), for highly strategic guidance on the work of the Group of Experts and for the convening of the next session. As for texts adopted by the Group of Experts itself, it seems to me that decisions should apply only to matters that actually modify the work or organization of the Group of Experts, and that items such as reiterations of previous decisions or expressions of thanks to the organizers should be contained either in the session report or in intermediate-level statements.

## 2. Apply formalities only where necessary

Our first two sessions concluded with the adoption of 9 decisions of the Council and 31 decisions of the Group of Experts, the majority of which did not receive the expected follow-up. In addition, the strategic plan and work programme for 2021–2029, adopted pursuant to one of these Council decisions (decision 2022/259), provided for several annual or biennial reports. Lastly, the drafting of the strategic plan and work programme also took into account a dozen resolutions of the General Assembly and the Council, which the relevant working groups were to review pursuant to recommendation No. 3 of 2019, in order to assess their relevance to the work of the Group of Experts (Economic and Social Council decision 2019/232).

Of course, the non-implementation of some of these decisions is largely due to the fact that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic changed our working conditions and profoundly disrupted the functioning of the working groups of the Group of Expert, whose meetings had to be cancelled one after another for more than three of the four years since 2019. In these special circumstances, the Bureau continued to operate normally by videoconference, but had to set priorities. The 2021 session was held entirely online, which allowed more experts to take part, but also constrained the organization of the debates, the duration of which was reduced by one third, compared with sessions held in person, given the time differences between participants' locations and the working conditions of interpreters.

This also highlights a risk that would arise from excessive formality in some of our statements regarding the capabilities of the Group of Experts, especially with respect to some work that is actually still under discussion and on which no decision can yet be adopted, other than to record a milestone or sometimes just to announce the continuation of the discussions.

## 3. Record our strategies and actions in a single document

Our priorities and activities are currently summarized, both in the strategic plan and work programme, and also in decisions taken at each session by the Council or the Group of Experts. In order to better manage ourselves, and to ensure greater transparency for the Council, the strategic plan and work programme should reflect, in an accurate and ongoing manner, all the activities carried out by the Group of Experts. In particular, the work programme should evolve over the course of the sessions in order to incorporate new activities, close out those that have been completed and amend those that the Group wants to develop. Decisions by the Council or the Group of Experts should therefore take the form of amendments to the strategic plan in the case of strategic themes, or to the work programme in the case of decisions on activities.

## B. Integrate our work more fully into the United Nations framework

Beyond the procedures themselves, the standardization of geographical names merits wider recognition, not only as a technical component necessary for the proper functioning of geographical tools, which is in itself significant, but even more as a fully-fledged political issue. I say it again, this is a matter of avoiding the risk that the French philosopher Albert Camus summed up as follows: “To name things wrongly is to add to the misfortune of the world”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Albert Camus, “Sur une philosophie de l’expression” (1944), in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Vol. I, 2006), p. 908.

This means that it must be better integrated into the framework provided by the United Nations, in terms of both topicality and principles.

**1. Follow the annual priorities set by the United Nations**

We are already guided each year by the focus placed by the high-level political forum on sustainable development on one aspect or another of these goals, for either a theme of the information bulletin or the theme of the session. The theme for the current session thus focuses on “Strengthening relationships, links and connections in geographical names standardization and for sustainable development and pandemic recovery”.

These themes are not intended as mere window-dressing linking our usual activities to the United Nations, nor are they meant to suggest that the aims mentioned are the only important ones. They are simply opportunities to reconsider our activity from different perspectives in order to improve it.

**2. Ground our decisions in the principles of the United Nations**

Furthermore, in order to fully engage with the Council, it is important that the recommendations we make be considered not only technical, but also politically significant.

To achieve this, they should make explicit the very principles of the United Nations on which they are based, such as the right of peoples to self-determination, the maintenance of peace, or cultural and linguistic diversity. This was the basis for the drafting of our working group’s draft decision on exonyms, which will be proposed for adoption at this session.

This type of underlying principle should also be highlighted after the fact for relevant resolutions among the 200 or so resolutions already adopted by Group of Experts since 1959. This would not only allow them to be organized into a coherent and hierarchical whole that will be more accessible and usable, but also perhaps to better highlight contradictions to be resolved or gaps to be filled.

**3. Further mobilize the linguistic/geographical divisions**

Within the United Nations, and in particular in the Council, decision-making power belongs to the States that give us a mandate as experts, and it is therefore important to encourage their representatives to take an interest in our subjects. It is therefore important that before and during the session, the national experts of the Group of Experts explain to their permanent representatives to the United Nations their positions on the subjects under discussion, and make them aware of the issues at stake.

The linguistic/geographical divisions of the Group of Experts play an important intermediary role in this regard, which we decided in 2021 to mobilize further in support of our goals. We therefore organized three meetings between the Bureau and the division Chairs, to draw attention to some of our work and to share good practices. These meetings appear to have proved useful to the participants and should be continued.

### **III. Six more years ahead for the strategic plan and work programme**

The end of our strategic plan has been scheduled for 2029 in order to best coincide with the target date of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The

richness of the strategic plan and work programme itself and the decisions taken subsequently already provide substantial content with regard to the strengths that the Group of Experts is able to mobilize.

## **A. Integrate our different strategies**

There is every reason to confirm the strategies already set by the Group of Experts. They are derived, however, from the two sources mentioned above.

The strategies set out in the strategic plan were developed through lengthy discussion among us and were adopted at the 2021 session. There is no reason to question them and they should therefore be confirmed.

However, the Council also decided in 2021 to invite the Group of Experts to work on the links between place names and the environment. This was the theme of our information bulletin No. 63, one of the most substantial editions. It should remain part of our strategies, and each strategy can be adjusted to place additional focus on the environment.

## **B. Limit the number of projects to be implemented**

### **1. Three projects previously approved but not yet implemented**

Three decisions taken by the Council in 2019 on the recommendation of the Group of Experts have yet to be implemented.

The Bureau has been unable to follow up as fully as it would have liked on recommendation No. 2 (Economic and Social Council decision 2019/231), which 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 have been made in the documentation for the session pending further consultation with Member States on the issue.

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, for the purpose of helping it to facilitate the optimal use of geographical names, as called for in recommendation No. 6 (Economic and Social Council decision 2019/235). However, the staff of the Division were able to find the necessary assistance in this regard directly from the respective linguistic division.

Lastly, it has also not yet been possible to effectively implement recommendation No. 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 (Economic and Social Council decision 2019/234).

### **2. A limited number of new projects**

Two other projects remain to be completed.

The Group of Experts undertook to redesign and upgrade the world geographical names database, as envisaged in the action plan of the Working Group on Geographical Names Data Management. This project has been technically completed but had yet to be published for administrative reasons at the time this report was written.

Moreover, the collaborative project with the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management mentioned above is still seeking the organization and resources required for an effective launch. Its implementation is still uncertain and therefore the number of new projects to be undertaken now should be limited.

### **C. Mobilize all stakeholders and partners of the Group of Experts**

At the end of this report, I must emphasize that what is described here is the result of intense cooperation within the Bureau and with the Secretariat. I want to warmly and sincerely thank both of those teams, 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. They are now joined by the Chairs of the linguistic/geographical divisions, who have been mobilized to promote the work of the Bureau and the Secretariat. We are also mobilizing other parts of the United Nations Secretariat, other United Nations agencies and external partners. I thank them all very much! Together we can continue to implement our strategic plan and work programme.

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