



GGIM
UNITED NATIONS INITIATIVE ON
GLOBAL GEOSPATIAL
INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

UN creates expert group to consult on managing geospatial information

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The ECOSOC made history last week in Geneva by establishing a new intergovernmental body to address an emerging global issue. The **UN Committee on Global Geospatial Information Management** would bring together, for the first time at the global level, government experts from all member states to consult on the rapidly changing field of geospatial information. At a time when few new intergovernmental bodies are being created, this decision reflected ECOSOC's concern for promoting greater and wider use of geospatial information globally for sustainable development and humanitarian assistance.

Traditional maps have long been the primary tool for users to view and access geospatial information. In the last decade, new technologies have deeply transformed the availability and accessibility of geospatial information and their potential use. Satellite-based images, geo-coded administrative data, location-based information systems have pooled vast amount of data within a spatial framework. The power of internet and other systems have allowed users to access such information instantly for multiple purposes, from GPS assisting drivers finding their way, to 911 callers from cellular phones being located by police or fire services. Internet search engines allow everybody to zoom in on virtually any plot of land on the planet.

How should the world make best use of the surging geospatial information? What are the limitations or challenges? What are the best practices in managing geospatial information nationally and globally? Who has sovereignty over the information gathered remotely by technology? This Committee, scheduled to meet at least once a year and reporting directly to ECOSOC, will work together to develop the "full potential of geospatial information and the underlying technology" and to develop "effective strategies on how to build and strengthen national capacity, especially in developing countries". It is also mandated to "compile and disseminate best practices and experiences of national, regional and international bodies on geospatial information."

The Committee will comprise experts from all Member States, as well as experts from international organizations, as observers. The new body will be serviced by the **Statistics Division** of the **Department of Economic and Social Affairs** (DESA) and the Cartographic Section, a unit within the Department of Field Services that provides general and thematic geographic information as well as UN official maps.

In his closing remarks on Friday, the ECOSOC President Lazarous Kapambwe (Zambia) noted the establishment of the new Committee of Experts, and observed that "technical professionals were no doubt excited about the fact that they would

now meet under the umbrella of the United Nations. The group will bring together for the first time at the global level experts from all Member States to compile and disseminate best practices and experiences on geospatial information, relevant in the context of sustainable development and humanitarian assistance,” he added.

“We are very proud to serve this new Committee of Experts as its secretariat. We will assist countries to take advantage of geospatial information for sustainable development through a sound national technological infrastructure meshed within a global spatial framework,” said Paul Cheung, Director of the United Nations Statistics Division of DESA. “Geospatial information infrastructure, integrated with other information networks such as official statistics, will become as essential for countries and individuals as roads, telecommunications or other basic services.”

For over half a century, the Statistics Division has served as secretariat to the UN Statistical Commission, and also the Regional Cartographic Conferences for Asia and the Americas and the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Integrating statistical and geospatial data for better use in policy decision-making is increasingly the focus of the work of the Statistics Division. The division has produced a Handbook on Geospatial Infrastructure in Support of Census Activities encouraging the use geospatial technologies to improve their censuses.