

**Second Meeting of the Task Force on Access to Information  
under the Aarhus Convention**  
*Geneva, 16-17 December 2013*

Videoconference on 17 December at 8:30 am, NY time

UN-GGIM and Data Access

1. Why UN-GGIM?
  2. UN-GGIM objectives and work
  3. Data (including environmental) access, and confidentiality
  4. Geospatial Information for Sustainable Development
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**Distinguished delegates,**

**Dear Colleagues,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

On behalf of the United Nations Statistics Division and the UN-GGIM Secretariat, I would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to join the session and share with you this Statement on the objectives and work of UN-GGIM, particularly the challenge of facilitating access to information to support development.

## 1. Why the Global Geospatial Information Management Initiative (GGIM)?

- Most studies have shown that over 80% of decisions made daily involve an understanding of location information, ‘where’ activities and developments are taking place. Location is an essential component of the information management cycle when tackling the **challenges** the world is facing, and is often referred to as the ‘fourth driver of decision-making’ for business and the public sector alongside such metrics as revenue, time and cost. **Geospatial information has emerged as a critical base for policy formulation and for integrating data** across sectors: demographic, economic, social, and environmental. Furthermore, it is now widely accepted that building infrastructure for the collection, validation, analysis and dissemination of geospatial information is as important to countries as the building of roads, telecommunications and other utilities networks.
- Countries are experiencing an exponentially increasing amount of geospatial data that are being created and captured on a daily basis, such as high-resolution satellite imagery and large-scale digital data and maps, from local to global levels. Rapid advances in geospatial information technology are enabling better access and integration of location-based information,

expanding the traditional role of maps to information management. This paradigm shift from data availability to information availability has generated multiple issues for effectively harnessing geospatial information to solve global problems.

- The most important challenge lies in the area of effective coordination among countries to adopt and implement geospatial information standards, to manage and share information, and to discuss and resolve technical issues, both at the national and international level. In some countries, the government's role is shifting from being a primary supplier of authoritative geospatial data to a coordinating and regulatory role, and a facilitator of partnerships among the producers and consumers of geospatial information. At regional and global levels, many international initiatives dealing with specialized aspects of geospatial information have been created, such as GEO group dealing with earth observations, the Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe initiative (INSPIRE), or OpenGIS Consortium for the standardisation of geospatial information.

## **2. Need for a Global Mechanism: UN-GGIM**

- Until two years ago, there was no formal global inter-governmental forum where the Member States could come together and discuss the critical issues on geospatial information management. After multiple consultations involving leading countries from different regions, the need for a global and country-driven mechanism has been clearly expressed by Member States.
- Indeed, in July 2011, ECOSOC made history by establishing a new intergovernmental mechanism: the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, as the 20th UN Committee. 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.
- The Committee of Experts on UN-GGIM has brought 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, to hold regular high-level and multi-stakeholder discussions on global geospatial information, to make accurate, reliable and authoritative geospatial information readily available to support national, regional and global

development, and to assist developing countries in building and strengthening their national capacities in this field. Furthermore, such a global mechanism, under the auspices of the United Nations has raised awareness of politicians and decision-makers of the scope and significance of geospatial information.

- The Committee comprises experts from all Member States, as well as experts from international organizations, as observers. It is serviced by the UN Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the UN Cartographic Section of the Department of Field Services. Since October 2011, the Committee has already convened three sessions, and the fourth one is planned for August 2014. The Committee, as a global mechanism, is also supporting the establishment of regional Committees, such as in Asia & the Pacific, the Americas, the Arab world and Europe, dedicated to considering the priority issues for the regional implementation strategy and vision of the UN-GGIM initiative.

### **3. What about Data Access and related confidentiality issues?**

- One of the basic functions of the Committee of Experts is to propose actions to guide the development of principles, policies, methods and mechanisms for standardization, interoperability and sharing of geospatial data, and to help countries develop the full potential of leveraging/using geospatial information and the underlying technology, and to make it accessible to and effectively used by a broad range of users.
- More specifically, the Committee aims to help countries ultimately obtain authoritative, trusted, maintained, and accessible geospatial data.
- The Committee recognises and advocates that the integration of geospatial and environmental data with a variety of other data, including demographic and socio-economic data, and their analysis and modeling increases the understanding of the dynamics of socio-economic and demographic structures and helps to create more accurate, timely, and unbiased information for better decision-making.
- For example, geospatial data integration has proven to be critical to achieve improved operational readiness and responsiveness to disasters. By using satellite imaging, scientists and demographers can compare images and

statistics taken before and after earthquakes to estimate the amount of aid to be allocated to populated areas. There are many such examples related to an increased use of geospatial data in socio-economic, demographic, and environmental analysis, including environmental ecosystem accounting.

- However, confidentiality breaches can potentially happen when we integrate statistical information and geospatial information, and particularly through dissemination products and services. National Statistical organizations, for example, are aware that they have to take extra steps to safeguard confidentiality not only in the micro-data provisions, but also with regard to small areas with GIS presentations and its corresponding spatial analysis capabilities.
  
- A recent survey prepared by the Committee of Experts, profiling the status of national geospatial information management systems in Member States has provided a comprehensive picture of the impact that legal and policy issues have on geospatial information management in Member States. The results of the survey indicate that policy and legal issues pose a challenge to Governments in their efforts to collect, use and distribute geospatial information, including issues related to data licensing, sharing, pricing, privacy, quality, liability, authority, security and open data. The challenges

will become even greater as Governments, the private sector, universities, non-governmental organizations and citizens become increasingly involved as both producers and consumers of geospatial information. The Committee works to compile and disseminate best practices of national, regional and international bodies dealing with legal instruments, management models and technical standards for the building of spatial data infrastructures as one of the vital elements of information management, and to facilitate the dissemination of these practices and experiences to Member States of the United Nations. A survey has been conducted showing that many countries have implemented GIS web-based applications and geo-portals which make available geospatial information (39 from a total of 60 respondents from mapping and or geospatial organisations responsible for geospatial information indicated having geospatial web portal services).

- The Committee is aware that the challenge will be to develop a legal and regulatory **framework** that addresses the data protection/privacy risks while not making it unnecessarily difficult to collect, use or transfer geospatial information. Such a framework must balance the benefits with the risks associated with improper collection, use or sharing of geospatial information.



#### **4. Geospatial Information for Sustainable Development**

- Rio+20 Conference has recognized that reliable and authoritative geospatial information is crucial for both sustainable development and humanitarian assistance, providing a clear mandate for the future work of the UN Committee of Experts on GGIM.
- The Rio+20 outcome document “The future we want” urged governments and organizations to commit to disaster risk reduction in order to enhance the resilience of cities and communities to disasters, according to their own circumstances and capacities. Specifically, it ‘recognized the importance of comprehensive hazard and risk assessments, and knowledge- and information-sharing, including reliable geospatial information’. This mandate is a recognition that geospatial information has a vital role to play in all phases of hazard and disaster risk management and reduction. Therefore, it should extend the ability for national geospatial information agencies to not only map their geography and topography, but to also acquire specific data to model and analyze those areas that are most vulnerable to natural hazards, particular in areas of high population, such as urban environments.

- As the peak inter-governmental mechanism under the United Nations, the Committee of Experts on UN-GGIM has the mandate and responsibility to foster a geographic approach to the goals of the post-2015 development agenda. In this regard, the Committee has established a Working Group tasked with considering the development of a Global Map for Sustainable Development to provide the information base to inform sustainable development, so that the agenda, strategy and monitoring might be based on a body of trusted, reliable and authoritative geospatial data.

### **Distinguished Delegates,**

### **In conclusion**

- Geospatial and environmental information is now being used by governments, organisations and individuals across the globe to support modelling and analysis to understand complex situations, enable effective decision making, drive innovation and efficiencies, and underpin economic growth. The global recognition of the power of accurate and reliable geospatial information has resulted in world leaders wanting to use this data to tackle global issues, including climate change, disaster management, and

protection of the environment. While the geospatial community recognises that this is technically achievable in a location-enabled society, the legal and policy frameworks required to facilitate the progress of such a society are not developing in a consistent way to keep the pace with the technological developments.

- UN-GGIM, as an Inter-Governmental mechanism, is evolving a shared vision for the future in management of geospatial information nationally and globally, and working to forge a professional community to exchange knowledge, and in particular to make accurate, reliable and authoritative geospatial information readily available to support national, regional and global development.

**Thank you for your attention!**