

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Eighty-sixth session
Geneva, 16 September 2016

Item 6

Informal document No.**2016/43**

**Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution for strengthening
institutional arrangements on geospatial information**

UNECE Response to the ECOSOC Resolution on Strengthening Institutional Arrangements on Geospatial Information Management

Background

1. On 27 July 2016, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations adopted a resolution on strengthening institutional arrangements on geospatial information management (E/2016/L.28). This resolution has implications for the UN Regional Commissions. The purpose of this paper is to inform the Executive Committee (EXCOM) about the ECOSOC resolution and the potential implications it may have for the UN Economic Commission for Europe, and in particular the statistical sub-programme, and to seek the advice of EXCOM on the way forward on this topic.

2. ECOSOC established the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (GGIM) in 2011 (ECOSOC resolution 2011/24). The purpose was to provide a forum for coordination and dialogue among Member States, and between Member States and relevant international organizations. As a consequence, five regional geospatial expert groups have since been established, including the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for Europe (UN-GGIM: Europe).

3. As noted by ECOSOC, these regional expert groups have been mainly supported by the statistical divisions of the relevant UN Regional Commissions. This mirrors the global approach, where the UN-GGIM secretariat is provided by the Statistical Division of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). However, so far, in the UNECE region the links have been very weak, partly due to resource limitations in the UNECE, but mainly because, until now, there has not been a specific mandate for the UNECE to engage in this work.

UN-GGIM: Europe

4. The UN-GGIM: Europe expert group was created in autumn 2014. It has met in plenary once since then, in October 2015. Another meeting is planned for October 2016 in Budapest. There have also been 4-5 meetings of its Executive Committee each year. This pattern is expected to continue. The main topics of discussion have been the integration of statistical and geospatial data, and the contribution of geospatial data to monitoring the outcomes of the Sustainable Development Goals.

5. In May 2015 the UN-GGIM: Europe Chair (Sweden) and Vice-chair (Netherlands) visited Geneva for discussions with the Chair of EXCOM at that time, the Executive Secretary of the UNECE, and the Statistical Division. They requested UNECE secretariat support for the activities of their group. The UNECE did not have a mandate for this work at that time, and has been awaiting the ECOSOC decision before responding.

Key Elements of the 2016 ECOSOC Resolution

6. The key parts of the resolution, as far as the UNECE is concerned, include the following statements: ECOSOC

“Stresses the need to strengthen the coordination and coherence of global geospatial information management, in capacity-building, norm-setting, data collection, data dissemination and data sharing, among others, through appropriate coordination mechanisms, including in the broader United Nations system, building on the work of the [global] Committee of Experts” (op 5).

“Requests that the regional commissions provide relevant support, upon request and as appropriate, to the work of the regional bodies of the United Nations Initiative on Global Geospatial Information Management, and that the outcomes and benefits of the activities of those bodies be equally disseminated to all Member States in each region” (op 11).

“Notes that sustainable funding and support, particularly for the operations of the Committee of Experts that focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is needed to strengthen and ensure the continued effectiveness of the Committee, and in this regard encourages Member States to provide voluntary contributions, and otherwise requests the Secretary-General to try to mobilize additional resources, including through the means of trust funds and other sources, as appropriate, and encourages Member States to consider expert secondments, to support the activities of the Committee” (op 12).

Work on Geospatial Information in the UNECE Region

2015 UNECE Session

7. Annex II of the report of the 2015 Commission Session (E/2015/37, Panel D) summarizes an intervention on the growing importance of geo-spatial information by Dr. Vanessa Lawrence, Co-Chair of UN-GGIM, and a panelist on the High-level Thematic Panel on “Measuring and Monitoring Sustainable Development”, as follows:

8. “She underlined the value of geospatial information in the context of Big Data and the data revolution for sustainable development, given that all events are linked to a location. She gave examples of how geospatial information is providing value by helping public authorities and the private sector to deliver services much more efficiently. The importance of geospatial information has been recognized at the global level by the Economic and Social Council, when it established the UN-GGIM initiative in 2011. Ms. Lawrence stressed the importance of anchoring this work at the Regional Commissions, proposing that ECE should provide the secretariat for UN-GGIM: Europe, as the other Regional Commissions are already doing for equivalent groups in their regions. The geospatial dimension underpins activities in many ECE work programmes, particularly in the context of the SDGs. She concluded that geospatial information will be an important part of the evidence base for monitoring the SDGs. The ECE secretariat can play an important role in supporting this work in the ECE region.”

9. According to the same Annex of the report (page 27, paragraphs 9 and 11), “the importance of using geospatial data for providing an evidence base, measuring and monitoring of the SDGs was emphasized” during the discussion.

February 2016 Meeting of the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians

10. Following the discussions at the 2015 UNECE session, and the request for secretariat support by the Chair and Co-Chair of UN-GGIM: Europe, during their visit to UNECE in May 2015, the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) commissioned an in-depth review on developing geospatial information services. This review was prepared by the United Kingdom Office for National Statistics. The resulting report was discussed by the CES Bureau in February 2016.

11. The report of the CES Bureau (ECE/CES/2016/15/Add.11, para 6 (a)) “supported the recommendations of the review paper and recognized that international work on geospatial information is gaining momentum. There are many initiatives in this area, the main challenge is their governance and coordination to ensure that the initiatives are converging and have a long-term perspective.” The Bureau also noted that the ECOSOC review could lead to “the establishment of regional entities under the United Nations regional commissions, including UNECE” (ECE/CES/2016/15/Add.11, para 6 (b)).

12. The CES Bureau also “agreed that UNECE would be well-placed to coordinate international activities on statistics and geospatial information in the UNECE region, subject to the availability of resources. Furthermore, the integration of the geospatial dimension into the work on modernization of official statistics would be useful” (ECE/CES/2016/15/Add.11, para 7). The secretariat was asked to prepare a plan offering different options based on resource availability.

April 2016: 64th Plenary Session of the Conference of European Statisticians

13. Following the in-depth review by the CES Bureau, the sixty-fourth Plenary Session of the CES discussed the growing importance of geospatial information, particularly in the context of monitoring progress towards the SDGs. Extracts from the report of that session (ECE/CES/91) relating to geospatial information include:

14. “The Conference recognized the growing importance of integrating statistical and geospatial information and encouraged statistical and geospatial organizations to deepen their collaboration to better meet policy needs and other user requirements. The importance of the United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) initiative, and its regional bodies, such as UN-GGIM Europe and the UN expert group on the integration of statistical and geospatial information, in this respect was stressed” (ECE/CES/91, para 44).

15. “The demand for georeferenced data is increasing. Better technologies for visualizing and communicating data raise expectations for easier, faster and more interactive ways of getting information. Monitoring SDGs, humanitarian work and the Sendai framework for disaster risk reduction are some examples of areas that increasingly require data linked to location.” (ECE/CES/91, para 41 (b)).

16. The Conference agreed on several follow-up actions, including:

- “Support professional fora for statistical and geospatial experts to share good practices and learn from one another” (ECE/CES/91, para 45 (e)).
- “Consider the potential contribution of UNECE to the international geospatial initiatives globally and regionally in close cooperation with UN-GGIM and its regional representatives” (ECE/CES/91, para 45 (f)).

17. The Conference asked the CES Bureau and the secretariat to follow up on the issues raised and consider how to implement the agreed actions. The CES Bureau will discuss next steps when it meets in October 2016.

UNECE Comparative Advantage

18. The UNECE, through the work of the CES, has an internationally recognized leading role in developing new statistical methodology and exploring the use of new data sources. UNECE-led work on modernizing the production of official statistics is already starting to look at the potential benefits of better integrating geospatial information with other data sources. This includes work within a major international CES project on data integration, currently underway. The project is exploring how traditional statistical survey data, administrative data, “Big Data” and geospatial data can be combined to produce existing statistics more efficiently, and to enable new types of analysis. To support this work, Sweden has volunteered to host an international workshop for the UNECE during 2017 on the coherence of statistical and geospatial standards.

19. An important benefit of integrating statistical and geospatial data is to support the indicators for measuring progress towards the SDGs. The geospatial element is essential for many of the goals, as country totals can mask very different situations in different sub-national areas. Geographic breakdowns, such as urban / rural are proposed for many indicators.

20. The UNECE statistical sub-programme is well placed to take a leading role in further developing geospatial information in the region, given its unique expertise in developing and integrating various types of data sources. It also has the active support of Member States, including some of the most advanced in the world, in terms of geospatial information systems.

21. Whilst there is a very strong link to the work of the statistical sub-programme, particularly in the context of SDGs, other areas of UNECE work could also benefit by having greater geospatial knowledge and capability within the UNECE. Examples include environmental issues such as cross-border pollution and water management, transport networks, smart cities, housing and land management. In the case of housing, the 2015 Commission Session endorsed the Geneva United Nations Charter on Sustainable Housing (E/ECE/1478/Rev.1), which states in paragraph 18(b)(xiv) that Member States support actions to “promote the use of spatial, cadastral and land

registration information and services to create an environment conducive to investment in housing and the security of land and housing tenure”.

22. The UNECE is ideally placed to bring the management arrangements for UN-GGIM: Europe into line with those for equivalent groups in other UN regions, in-line with the ECOSOC request. A UNECE secretariat for this group would also facilitate the spread of information to, and promote capacity building in, sub-regions that are currently unrepresented, particularly the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia sub-region. A UNECE secretariat would also facilitate communications with UN-DESA, and the GGIM initiative at the global level.

Conclusion

23. Every person, object, event and activity has a location. The demand for geospatial information is growing. The geospatial dimension of existing UNECE work programmes is becoming increasingly important. High quality geospatial and statistical data are needed for all sectors of economic and social activity. Bringing together geospatial and statistical information will enhance the capacity of countries in the UNECE region to meet new information challenges. The importance of coordinating the work of the geospatial and statistical communities is highlighted by the geospatial dimension of many of the indicators of progress towards the SDGs.

Input sought from EXCOM

- a) The 2016 ECOSOC Resolution “Requests that the Regional Commissions provide relevant support, upon request and as appropriate, to the work of the regional bodies of the United Nations Initiative on Global Geospatial Information Management”. This support has been requested by the UN-GGIM: Europe expert group. The Secretariat is seeking EXCOM support and approval for the UNECE to engage in this work.
 - b) The ECOSOC resolution also requests the Secretary-General "to mobilize additional resources, including through the means of trust funds and other sources, as appropriate, and encourages Member States to consider expert secondments" to support geospatial activities. The secretariat suggests to prepare a proposal with different options for resourcing such work for consideration by EXCOM at its next meeting.
-