

ECOSOC, 31 janvier 2020
Statement by Pierre Jaillard,
chair of UNGEGN

Madam Chair,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to introduce in a few words our Group of Experts on Geographical Names to the participants of this annual meeting, since it attends to it for the first time, if I'm aware. As a matter of fact, even if it was created by a decision of the ECOSOC in 1959, our body was given a new formula two years ago in order to narrow it with some other bodies of the ECOSOC.

The novelty of our Group of Experts has first resulted in the renewal of certain bases of work. This is why our Bureau, in close link with the Member States, has begun drafting a strategic plan and an action plan to be adopted at the next session in 2021.

It seems necessary to express the basis of the activity of our Group of Experts. Some current debates, such as the one that preceded the adoption of the name of North

Macedonia, make obvious that place names are not just labels to put on geographical objects, but that they carry linguistic, cultural, and even political stakes, which fully justify the interest of the ECOSOC. They are caught between the technical necessity of their standardization and the superior interest of safeguarding their diversity. Sixty years ago, the constraints of the nascent informatics made it necessary to give priority to a standardization that could sometimes appear outrageous. Today, a rebalancing is permitted, on the one hand by the acquired agility in the information management, and on the other hand by the realization that peace can not be established without respecting the cultural diversity, which has thus become an imperative that is at the same time ethical, political and even legal, particularly with the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

At the operational level, a priority is to be given to projects likely to serve the cooperation between our body and the Committee of Experts on Global

Geospatial Information Management. Our Group of Experts, or rather its Bureau, has therefore examined ways to strengthen its cooperation with this Committee of Experts.

But our Group of Experts has also about ten thematic Working Groups, all of which staying necessary. Two of their Convenors have already been involved in the work on geographical names of this Committee of Experts: the Convenors of our Working Groups on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers and on Romanization Systems. Others Working Groups deal with Country Names, Exonyms (that is names of places in languages not usually spoken in those places, like *Germany* in English for instance), Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage, Toponymic Terminology, Training Courses in Toponymy, and so on.

Thank you very much for your attention.