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**Items for discussion and decision: integration of statistical and
geospatial information**

Report of the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2021/224 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information. In its report, the Expert Group summarizes the activities it has undertaken since the fifty-second session of the Statistical Commission, in accordance with Commission decision 52/117. The Expert Group has focused on developing an implementation guide to assist countries in operationalizing and implementing the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework. The Expert Group provides the Commission with an update on the outcomes of the global survey to diagnose readiness at the country level for implementing the Framework and the other items summarized in its workplan for the period 2020–2022. In addition, the Expert Group details how it is supporting the wide range of implementation and adoption activities with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2020 round of population and housing censuses. The Commission is invited to endorse the Implementation Guide of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework and to take note of the report of the Expert Group, including its workplan for the period 2022–2024 and its progress in the integration of statistical and geospatial information.

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* E/CN.3/2022/1.

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Report of the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information

I. Introduction

1.   Pursuant to Statistical Commission decision 44/101, the Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information comprises members of both the professional statistical and geospatial communities of Member States and relevant international organizations. Since its establishment in 2013, the Expert Group has reported to both the Commission and the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management at each of their respective annual sessions.

2.   The overall objectives and functions of the Expert Group are to pursue the implementation of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework and to support regional and global agendas such as the 2020 round of population and housing censuses and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Furthermore, in its decision 48/108, the Commission strengthened the mandate of the Expert Group for it to become the overall coordination group for all activities in the area of the integration of statistical and geospatial information. In its decision 51/123 (see E/2020/24), the Commission endorsed the Framework, as adopted by the Committee of Experts in its decision 9/106. Notably, both of the apex intergovernmental entities of the statistical and geospatial communities called for the implementation and operationalization of the Framework at the national and regional levels.

3.   In the present report, the Expert Group summarizes the activities it has undertaken since the fifty-second session of the Commission and the decisions emanating from the eleventh session of the Committee of Experts, convened virtually on 23, 24 and 27 August 2021; examines the ongoing impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on demand for geospatially enabled statistical data to support the response to and recovery from COVID-19; describes how it has diligently worked towards the execution of its workplan for the period 2020–2022; and discusses the development of the Implementation Guide of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework and the Expert Group's workplan for the period 2022–2024, both of which are provided as background documents to the present report.

4.   The Commission is invited to take note of the present report and note the progress made by the Expert Group in the integration of statistical and geospatial information and on its the workplan for the period 2022–2024 and to endorse the Implementation Guide of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework.

II. Eleventh session of the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management

5.   In its decision 11/106 (see E/2022/46), the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management welcomed the report of the Expert Group, the many instances in which the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework had been implemented in Member States and the increased focus on the exchange of knowledge and capacity-building. The Committee urged Member States to continue to implement and operationalize the Framework as a tool for attaining geospatially enabled statistical data for the 2030 Agenda and the 2020 round of population censuses, and recognized that addressing the many data integration challenges presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic and other complex issues, such as climate change and disaster resilience, required the implementation of the Framework at the national and regional levels.

6. The Committee expressed its appreciation for the significant progress made in the development of the Implementation Guide, which provided both the geospatial and statistical communities with valuable guidance for identifying methodologies, techniques and approaches for implementation of the Framework, and in this regard encouraged completion of the Implementation Guide in order to provide pragmatic and understandable guidance on the implementation and operationalization of the Framework to Member States. The Committee also requested the inclusion of relevant case studies as part of the process of finalizing the Implementation Guide.

7. In addition, the Committee recognized the promising initial results of the global survey to diagnose readiness at the country level for implementing the Framework, urged national statistical offices and national geospatial information agencies within Member States to submit their responses, if they had not yet done so, and suggested that the future workplan of the Expert Group should address the gaps identified by the global survey and develop the interlinkages between the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework and the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework.

III. Implementation Guide of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework

8. In their decisions concerning the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework, the Commission (decision 51/123) and the Committee of Experts (decision 9/106) urged Member States to continue their efforts towards the adoption and implementation of the Framework, especially in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In order to respond to that mandate in a practical manner, the Expert Group developed the Implementation Guide to assist countries in the implementation of the Framework and to enable them to produce geospatially enabled statistical data for national to global decision-making.

9. Under the Expert Group's task team on the principles of the Framework, three separate work streams developed guidance on implementing, operationalizing and strengthening national geocoding, common geographies and interoperability. The Implementation Guide is thus divided into sections in which the relevant principles of the Framework are highlighted, their importance discussed and any key resources and further reading identified.

A. Geocoding

10. In the Implementation Guide, in line with principles 1 and 2 of the Framework, countries are urged to consider geocoding as a fundamental mechanism that links statistical data to a geographic location, creating the bridge that facilitates the use of geospatially enabled statistics, including the data needs of national priorities and global agendas.

11. In line with previous guidance provided by the Expert Group to the Commission at its forty-ninth session in March 2018, in which it was stated that all statistical unit record data should be collected or associated with a location reference, and that ideally it should allow for geospatial coordinates with x- and y-values to be produced for each record (see E/CN.3/2018/33, para. 12), the different national requirements that help to capture and link precise x- and y- coordinates for each statistical unit record are described in the Implementation Guide.

12. Moreover, the Implementation Guide provides technical implementation guidance on geocoding statistical data, elaborates on how to select an appropriate geography based on national requirements and existing institutional capacity, and

provides guidance on the forms of geocoding, including street addresses, enumeration areas, grid cells and aggregate geographies (such as postal codes).

B. Common geographies

13.   Principle 3 of the Framework, on common geographies for the dissemination of statistics, enshrines the importance of common geographic areas for the display, storage, reporting and analysis of social, economic and environmental comparisons across statistical data sets from different sources. While the Framework is the bridge between the statistical and geospatial communities, principle 3 is the keystone of the bridge.

14.   In the Implementation Guide, the Framework definition of what is meant by common geographies is provided, and the importance of common geographies to an integrated statistical data and geospatial framework to meet national and international commitments is underlined. By highlighting the basic requirements for implementing geographic areas within national, regional and international statistical and geospatial systems, the Guide provides countries with information on the criteria for establishing geographical hierarchies and urges that there should be agreement on methodologies to translate, aggregate and disaggregate differing forms of geospatially enabled statistical data.

C. Ensuring privacy and confidentiality

15.   A section of the Implementation Guide is dedicated to the issue of the importance of privacy and confidentiality. In noting the increased availability of geospatial data (aggregate statistics released for geographical areas), often for small area geographies, the Expert Group drafted the section to help steer countries through evolving concerns about data confidentiality.

16.   In the Implementation Guide, it is noted that, as the number of features necessary to uniquely identify a statistical unit (i.e. a person, household or business) decreases in line with a decrease in the population of a cell or geographical area, the risk of accidental disclosure increases. That risk is even higher in an era of big data, artificial intelligence and the proliferation of open access geographical visualization and analysis tools. However, through the appropriate application of various methodologies and concepts, it is still possible to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of geospatially enabled statistical data. The Implementation Guide is not intended to be an exhaustive and comprehensive resource on statistical disclosure control for the global statistical community, but rather to provide for basic awareness of the specific issues regarding the management of confidentiality in geospatially enabled statistical data.

D. Interoperability

17.   Principle 4 of the Framework, on statistical and geospatial interoperability, covers why greater standardization and use of data will lead to improved efficiency and simplification in the creation, discovery, integration and use of geospatially enabled statistics. Accordingly, the concepts discussed within the Framework are elaborated on in the Guide through a set of agreed common definitions and concepts.

E. National and regional good practices and experiences

18. In addition to the substantive guidance requested by the Committee of Experts, the Expert Group has also sought to document good practices and experiences of how the Framework has been implemented by national statistical offices and national geospatial information agencies at the national level. Twenty-nine States Members of the United Nations, namely Australia, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Ghana, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Kuwait, Malawi, Mexico, Namibia, New Zealand, Panama, Peru, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Uruguay, provided information on their national experiences, detailing how the Framework is being implemented either individually by national statistical offices and national geospatial information agencies or collaboratively. In addition, those national experiences are supplemented by regional perspectives on the Framework's implementation.

19. In the light of the developments occurring since the Commission decision 51/123, the Expert Group is pleased to submit, as a background document to the present report, the Implementation Guide to the Commission for its endorsement.

IV. Reviewing the implementation of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework

A. Outcomes of the global survey on readiness to implement the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework

20. Fostering international collaboration to support capacity development in developing countries has been a key focus of the Expert Group. The Framework is the mechanism for developing such capacity. The Expert Group devised a global survey to diagnose readiness at the country level for implementing the Framework to support an assessment of global capacity. The survey builds on previous work in the European region by incorporating lessons learned from the assessment of the European implementation of the Framework.

21. The survey was launched in the six official languages of the United Nations on the margins of the fifty-second session of the Commission in March 2021 and was provided as a background document to the Commission's report (see E/CN.3/2021/27). The survey was disseminated electronically to the national statistical offices and national geospatial information agencies of Member States through the regional committees of the Committee of Experts, regional commissions of the United Nations and other relevant regional organs. In addition, the Expert Group promoted the survey to the regional commissions, urging regional secretariats and their supporting organizations to encourage Member States to complete it.

22. The Expert Group had originally planned to close the survey on 31 May 2021 and report its findings to the Committee of Experts at its eleventh session. However, with the support of Member States, the Expert Group decided to keep the survey open during the intersessional period in order to collect further responses. As at 24 November 2021, responses had been received from more than 100 Member States, which are identified in the background document accompanying the present report. Overall, there was a strong response from the Latin American and Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific and the Western Europe and other States regions; however, the response rate from Africa and the Arab States was comparatively low.

23. The responses reflected clear, intrinsic trends with regard to global progress towards implementing and operationalizing the Framework. They also underscored

the importance of strengthening the integration of statistical and geospatial information as a means of supporting national development priorities and the implementation of global development agendas. In considering the outcomes of the survey, the Expert Group is augmenting its analysis to consider gaps in responses as a rough measure of the overall level of capacity of a region.

24. Looking forward, the Expert Group will continuously examine the results of the survey and use them as a beacon to guide its future work. As the hosts of the survey platform, Norway has agreed to maintain access to the survey for Member States until the forthcoming intersessional period. Accordingly, the Expert Group urges regional stakeholders to liaise directly with the Member States in their regions to encourage them to complete the survey, and to use the survey results to inform decision-making in their regions. As the Expert Group develops further guidance on implementing and operationalizing the Framework, it reiterates its offer to provide support to regional stakeholders in that regard.

25. An analysis of the key findings of and the responses to the survey are provided in a background document to the present report.[1]

B. Supporting the 2020 round of population and housing censuses and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

26. Since its inception, the Expert Group has worked diligently to deliver on its mandate to provide comprehensive guidance for countries with a view to strengthening data needs for both the 2020 round of population and housing censuses and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As highlighted in the Implementation Guide, several countries have benefited significantly from the implementation and operationalization of the Framework in the execution of their population and housing censuses. Yet, as evidenced by the results of the global survey, there is still significant ground to be covered to continue to raise awareness of the Framework.

27. In that regard, several countries have noted delays in conducting their round of population and housing censuses owing to the ongoing impact of COVID-19. In the *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021*, the stark challenges faced by the global community are examined. It was observed that: "Regrettably, the [Sustainable Development Goals] were already off track even before COVID-19 emerged. Progress had been made in poverty reduction, maternal and child health, access to electricity, and gender equality, but not enough to achieve the Goals by 2030." According to the report, "innovative methods, such as the integration of geospatial information and household survey data are also being used to produce more disaggregated and timely data".

28. Given the setbacks caused by COVID-19, the Expert Group urges the implementation of the Framework so that countries can reap the benefits thereof regardless of whether their decennial population and housing census have been conducted. In its previous report to the Commission (E/CN.3/2021/27), the Expert Group noted that the overarching need for geospatially enabled statistical data for both the 2020 round of population and housing censuses and the 2030 Agenda had guided the development of the Framework. In particular, the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals were highly dependent on geospatially enabled statistical data, as statistical data alone was not sufficient to relate people to their location and place and measure "where" progress was or was not being made,

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[1] Responses have been disaggregated by their corresponding regional apparatus for the Expert Group.

particularly at "disaggregated" subnational and local levels. In the intersessional period, bolstered by its evolving experiences and the case studies provided, the Expert Group has reiterated that message to the Commission.

C. Role of geospatially enabled statistical data in response, recovery and building back better from the coronavirus disease pandemic

29. The Expert Group urges the Commission to consider that the overarching needs for geospatially enabled statistical data in response, recovery and building back better from COVID-19 are the same needs as those articulated in the 2030 Agenda. Accordingly, the means for strengthening the integration of statistical and geospatial information to achieve the shared ambition of the 2030 Agenda can be applied towards efforts to combat COVID-19.

30. In that regard, the Expert Group expressly wishes to offer its appreciation to its members and to those who have contributed case studies on the role of the Framework in the response to COVID-19. In those national responses, some countries have provided detailed examinations of how the Framework has supported the availability of national geospatially enabled statistical data in response, recovery and building back better from COVID-19. Those experiences collectively underscore the importance and criticality of using geospatially integrated statistical data to inform national decision-making, whether in times of crisis or normality.

31. Several countries noted that the Framework had supported the national response to COVID-19 in providing harmonized and standardized geospatial information. Some countries currently implementing the Framework have observed how earlier implementation would have contributed to having more updated statistics, disaggregated and known by all public institutions, to support the design and implementation of the different public policies established during the pandemic period. The Expert Group is optimistic that the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic will help raise awareness as to why geospatially enabled statistical data is essential for Member States to make informed decisions.

D. Across the Commission's areas of work

32. Several other decisions of the Commission evidenced the growing importance of the integration of statistical and geospatial information. For example:

(a) **Decision 52/101 on the global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. The Commission encouraged the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators to further incorporate data innovation in its work, including the integration of geospatial information and statistics for the 2030 Agenda, the sharing of experiences and best practices on monitoring of the Goals, the automation of data and metadata transmission using Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX), and the development of guidelines for geospatial information and SDMX;

(b) **Decision 52/105 on economic statistics**. The Commission expressed its appreciation for the initiative of the Friends of the Chair group on economic statistics to incorporate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on statistical systems in the development of its recommendations so as to build a more efficient, responsive and resilient system to track the contrasting impact of the pandemic on different segments of the economy and society and to monitor the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development with geospatially enabled links to the economy, environment and well-being;

(c) **Decision 52/107 on Business and Trade Statistics**. The Commission welcomed the training and capacity-building programme for statistical business registers that applies the maturity model for building and maintaining statistical business registers in national statistical systems, and recommended the development of guidance on the integration of geospatial information in the statistical business registers building on country experiences;

(d) **Decision 52/110 on regional statistical development**. The Commission expressed its appreciation for the work undertaken in the region by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (see E/CN.3/2021/12) over the five years since the previous report, especially with regard to cooperation and coordination in regional statistical capacity development and alignment of the priorities of regional statistical work with the United Nations data strategies, regional and national statistical priorities, with a focus on modernizing official statistics, using technology, big data, register-based data sources and linking geospatial and statistical information.

33. The Expert Group welcomes and takes note of those decisions and observes that the integration of statistical and geospatial information is becoming progressively more important to the substantive work of the Statistical Commission. As such, the Expert Group wishes to reiterate to other subsidiary groups of the Commission its willingness to cooperate and "be the bridge" to harness the potential that geospatial information can bring to the statistical community.

34. Moreover, the Expert Group notes the role of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework within the SDGs Geospatial Roadmap. It commends its members and other contributors that have supported the development of the road map.

E. In the broader global community

35. Pursuant to Commission decision 48/108, the Expert Group has taken steps to strengthen its role as the overall coordination group for all activities in the area of the integration of statistical and geospatial information. In that regard, the Expert Group takes note of the following areas of progress:

(a) The Central American Project,[2] sponsored and funded by the Pan-American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) and led by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico (INEGI), the United States Census Bureau and the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for the Americas, has developed a Global Statistical and Geospatial Framework e-learning tool in English and Spanish to assist countries in the region in implementing and operationalizing the Framework;

(b) In the Economic Commission for Europe initiative entitled "Geospatial view of Generic Statistical Business Process Model – GeoGSBPM",[3] geospatial-related activities, in particular, those that are needed to produce geospatially enabled statistics, are described using the framework of the Generic Statistical Business Process Model;

(c) The Eurostat GEOSTAT project is a collaboration between the Eurostat and national statistical offices to establish a data and production architecture for pan-European geospatially enabled statistical data. Now in its fourth iteration, GEOSTAT

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[2] See https://www.ipgh.org/gsgf-e-learningtool.html.

[3] See https://statswiki.unece.org/display/GSBPM/GeoGSBPM.

4 sets out the European implementation of the Framework, with a view to supporting States of the region to implement the Framework in line with their national circumstances while respecting prevailing regional directives and legislation;

(d)   The *Guide on Geospatial Data Integration in Official Statistics* of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century,[4] which draws heavily on the Framework provides further commentary on the importance of why integration is so important.

36.   As the Framework is the substantive foundation upon which these cases are built, the Expert Group invites the broader statistical and geospatial information communities to share how they are leveraging the Framework. To help deepen awareness of regional progress in this area, the Expert Group will also convene another meeting of its regional focal points to help share progress during the forthcoming intersessional period.

V.   Finalizing its workplan for the period 2020–2022 and developing a workplan for the period 2022–2024

A.   Workplan for the period 2020–2022

37.   At its sixth meeting, held in Manchester, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in October 2019, the Expert Group established three task teams in order to make progress on the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework: (a) the task team on the principles of the Framework, with three work streams that provide specific implementation guidance to cover geocoding, common geographies and interoperability; (b) the task team on capacity-building; and (c) the task team on privacy and confidentiality. Each of the task teams aimed to operate over an 18-month to two-year period, with their work being reviewed by the Expert Group. Each task team is led by a member of the Expert Group, with the task team on the principles of the Framework composed of three work streams being led by members of the Expert Group.

38.   During the intersessional period, the Expert Group executed its work, guided by the workplan for the period 2020–2022 and its mandates. The outcomes of that work are detailed in the background documents accompanying the present report.

B.   Workplan for the period 2022–2024

39.   When reflecting on the execution of its workplan for the period 2020–2022, the Expert Group was cognizant of the broader landscape surrounding the Framework. While COVID-19 has shaped the current global landscape, the importance of geospatially enabled statistics predated, and will post-date, our current circumstances. The report[5] of the Expert Group to the Committee of Experts at its eleventh session, held in August 2021, discussed that point in detail, laying the groundwork for the development of a workplan for the period 2022–2024.

40.   Through virtual meetings and deliberations, the Expert Group has formulated a new workplan for the period 2022–2024 that includes the following work packages:

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[4] See https://paris21.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Geospatial_Data_Integration_in_Official_ Statistics_0.pdf.

[5] See http://ggim.un.org/meetings/GGIM-committee/11th-Session.

(a)   Developing the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework for the statistical domain;

(b)   Developing capacity-assessment tools and maturity models for statistical and geospatial integration;

(c)   Leveraging enterprise architecture in the integration of statistical and geospatial information;

(d)   Providing guidance on developing user-centric and other geographies;

(e)   Carrying out activities to strengthen interlinkages with relevant groups in both the statistical and geospatial communities.

41.   The Expert Group reiterates the importance of the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework[6] as the overarching framework for the global geospatial information community and an enabling framework for the Global Statistical and Geospatial Framework. In addition, by its decision 11/106, the Committee of Experts suggested that the future workplan of the Expert Group should address the gaps identified by the global survey and develop the interlinkages between the Global Statistical and Geospatial Framework and the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework. As its members have shared their national experiences of implementing both Frameworks, the Expert Group has further identified the interlinked and interconnected nature thereof, noting that the one fosters an enabling environment for the other. Accordingly, the Expert Group aims to provide guidance to the statistical community on how it can specifically relate and implement the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework through a proposed paper on developing that Framework for the statistical domain.

42.   The paper will be the main focus of the Expert Group in the coming intersessional period, alongside other work packages to be discussed in detail in the accompanying background documentation.

VI.   Ongoing working modalities of the Expert Group

43.   Before COVID-19, the Expert Group convened plenary meetings on an approximately annual basis, augmented by regular quarterly meetings. Since March 2020, the Expert Group has continued its virtual quarterly meetings, with its task teams convening virtually when appropriate. For the coming intersessional period, those working arrangements will continue, guided by the Expert Group's new workplan.

44.   At its Manchester meeting in 2019, the Expert Group appointed by acclamation Germany and Namibia as its co-Chairs. Germany is now stepping down as co-Chair, after its successful leadership of the task team that developed principle 1 of the Framework and of the Expert Group in the development of the Implementation Guide. In the coming intersessional period, the constraints imposed by COVID-19 notwithstanding, the Expert Group will therefore convene a plenary meeting to identify a successor to Germany as co-Chair alongside Namibia and expresses its appreciation to Germany for its continued leadership.

VII.   Conclusions and the way forward

45.   At the fifty-third session of the Commission, the need for geospatially enabled statistical data cannot be understated. Such data is transformational when it comes to

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[6] See https://igif.un.org.

strengthening national decision-making and empowering progress towards realizing the ambition of global agendas. At the heart of that transformation is the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework, which acts as a bridge to enable the integration of a range of data from both the statistical and geospatial communities. Applying the five principles and supporting key elements of the Framework enables the production of harmonized, standardized and geospatially enabled statistical data to support data-driven decision-making.

46. Geospatially enabled statistical data is the foundation for providing high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated data by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographical location, and by other characteristics relevant in the national contexts. The Framework facilitates the production of geospatially enabled statistical data that are essential for data-driven and evidence-based decision-making, thereby supporting national development priorities, the prevention of, response to and recovery from COVID-19 and the needs of the 2020 round of population and housing censuses and the 2030 Agenda.

47. The Expert Group welcomes and reiterates its appreciation to those countries that have responded to its various work items. In the Implementation Guide, the Expert Group has developed simple, actionable guidance for colleagues to further implement and operationalize the Framework in their countries, supported by case studies demonstrating how it can be applied in a variety of national contexts. The Expert Group remains committed to the Framework and invites the Commission to participate further in its work.

VIII. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

48. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To take note of the present report, the results of the global survey on readiness to implement the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework, and the workplan for the period 2022–2024;**

(b) **To express its views on the progress made by the Expert Group in the integration of statistical and geospatial information;**

(c) **To endorse the Implementation Guide of the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework.**