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Gaborone Action Plan on Geographical Names Activities in Africa

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We, the participants of the Consultative Workshop on the Future Orientation of Geographical Names Activities in Africa held in Gaborone, Botswana from 23 to 25 November 2011, hereinafter referred to as “the Participants”, having met in the context of the request of the Second meeting of the Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa) to the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to prepare a work programme on future activities of the geographical names in Africa, in collaboration with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN);

Recalling Resolution 2011/24 of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, which recognized the importance of integrating cartographic and statistical information as well as spatial data, and the need to promote international cooperation on cartography, geographical names and geospatial information;

Recognizing that geographical names are important mechanisms for linking location-specific statistical data to meaningful identifiers and that standardization of such geographical names are essential for the cross-referencing and sharing of location-specific data and information to enhance the development of location-based applications and services;

Affirming the important role of geographical names in economic, social and cultural development, particularly in the developing countries; and *Noting* the little progress made by most African countries in the field of geographical names standardization;

Acknowledging the increasing use of information and communication technologies in geographical names activities, the concomitant usefulness of the Africa GeoNyms software developed by ECA, and the significance of the Gazetteer Framework Project of Centre of Excellence for United Nations Spatial Data Infrastructure (CoE4UNSDI);

Having deliberated on the urgent and increasingly critical demand for reliable and easily accessible geographical names data necessary for formulating and managing national and international development policies and programs,

We hereby issue this Gaborone Action Plan on Geographical Names, grouped under four themes, for consideration by the Statistical Commission for Africa.

I. Improving national institutional arrangements with respect to geographical names authorities

To date, only 16 out of 54 countries have established a national authority to oversee their standardization efforts while 18 have an institution serving as contact on geographical names without the proper legal mandate from Government. Of these even fewer countries are actively engaged in the standardization work. There is no information from the remaining 20 on the status of their geographical names activities. The Participants, therefore, recommended the following actions to improve the institutional arrangements in the African countries with respect to geographical names:

1. Address the benefits of national names authorities and the need to have a stable ongoing national commission, council, committee or equivalent body, led by a government department, by:
 - a. Increasing awareness among politicians;
 - b. Increasing awareness in mapping organizations, statistical offices and other government departments that use place names;
 - c. Sensitizing the general public, and in particular the media and academia, on the use of standardized geographical names.
2. Encourage governments of African countries to establish or re-vitalize national names authorities.
3. Establish contacts for countries; and within countries between government departments, universities, etc.

To achieve the above objectives ECA, in collaboration with countries and partners such as the African Union Commission (AUC), UNGEGN; and regional geospatial and statistical training and service centres and others organizations, could start by creating a greater awareness of politicians, government departments, academia and the general public and of convincing them of the benefits of standardized geographical names, through official letters addressed to heads of States; setting up a website to promote use of standardized geographical names; encouraging national names and other authorities to set up national web sites; etc.

II. Increasing capacity building and knowledge sharing

One of the reasons for the poor performance of standardization of geographical names in countries with names authorities is the lack of competence in this field. There is great need to strengthen the capacity of countries and relevant institutions in member States to help them provide standardized geographical names, on a regular basis, for national development and planning; and for international use. To implement this objective, the Participants recommended:

1. Continued toponymic training for the administration of geographical names in African countries, through:
 - a. Provision of further courses or workshops with regard to geographical names standardization to strengthen capacity and skills of staffs in National Names Authorities and other governments agencies in the countries to adequately respond to national and international demands for timely and reliable place names;
 - b. Organizing train the trainers workshops;
 - c. Sponsoring the participation of African countries in regional workshops;
 - d. Providing free online training courses styled for Africa.
2. Promote South-South cooperation in the development of human resources to enhance the exchange of information, best national practices, and experiences and lessons learnt, through:
 - a. Organizing meetings of national experts;
 - b. Developing and maintaining national geographical names web sites;
 - c. Sponsoring the participation of African countries in the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) held every five years; and to the

UNGEEN sessions held in between the UNCSGN thus providing opportunities to share experience and network at international conferences;

- d. Setting up short workshops prior to and in association with such events as CODIST and StatCom-Africa and other related major conferences; and sponsoring the participation of African countries in order to provide opportunities to participate and network at African conferences.

ECA to take the lead in mobilizing funding and organizing training workshops and experts meetings. UNGEEN and Regional Centres such as the Regional Center for Mapping of Resources for Development (RCMRD), the Regional Centre for Training in Aerospace Surveys (RECTAS), the Regional Center of Remote Sensing for North African States (CRTEAN), and statistical centres and training institutions to provide expertise, and possible funding through ECA. Regional Economic Communities (RECs) should be approached by ECA to muster their support in this direction.

III. Promoting coordination and cooperation at national, regional and global levels

The place names situation in Africa needs a concerted effort by national, regional and international bodies, to achieve similar results as those countries which have accessible standardized geographical names. To improve the situation, simultaneous activities need to be carried out at national, regional and global levels. Some suggested actions required to improve the situation in Africa are:

1. At national level

- a. Have geographical names incorporated into learning programmes of schools and universities, for a longer term view;
- b. Develop well thought out slogans to assist in sensitizing the public, politicians and administrators to the value of the standardization of geographical names.

2. At regional level

- a. Put geographical names standardization on the agendas of StatCom-Africa and CODIST;
- b. Create a database of African resource persons on the standardization of geographical names;
- c. Improve sharing of information and methods of doing so;
- d. Promotion of the significance of geographical names by putting geographical names standardization on the agendas of relevant meetings and conferences organized by UNECA, AU, Regional Centres, and RECs (e.g. ECOWAS, SADC, ECCAS, etc.);
- e. Establish an African Day on Geographical Names;
- f. Encourage countries not yet having a national geographical names authority to host a workshop to launch such a possibility.

3. At global level

Support African place name experts to participate in international conferences.

ECA, in collaboration with AUC and the UNGEEN Africa Divisions and the Task Team for Africa, would establish modalities for more effective cooperation and coordination with regional organizations such as RECTAS, RCMRD, CRTEAN, RECs, and statistical centres and training

institutions to support countries in the above listed tasks. Some of the actions listed here need financial resources while other points are anticipated through letters, from ECA or UNGEGN.

IV. Addressing advances in technology and communication and their impact on geographical names in Africa

The fast evolution of information and communication technologies offers tremendous opportunities for geographical names. Easily accessible standardized geographical names are vital in today's highly globalized and digitally interconnected world. The potential of the Internet to realize the goals of distributing standardizing national and international geographical names is vast.

Country toponymic websites would also help provide information on the standardization of geographical names; toponymic guidelines; information on training courses in toponymy; interactive capabilities for handling geographical names enquiries; and facilitation of international exchange of toponymic data. To this end, the Participants recommend:

1. UNECA's Africa GeoNyms gazetteer software being made available to countries in Africa, starting with some pilot projects in selected countries in the immediate future, with the provision of the requisite training;
2. UNECA ensures that GeoNyms adopts international standards for such software tools to ensure interoperability with similar technologies, such as the Gazetteer Framework of the CoE4UNSDI and relevant UNGEGN working groups;
3. Assisting countries in the use of this technology to allow for geographical names to be stored and re-used in mapping, statistics, census operations, GIS, and for other purposes in government and the private sector.

UNECA makes Africa GeoNyms gazetteer software available to countries in Africa and provide training on its use and on how to adapt it to the countries' needs. UNGEGN working groups and Regional Centres could provide support to UNECA in developing capacity in all African countries.