

ECOSOC, 1st February 2021
Statement by Pierre Jaillard,
Chair of UNGEGN

Mister Chair, Excellencies,

Thank you first for giving me the opportunity to recognize the role of ECOSOC in supporting our bodies through the current pandemic. Most of our subsidiary events had to be cancelled or postponed since our last meeting, but the Bureau continued to meet and our next biennial plenary session is still scheduled for May 2021, in a virtual format, thanks to the assistance of the Secretariat.

Our Strategic Plan and Programme of Work is to be adopted on that occasion. Its term and its strategies are tuned to fit as far as possible with those of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is drafted with five strategies:

1. Technical expertise;
2. Relationships, links and connections;
3. Effective work programmes;
4. Culture, heritage and language recognition;
5. Promotion and capacity building.

Let me give you a very present example of the link that can occur between geographical names and most concrete issues. Several previous epidemics have been named from the place where they were first observed or described: *Ebola fever*, *Zika fever*... But, I guess, Mister Chair, that you will agree to be uncomfortable for a Pakistani Representative to pass through a pandemic of a so-called *Karachi fever* or *Lahore disease*. That's why World Health Organization decided to no longer name a disease from a geographical name. Therefore, the current pandemic is not a *Wuhan disease*, but a *covid-19*, an acronym for *corona virus disease 2019*. Fine!

But the story doesn't end there. The main variants appeared during the pandemic have been named by medias, as usual, from the countries of their first occurrence: *British variant*, *South-African variant*, *Brazilian variant*... And one can wonder if this kind of designation would induce a bias in peoples' mind in favor of national isolationism and borders control, versus barrier behaviors and vaccination, in the policy mix against the pandemic.

Of course, our Group of experts doesn't address directly those kind of questions, but we must keep them in mind when we work on our own topics. That's a reason why I'm so

interested in sharing thoughts in this meeting, notably to gain deeper understanding of the work being done by other ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and to detect how this may influence our work program. Conversely, I hope the benefits of standardized geographical names to be broadly recognized. In more conventional fields, geographical names give context to space, conjure up places even when we cannot navigate to them, and revives history and culture linked with them.

That's why our Group of Experts has a Working Group on geographical names as culture heritage since 2002, and why it identified target 11.4 among Sustainable Development Goals, "strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural heritage", as the main one to which its work already contributes. In a broader way, the monitoring of any global policy should be adequately supported by thematic analyses based on a set of geospatial data, of which geographical names are a core element. Therefore, optimizing the use of standardized geographical names should be a prerequisite.

The next session of our Group of Experts, in next May, will have the theme "Geographical Names supporting sustainable development and management of the pandemic", which is aligned to the annual theme of the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Governments and experts have been encouraged to consider the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the Sustainable Development Goals with their work on the standardization of geographical names for common discussion.

Thank you very much for your attention.