

Recent Activities of the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG)

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The United Nations has been working on the coordinated use and development of geographic information. This paper briefly introduces its activity and recent development.

Most agencies and programmes in the UN system use geographic information for their substantive projects including peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance as well as global demographic and environmental analyses. The increasing complexity of the operational requirements and the rapid technological development have been a driving force in the Organisation to further apply geographic information to their programmes.

However, such information is often either lacking or outdated, where it exists, there is uncoordinated use of geographic information between projects conducted by different agencies. In an attempt to improve the situation, informal working group meetings had been held at Headquarters by Mr. Miklos Pinther, the former Chief of the Cartographic Section, since 1996, in order to address common problems and keep up with emerging technological changes. This attempt was well received within the Organisation and it enlisted strong support for forming a system-wide formal working group. These efforts finally led to the establishment of the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group (UNGIWG) in March 2000.

Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, acknowledged the relevance of UNGIWG in his keynote address at the meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) held in New York on 1 March 2001. In his words, "last year we at the United Nations established a Geographic Information Working Group to improve the way in which the many entities in our far-flung system use cartographic and geographic information. One of the Group's main goals is to establish a common UN Geographic Database. It will be working with national mapping agencies, non governmental organisations, industry groups and research institutions." With recognition and support at the highest level in the UN, the Cartographic Section organised the second meeting of UNGIWG, which was held on 5 - 7 March 2001. The meeting was hosted by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) at FAO headquarters in Rome, and was attended by nearly 100 participants, representing various UN departments, agencies and programmes, as well as national mapping organisations, international non-governmental organisations and industry. To advance and implement the resolution adopted at the first meeting, seven task forces were established at this meeting to identify the short-term tasks to be

focused on in the coming year. The terms of reference were also approved and it was agreed that work should begin on a strategic plan for UNGIWG. More information on UNGIWG may be obtained at the Cartographic Section's website: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/english/htmain.htm>.

Throughout the meeting, the participants reaffirmed support for establishing a common geographic database in the UN system.

However, this database may not be developed and maintained by the United Nations alone without any support from related national, regional and international organisations. Fortunately, very recently, our proposal on the programme development of a UN geographic database has been approved for funding by the UN Foundation. It is expected that this fund will facilitate further cooperation between related initiatives as well as actually develop a geographic database for wider use in the UN system.