

## GIM INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEWS STEFAN SCHWEINFEST

# Location, Place and Geography Are Key to Decision-making



Earlier this year, United Nations secretary-general Ban-ki Moon officially approved the appointment of Stefan Schweinfest as director of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and, thus, the Secretariat of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM). As the importance of UN-GGIM continues to grow, GIM International talked to Schweinfest to gain a comprehensive progress update.

**Congratulations on your appointment as director of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the Secretariat of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM). You are a statistician yourself, so one could say that it's a case of 'statistics meets geospatial'. Is that a good combination?**

Indeed, it is a good combination. The geospatial and statistical professional communities are major contributors of data used for evidence-based decision-making across many sectors, both public and private. Globally, there is clear recognition of the need to link – or integrate – geospatial information (principally environmental information) and statistical information (principally socioeconomic information) to improve the relevance of the evidence on which decisions will be made. The challenge has always been how best to achieve this integration in an effective and consistent way. In 2013, at each of their respective intergovernmental meetings, the United Nations Statistical Commission and UN-GGIM acknowledged the critical importance of integrating geospatial information with statistics and socioeconomic data, and the need to develop a statistical-spatial framework as a global standard for doing so, especially in the context of the ongoing debate on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Therefore, they established an Expert Group on the Integration of Statistical and Geospatial Information. The Expert Group convened a Global Forum on the topic in New York, USA, from 4-5 August 2014 on the margins of the Fourth Session of UN-GGIM. As a way of reaching out and developing best practices involving both the statistical and geospatial professional communities, the Global Forum brought together more than 180 senior leaders. They discussed the strategic vision and goals for the integration of statistical and geospatial information, marking a continuation of the global consultation and communication on the development of a global statistical-spatial framework.

**For the readers of *GIM International*, can you explain UN-GGIM, its importance and purposes?**

Established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in July 2011, UN-GGIM is a formal intergovernmental mechanism that seeks to guide the agenda for the development of global geospatial information and promotes its use to address key global challenges. It also makes joint decisions and sets directions on the use of geospatial information within national and global policy frameworks. It comprising representatives from Member States and provides a forum for liaison and coordination among and between Member States and international organisations. The main purposes of UN-GGIM are to work with governments to improve policy, institutional arrangements and legal frameworks; to address global issues and contribute collective knowledge as a community with shared interests and concerns; and to develop effective strategies to build geospatial capacity, particularly in the developing countries. UN-GGIM is important because it signals to national leaders the significance of geospatial information in addressing national, regional and global challenges. It also provides the forum for developing common global goals, guidelines and best practices to make the use of geospatial information for sustainable development pervasive.

**What was the most important outcome of the most recent UN-GGIM meeting in New York in early August?**

Our Fourth Session in August had many important outcomes. There were 11 items on the agenda for discussion and consideration, including a knowledge base for geospatial information management, the integration of geospatial, statistical and other information, legal and policy frameworks, determining global fundamental geospatial data themes, developing a shared statement of principles on the management of geospatial information, and a global map for sustainable development. All of these are of great significance to the geospatial community. However, if we were to judge the importance on the number of interventions from delegates across all agenda items, the adoption of the decision on the Global Geodetic Reference Frame (GGRF) by the Committee of Experts could be regarded as the most important. The Committee recommended that the amended draft resolution on a GGRF for sustainable development should be referred to the Economic and Social Council for endorsement and further to the United Nations General Assembly. The resolution calls for greater global co-operation and data-sharing to strengthen our ability to measure and monitor the Earth and positioning of objects relative to it. A more sustainable GGRF will ensure that more consistent locational positioning will be available across the globe. This is especially important as precise positioning is being applied in virtually every aspect of people's lives, from civil engineering and transportation, climate change and sea-level monitoring to sustainable development and emergency management.

### **What is the next step in your view?**

In terms of the top three priorities, the first is to complete the establishment of the regional UN-GGIM architecture. We are well on our way to achieving this within the next year. We have already established UN-GGIM-AP for Asia and the Pacific and UN-GGIM:Americas, plus UN-GGIM:Europe was formally launched in Moldova on 1 October. We will have the first preparatory meeting of UN-GGIM:Africa in Tunis from 8-10 December, and the second preparatory meeting of UN-GGIM:Arab States in Jordan in February 2015. So we are making very good progress. Secondly, and because we are a UN body, it is imperative that we are able to bring geospatial information science, technology and innovation more comprehensively into the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and to assist in measuring and monitoring the sustainable development goals in particular. Quite simply, in these modern times, one cannot measure and monitor sustainable development without location, place and geography. Thirdly, the Committee of Experts is required to go back to ECOSOC in 2016 with "a comprehensive review of all aspects of its work and operations, in order to allow Member States to assess its effectiveness". So we are initiating a programme review to report our efforts and value to ECOSOC and the Member States.

### **How can countries which are not currently represented be convinced to become involved?**

We have seen growing interest and diversity of representation over the past four years. Building consensus, awareness and communication is a continuous process, and we expect the number of Member States represented to continue to increase. The regional UN-GGIM entities have been significant enablers in this process of increased communication and geospatial ambassadorship. This year's Session saw unprecedented representation from the Caribbean with 13 Member States in attendance. This was achieved through the hard work and tenacity shown by the UN-GGIM:Americas regional body, led by its president, Rolando Ocampo, in Mexico. In 2013 at the 10<sup>th</sup> Regional Cartographic Conference for the Americas, one of the decisions from the meeting was to increase the participation of Caribbean countries in regional and global geospatial information management matters. The president has been able to garner regional agreement and sponsorship to support these small island states in being a part of this important global process. UN-GGIM:Americas held its first regional meeting during the Latin Americas Geospatial Forum in Mexico from 24-25 September 2014.

### **What are the main challenges the global geospatial community will face in the years ahead?**

Financing; keeping abreast of innovation given the rapid pace of technological change; harnessing big data and data from the cloud, and making it authoritative; being able to provide data to support instantaneous decisions. Furthermore I foresee a number of challenges in terms of legal and policy concerns, and privacy.

### **The UN-GGIM High-Level Forum is calling for a 'data revolution'. What are the main ingredients of such a revolution?**

In May 2013, the secretary-general's High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda called for a 'data revolution' for sustainable development, and emphasised the need to improve the quality of information available to citizens. The availability, quality and accessibility of today's data just isn't good enough. Too often, development efforts are hampered by a lack of the most basic data about the social and economic circumstances in which people live. Member States are actively discussing the various aspects of the data revolution, such as the need for capacity development, the modernisation of statistical systems, big data and the development of new indicators in order to address existing data gaps and to be able to satisfy the significantly greater information needs resulting from the Post-2015 Development Agenda. In recognition of the vital role that geospatial information plays in almost all of these aspects, UN-GGIM discussed this at the Third High Level Forum in Beijing in October 2014. In order to obtain more complete and timely data, and to close the data gaps in national settings, it will be necessary to ensure availability of and access to fundamental data themes and spatial data infrastructures that reliably collect, integrate, analyse, model, fuse and aggregate data for dissemination and decision-making.

### **What is the geospatial industry's role in this data revolution?**

The geospatial industry has a vital role to play because the data revolution – just like leveraging big data and the cloud – requires innovation and technology to be harnessed and advanced. Bringing the data revolution to fruition will rely on promising new technologies and tools – satellite imagery, geocoding, crowdsourcing, social media, mobile devices, other digital mechanisms as well as data visualisation – to engage the broader community. This is the geospatial industry's domain. There has been a fundamental change in the nature of data, which is now generated continuously and in enormous quantities, and in the innovative sources from which it is derived. Technology-driven trends will continue to have a major impact on the growth and direction of geospatial information as we manage a world of data in the coming years.

### **Data is key to strengthening worldwide human development. Can you give us some inspirational examples of big data initiatives?**

Several interesting big data initiatives are being undertaken within my purview in statistics, for instance. In March 2014, the UN Statistical Commission established a global Working Group mandated to provide strategic vision, direction and co-ordination of a programme on big data for official statistics, while finding solutions for the challenges, and to promote capacity building and sharing of experiences in this respect. In fact, my division organised an International Conference on Big Data for Official Statistics in Beijing, China, from 28-30 October 2014, which considered the use of big data and analytics with geospatial information.

**Many countries have their own spatial data infrastructure or are developing one. Is creating a successful national spatial data infrastructure (NSDI) essential to a country's sustainable future?**

The concept of NSDIs is not new – they have been around for more than a decade now. However, and as mentioned previously, the paradigm of data availability and usefulness is changing rapidly; volumes are greater and increasingly real-time information is required. So NSDIs are evolving and will become more important than before, but their value must also be viewed differently. NSDIs are no longer just a means of storing and delivering data. They now have the real ability to provide the means to 'organise' and deliver core geographies from anywhere, at any time. For this to be accomplished it is necessary for the data to be available, standardised and widely accessible, and to allow new geospatial datasets to be developed through user co-operation. From an aspirational perspective, I would like to see countries invest in and strengthen national statistical capacities and geospatial information systems for the collection, analysis, production and dissemination of disaggregated data to measure and evaluate policy effectiveness, and promote a culture of evidence-based decision-making.

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