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CIRCULAR LETTER 57/2015
11 August 2015

**REPORT ON THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS COMMITTEE OF
EXPERTS ON GLOBAL GEOSPATIAL INFORMATION MANAGEMENT**

- References:
- A. CL44/2015 dated 19 June - *Fifth Session of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management.*
 - B. CL4/2015 dated 13 January - *Shared Guiding Principles for Geospatial Information Management.*

Dear Hydrographer,

1. This Circular Letter provides a summary of the key outcomes of the Fifth Session of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) that took place at the UN Headquarters in New York, USA from 5 to 7 August, as announced at Reference A.
2. The UN-GGIM reports to the UN Assembly via the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). ECOSOC has instructed UN-GGIM to work according to a five-year programme and to provide its first report in 2016. The principal purpose of the UN-GGIM is to play a leading role in setting the agenda for the development of global geospatial information management and to promote the use of geospatial information in addressing key global challenges.
3. The UN-GGIM has now established a subordinate regional structure. Each UN-GGIM regional entity plays a vital role liaising with the UN-GGIM Secretariat on topics of interest and major developments in intervening periods between meetings of the Committee of Experts, facilitating regional development and discussion, and formally feeding into the Committee of Experts. UN-mandated regional bodies are established in the Asia-Pacific, the Americas, the Arab States and Europe. UN-GGIM activities are presently coordinated in Africa by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA).
4. Representatives of over 80 UN Member States participated in the Fifth Session of UN-GGIM (UN-GGIM5) together with representatives from international organizations, including the IHO. The Session was attended by the greatest number of UN Member States so far, and a growing number of Observer Organizations, though very few delegations included representatives of national Hydrographic Offices. Representatives from the Hydrographic Offices of Cuba, Mexico, Oman and the USA were present in their respective delegations. President Robert Ward represented the IHO.
5. The Session was preceded by 28 associated side meetings including the 22nd meeting of the International Steering Committee for Global Mapping (ISCGM) which focussed on mapping activity to support disaster risk reduction, security and civil management, and briefings in support of the UN-GGIM meeting itself, including a briefing on the benefits of implementing international geospatial data standards, in which the IHO was represented.

6. A number of the items on the agenda of UN-GGIM5 were of direct relevance to IHO Member States, particularly in relation to the contribution of hydrographic data and services to national and regional spatial data infrastructures. Underpinning much of the discussion during the Session was the “*UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*” which was agreed immediately before and is expected to be adopted at a UN Summit in September. The agenda for sustainable development includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will guide decisions taken by the UN over the next 15 years. In his opening remarks, Mr Wu Hongbo, UN Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs, said that efforts to increase the availability of high quality, timely and reliable data, disaggregated by geographic location, will be critical and that the work of the UN-GGIM would underpin this effort. Of particular note to hydrographers is SDG-14: *Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*.

7. The Committee noted with satisfaction that the UN General Assembly adopted its Resolution on a Global Geodetic Reference Frame for Sustainable Development (A/RES/69/266) in February.

8. The Session considered a report on the development of a list of fundamental data themes for subsequent adoption by the Committee. Hydrography is reflected in the provisional list of themes using a number of terms, including: *hydrography, depth, elevation and depth, and water*. From an IHO perspective, these different terms need to be unified and standardised. The Committee decided to invite UN-GGIM Europe to liaise with other UN-GGIM regional groups to develop agreement on a minimum set of global fundamental geospatial data themes and to report to the next Session of the Committee.

9. The Committee adopted *A Guide to the Role of Standards in Geospatial Information Management* prepared by the Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC), the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the IHO and its companion document as UN-GGIM reference documents. The IHO input to these documents was provided by the IHB and the Marine Spatial Data Infrastructure Working Group (MSDIWG). These documents are available on the UN-GGIM website and the IHO website. The earlier request from the Secretariat of the Committee to provide a further supplement to the guide and companion document by identifying real-world examples and value statements illustrating the benefits of adopting and using international geodata standards was addressed by a series of presentations delivered in the precursor briefing on the benefits of implementing international geospatial data standards.

10. The Committee reviewed the work done so far on establishing a shared statement of principles on the management of geospatial information. The draft statement, circulated to Member states under cover of Reference B, declares thirteen principles grouped under three broad themes: *innovation, governance and compliance*. The Committee decided not to adopt the statement in its current form but to allow more time for Member States and Observer Organizations to consider its contents and to reconsider the matter at a future session of the UN-GGIM.

11. The Committee considered a report from the Centre for Spatial Law and Policy in consultation with the International Bar Association that proposed to develop a Convention on geospatial information to address the legal and policy frameworks for geospatial information management, including issues related to authoritative data. However, the Committee considered that the development of such a Resolution might be premature since it could inhibit rather than encourage the availability of relevant data.

12. Of particular significance for IHO Member States is the growing development of geospatial data infrastructures and reports of the evolution of national mapping agencies into geospatial data agencies. The Committee heard that 63% of the responding Member States have indicated that they have carried out, or plan to make, significant changes to their national institutional arrangements. These changes include the implementation of new policies to address data quality and availability; the establishment of new committees to reorganize existing activities for better synergies; and to increase participation to ensure wider representation and foster closer relationships with stakeholders. In this context, the continuing work of the IHO Marine Spatial Data Infrastructure Working Group (MSDIWG) and its task in assisting Member States in their role as custodians of national hydrographic data sets and their obvious part in national and global spatial data infrastructures is particularly relevant.

13. The Committee heard that many national geospatial information agencies are in the early stages of introducing and making use of volunteered geographic information (crowd-sourcing). Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI) would likely be a major emerging source for rapidly collecting

geospatial data, change detection and the updating of datasets. However, there were concerns about the lack of appropriate quality assurance mechanisms and the general levels of participation. The challenges are, therefore, to identify the advantages and weaknesses of VGI from both the data provider and the data user perspectives, and to encourage Member States to develop best practices on the collection, quality assurance and application of VGI. The newly established IHO Crowd-Sourced Bathymetry Working Group is already considering these aspects on behalf of the IHO.

14. Copies of all the papers and report of the meeting are available on the GGIM website at: <http://ggim.un.org>.

15. Many of the discussions and decisions being taken by the UN-GGIM are likely to have a direct impact on the activities of national Hydrographic Offices in the future. Those Member States that have not already done so are encouraged to develop close liaison with their national representatives in the UN-GGIM and where possible ensure that appropriate hydrographic input is considered by the Committee and by the UN-GGIM regional bodies. Regional Hydrographic Commissions may also wish to consider establishing links with the relevant UN-GGIM regional bodies where these exist.

16. The Sixth Session of UN-GGIM will take place at the UN Headquarters during the first week of August 2016.

On behalf of the Directing Committee
Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robert Ward', is centered on the page.

Robert WARD
President