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SIXTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON
THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
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Item 8 (c) of the provisional agenda *

RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMMES

Scope and Direction of Future Work
of the United Nations on the
Standardization of Geographical Names**/

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SCOPE AND DIRECTIONS OF FUTURE WORK OF THE UNITED NATIONS ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Introduction. Resolution 4 of the Fifth UN Conference called for a review of UNEGN programs and much effort has been carried out and reported by the UNEGN Working Group on Evaluation. Despite the association with UNEGN programs, few if any recommendations could be limited only to that group. It is, therefore, useful to expand the results of UNEGN efforts to include UN programs.

Observations. As noted in earlier discussions and reports, it is a principle that organizations require a periodic review of their mission and function. Several individuals who endorse that principle felt it also applied to UN programs. There was no harsh criticism of the programs, but there was a belief that too much effort was directed to activities that did not address main goals. A review of resolutions tends to support that concept. Another view is many actions developed over the years were not delivering desired results. Evidence is that many nations still do not have standardization agencies. And it is possible that some agencies are not fully operational.

While the creation of national standardization agencies remains a principle goal, there are also cases where virtually all names are uniform and consistent without such an agency. On the other hand, there are instances of authorities which must deal with the realities of national life with results that do not conform to the normal meaning of standardization.

Furthermore, with the growth of new nations and the attempts to recognize indigenous peoples, some early UN principles may need reexamination. For example, one goal has been that each named feature should have a single official name. The high number of features that have two or more official names contradicts this goal. Another example relates to "exonyms" (or conventional names) where the goal is to reduce them as a way of eliminating names confusion. But we must deal with several realities. A bilingual country has a right to dual names. Many communications have contextual implications; ordinary conversations will retain whatever conventional names are appropriate. Furthermore, popular literature, news media, tourism, and other activities may use such names to assure maximum comprehension.

These observations do not suggest we should forego the goal of national standardization. Instead, they mean that our UN programs need refining. A major campaign should be to provide training for those nations desiring skills and abilities. We understand how various UN programs give support to nations, and perhaps it is time to realize that geographic names are a vital element of national life and to seek more UN backing.

Another comment is that we need to understand that names and cartography are strongly associated. As Francis Gall of Guatemala

said, "A map without names is a silent map." This can be expanded to say that a map with inconsistent and inaccurate names is an inarticulate map. We need, therefore, to direct our efforts to collaborate with national mapping and charting agencies. Those agencies understand the importance of names and should support the efforts being promoted by the UN. In short, we need to focus on practical aspects of toponymy.

Recommendations. The 6th UN Conference on Geographical Names should develop new directions as appropriate to assure more effective application of names work at the national and international levels. A special committee should work on this activity during the conference for the purpose of providing such direction for immediate implementation. The UNGEGN Working Group on Evaluation should be disbanded and its members congratulated for their efforts.