SIXTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE
  STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
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TOPONYMIC DATA FILES: DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Report of the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files
and Gazetteers

Paper submitted by the United Nations Group of Experts
on Geographical Names**

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Committee on Geographical Names and Temporary Convenor of the Working Group.

The Working Group convened during the fifteenth session of the United
Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in Geneva in November 1991.
Those participating discussed what they felt should be the prime objectives of
this group, to further the development of computerized toponymic records
meeting acceptable standards, to promote compatible data structures, to
facilitate toponymic data exchange, and to encourage the use of this
information in national gazetteer publication programmes.

1.   The first task quite clearly became the collection of information on
toponymic databases existing in various Member States. A questionnaire was
planned to determine what types of toponymic databases (digital and analogue)
exist; what information is included and how it is gathered and updated; and,
if databases are computerized, how the information is stored and disseminated.
Ms. Mattisson of the National Land Survey of Sweden spearheaded the
development of a suitable questionnaire. After input from Working Group
members, this questionnaire was forwarded to the United Nations Secretariat in
March (1992), for wide distribution (in English, French and Spanish) to
national geographical names and mapping authorities. Early replies will be
gathered into a preliminary report. Later responses are still very much
needed so that the Working Group can use the information to develop suitable
recommendations to present to the Group of Experts, for the benefit of all
States Members of the United Nations. The information from the questionnaires
will provide a valuable inventory of existing toponymic databases and system
configurations and will be used:

     (a)   To assist those who need to develop automated toponymic databases;

     (b)   To cooperate on common data fields to be universally maintained
(i.e. stored and updated);

     (c)   To collaborate to develop practical mechanisms for exchange of
toponymic data between national databases;

     (d)   To work towards the acceptance and general use of international
standards for data storage and exchange;

     (e)   To encourage the use of national toponymic databases for national
gazetteer programmes.

2.   For the initial development of many toponymic databases a PC-based system
is ideal. The Working Group recommended that:

     (a)   Guidelines on database development, already prepared by some members
of the Group of Experts for various toponymic courses be made widely
available. These would be particularly valuable if they could be used on
personal computers (PCs).

     (b)   One or more database packages be developed and made available (with
no copyright restrictions) so that any Member State might take advantage of

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simple menu-driven routines for developing a toponymic database to handle their own names records.

3.   The Working Group recommends that training courses offered in toponymy and concerned with the development of national geographical names programmes and world standardization should contain, at least, a basic workshop on digital databases, their development and maintenance.

The role of the Working Group, in the immediate future, will be to evaluate the database questionnaire responses, from which recommendations should be made to address the common issues of assistance, cooperation, standards development and gazetteer production programmes, as noted above. Increased effort should be put into the creation of database packages which can be the foundation for Member States to set up their own computerized toponymic data files.   Already existing guidelines on database development should be collected and made as widely available as possible.