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**Item 19 of the Provisional Agenda:
Implementation of resolutions and the
aims and functions of the Group of Experts**

**Commemorative Naming – Possibilities and Problems
An inquiry concerning UN Resolution VIII/2 and the work of UNGEGN**

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Commemorative naming – possibilities and problems

Commemorative naming is a very common phenomenon throughout the world. By commemorative naming I here mean the practice whereby any official name-giving body through a formal decision attributes a person's name to a geographical feature in order to honour or commemorate him or her.

Examples from Stockholm, Sweden

In my paper at the ICOS Congress in Uppsala 2002, I attempted to describe the work of the Name Drafting Committee in Stockholm, of which I am secretary. The Name Drafting Committee makes suggestions and proposals, but the local politicians in Stockholm make the decisions. I mentioned in my paper that the famous writer of children's books, Astrid Lindgren, had died in January that year. The day after she passed away, different ideas of honouring her by attributing her name to some place or feature in the city were already being proposed in the newspapers, addressed to the politicians or to the Name Drafting Committee from the public, or addressed to the Name Drafting Committee from the politicians. This was the start of a name-giving process that lasted for several years.

The situation caused a very animated debate, numerous meetings and petitions, lots of newspaper articles and much more. An idea from one of the political parties was to change the name of the street where Astrid Lindgren lived for (almost) the last 50 years of her life. But the Name Drafting Committee strongly opposed all suggestions that involved replacing an older street name or park name. Our arguments were numerous, but one important factor was the new consideration clause on a 'code of good place-name practice,' recently inserted into the Swedish Ancient Monuments and Finds Act, which clearly states that older and well-established names shall not be changed without good reason. Instead we suggested and argued for the naming of an anonymous section of a park close to where the author lived. There are undoubtedly strong reasons to attribute Astrid Lindgren's name to some place – and there are reasons in this case to see commemorative naming as a possibility – but this does not mean that there are strong reasons to remove or distort any of the old street-names which came under discussion. The fact that there was disagreement on this matter caused problems, and the fact that too many people wanted 'action', also caused problems, as I see it. By this I mean they wanted a quick decision, the quicker the better. The questions still remain – where will Astrid Lindgren's name be used? Exactly what will the name be?

We faced a similar situation in September 2003 when Anna Lindh, the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, was murdered in Stockholm. A few weeks after her death we had been presented with proposals for twelve sites, all in Stockholm, which could bear her name and we felt strong pressure to make a quick decision. But that was exactly what we did *not* want to do – we wanted to wait, to think this tragic and unexpected situation over, very carefully. Again – here we have a good opportunity to honour and commemorate Anna Lindh by attributing her name to something – but the fact that many people wanted this naming to take place instantly caused as I see it – an unnecessary problem.

The UN Resolution VIII/2 from Berlin

The above examples are from Stockholm, Sweden, but the situation there is in no way unique. Commemorative naming has also been discussed by the United Nations through UNGEGN. In 2002 the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names

(Berlin) adopted a resolution (VIII/2) on ‘Commemorative naming practices for geographical features’. The final recommendations in the resolution text read as follows:

The Conference,

1. *Recommends* that the appropriate national authorities discourage the use of personal names to designate a geographical feature during the lifetime of the person in question;
2. *Also recommends* that the appropriate national authorities include in their guidelines clear statements on the length of the waiting period they wish to establish before using a commemorative name.

Of course these recommendations are just what we need in Stockholm. Even if the power to decide – when it comes to naming streets, parks and other urban features – lies with the local political bodies, on a national level we can inform the persons responsible that this UN resolution exists, we can explain its background and we can use it as an argument when trying to avoid inappropriate and overhasty decisions.

Thus in Sweden, the National Place-Names Advisory Board, made a written recommendation and sent it to all the 290 local municipalities. The recommendation says – in accordance with the UN resolution – that new names shall not be created on the basis of a person’s name if the person in question is still alive. It also recommends that this kind of commemorative naming shall not be undertaken until 3-5 years have passed after the death of the person in question.

A questionnaire on commemorative naming

What about the rest of the world? This kind of resolution is not binding in constitutional law. The UN cannot order or force single member nations to act in a certain way. But it is not unreasonable to presume – to put it very simply – that all the nations present when the resolution was adopted, should also interpret it in a similar way and in the long run also use it in a similar way. However we do not know this for a fact, so in order to find out, I decided to conduct a very simple enquiry.

I constructed a questionnaire with seven questions: the first five (1-5) each presented the question together with four alternative answers, graded from ‘very much’ to ‘not at all/nothing’. Only one of these alternatives was to be chosen. The two final questions (6-7) were of multiple choice-type, allowing the opportunity to select an optional number of alternative answers. After every question there was room for personal comments. I e-mailed the questionnaire to approximately 190 UNGEGN experts, according to the most recent available list of e-mail addresses. Only 22 questionnaires were filled in and returned to me. This may seem to be a very small number*, and it is not sufficient for any reliable statistical conclusions, but at the same time, the answers represent 18 nations from Europe, Africa, Asia and North America. Thus they do provide a lot of information.

The first question was:

1. How would you describe the practice – in your country – of attributing a personal name to a geographical feature during the lifetime of that person?

* Many countries are represented by more than one expert. From the answers I can occasionally glean that national experts have discussed the questionnaire between themselves and agreed to return only one common answer.

- // It is common practice.
- // It happens quite often.
- // It is not very common, but there are some examples.
- // It never happens (as far as I know).

The most common answer was ‘It is not very common, but there are some examples’. A few answered that it never happens or it happens extremely rarely. Two answered ‘It happens quite often’. When this kind of naming occurs it is generally a matter of (re)naming streets or other urban features (normally decided by local authorities, as in my examples from Stockholm). When it comes to other features, this kind of naming is even more rare; being either extremely seldom or almost accidental. One important fact to point out, though, is that the term *geographical feature*, as used in the resolution title and in my questionnaire, can be interpreted in different ways. If you interpret it as ‘natural feature’, which some countries prefer to do, the whole question of streets and urban commemorative naming becomes irrelevant. I will return to this matter below.

The second question was:

2. How would you describe the practice – in your country – of attributing a personal name to a geographical feature shortly or immediately after the death of a person?

- // It is common practice.
- // It happens quite often.
- // It is not very common, but there are some examples.
- // It never happens (as far as I know).

The answers here follow the same lines as the answers to question 1, but as expected this kind of naming seems to be a little more accepted and used, but still it is not very common in most countries. The length of the waiting-period after a person’s death is under discussion in some countries or cities or is already in practice, for example, the 25 years ‘by municipal order’ in Budapest, Hungary. In quite a few countries, the UN resolution is said to be just a confirmation of the current practice, although the length of the waiting-period is not specified. One country replied that this kind of naming never occurs, but that there are lots of suggestions in this direction and there seems to be an ongoing change in attitude towards this problem. Both countries answering ‘it happens quite often’ in question 1, answered the same here.

The third question read as follows:

3. How would you describe the situation – in your country – of commemorative naming practices?

- // These practices cause discussions and debate (in the press, amongst politicians, amongst the public etc.) to the point where I consider it a problem.
- // These practices cause discussions and debate, but I would not consider it a problem.
- // These practices are rarely discussed or debated, but it happens occasionally.
- // These practices are never discussed.

The most common answer to question 3 was ‘These practices cause discussions and debate, but I would not consider it a problem’. As many as seven delegates replied that ‘These practices are rarely discussed or debated, but it happens occasionally’. But at the same time they cite examples similar to those in my introduction concerning Stockholm. Two delegates

actually considered these discussions a problem according to the first alternative in the questionnaire.

Let us now look at questions 4 and 5 together:

4. How would you describe the situation today – in your country – concerning the awareness of this UN Resolution amongst the national and local name-giving authorities?

// This UN Resolution is familiar to all or most of the authorities and other bodies involved in the official naming of geographical features.

// This UN Resolution is familiar to some of the authorities and other bodies involved in the official naming – especially authorities on a national level.

// This UN Resolution is familiar only to authorities or individuals directly connected to and involved in UN-matters.

// This UN Resolution is probably familiar only to me and my personal connections (in or outside UNGEGN).

5. Has anything been done – in your country – to implement this UN Resolution and to make the intentions and purposes of it known to the proper authorities, bodies and individuals?

// Very much has been done. (Give just a few examples below in the comments!)

// Quite a lot has been done. (Give just a few examples below in the comments!)

// Not much has been done, but I could point to the fact that ...

// Nothing has been done at all.

The most common answer to question 4 was ‘this UN Resolution is familiar to some of the authorities and other bodies’. Six experts stated that the ‘UN Resolution is familiar only to authorities or individuals directly connected to and involved in UN-matters’ and five experts stated that it is ‘probably familiar only to me and my personal contacts (in or outside UNGEGN)’. Concerning question 5 (on implementation) the most common answer was ‘not much has been done’. Three experts claimed that ‘quite a lot has been done’ and two replied that ‘very much has been done’. But as many as seven experts answered that ‘nothing has been done at all’.

If we compare the answers to questions 4 and 5 with each other, it looks as if the UN resolution has been fairly well implemented in society. At the same time it seems as if not much has been undertaken to implement it. This could of course be interpreted by saying the resolution has implemented itself, but a more probable explanation for the discrepancy in the answers is that the contents of the resolution were already in practice in many countries, completely or partly, so there was no need for creating awareness of its implementation.

And finally, let us compare the answers to questions 6 and 7. What is meant by a ‘geographical’ name? What is the subject of UNGEGN’s work and concern? And what is the subject of the UN resolution we are dealing with here? Questions 6 and 7 were as follows:

6. Which one or which ones of the following name categories do you include in the term *geographical names* as used in the title *United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names* (UNGEEN) and thus should be treated as names of interest and importance to UNGEGN?

// names of topographical features like rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys

// names of ‘man-made’ topographical features like fields, meadows, pastures

// names of habitations like farms, cottages, villages, cities

- // names of administrative areas like parishes, districts, counties, nations
- // names of urban features like streets, squares, city-blocks, parks, bridges

7. Which one or which ones of the following name categories would you include in the range and intentions of the UN Resolution dealing with the ‘naming practices for *geographical features*’

- // names of topographical features like rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys
- // names of ‘man-made’ topographical features like fields, meadows, pastures
- // names of habitations like farms, cottages, villages, cities
- // names of administrative areas like parishes, districts, counties, nations
- // names of urban features like streets, squares, city-blocks, parks, bridges

One of the 22 returned questionnaires was incomplete so I have excluded it from the following synthesis. The rest of the replies can be summarized as follows.

Eleven of the 21 replies consider all the name categories as ‘geographical names’ in the same way as I personally do; in other situations I prefer to call them *place-names*, but the term used by the UN has for quite a long time now been *geographical names*. All the name categories in questions 6–7 are to be treated as names of interest and importance to UNGEGN according to these experts. These first eleven answers also consider that all these name categories are included in the aim and goal of the resolution now under discussion. This means that the term *geographical* has the same meaning and the same implications in the expression ‘geographical name’ (UNGEKN) as it has in the expression ‘geographical features’ (the resolution). But as is shown from the remaining ten replies, this is not the only way to view things. As they show, there are many different ways of understanding what it is that UNGEGN should deal with or consider, and there are many different ways of understanding what the UN resolution is really about.

In one reply we see that all kinds of names are considered to be a matter for UNGEGN, but at the same time according to the personal comments attached to this question, it is considered that the word *geographical* in the resolution text only means ‘topographical’ or ‘natural’. If we compare this to one of the other replies, the goals and objects for UNGEGN are the same as in the reply just mentioned, but the resolution is not considered to concern topographical features at all, on the contrary it concerns only urban features and habitations. A third reply considers that only names of urban features are the concern of UNGEGN and of the resolution. A fourth reply on the other hand considers that while names of habitations should be discussed by UNGEGN, the resolution (which is a result of UNGEGN discussions), should only concern names of urban features. And so on.

Conclusion

In conclusion, commemorative naming offers possibilities but may also cause various problems. The UN resolution can be used in several ways when trying to avoid or solve some of these problems. The diverging replies I received from all over the world in the questionnaire are – I suspect – to some extent due to misunderstanding of my questions. But this cannot explain all discrepancies. I am aware that it is not realistic to expect that the important work carried out within the UN and UNGEGN should result in complete agreement and unity; there has to be room and scope for national adaptation. However, I find it surprising that the contents of a UN resolution can be interpreted in so many ways. What are we actually recommending or protecting with such resolutions? This is something that could be discussed further.