AGENDA ITEM 13

International standardization and its field of application

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATON AND ITS FIELD OF APPLICATION*

Report presented by Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland

International standardization of geographical names is the definitive establishment of geographial names for such maps, charts and other publications as are intended for international use.

The writing of geographical names in maps or charts for internatonal use should comply with the following rules:

(a) In designating geographical-topographical entities under the sovereignty of a single nation, the nationally standardized names of the country concerned are used;

(b) In designating geographical-topographical entities extending over the territory of more than one nation or lying outside the sovereignty of nations, names determined by international understanding (see item 14 of the agenda) are used;

(c) The geographical names which are nationally

standardized in a non-Roman alphabet or script are romanized in accordance with the principles laid down under item 11 of the agenda.

It is recommended that these rules should also be applied in those publications for international use in which geographical names do not appear in context, such as international time-tables for railways and airlines, the Universal Postal Union publication *Nomenclature internationale des Bureaux de poste*, and tables of internatonal statistics.

In publications meant for international use that mention geographical names in context (for example, encyclopaedias and scientific periodicals), these names may show the peculiarities of the spelling systems of the language used or of a transcription that is not internationally recognized. In that case, however, it is recommended that forms of the geographical names complying with the rules given above should be added in brackets.

* The original text of this paper was contained in document E/CONF.61/L.23.

INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES*

Report presented by the United States of America

At this conference there have already been discussions of the needs and objectives of the standardization of names, national name-standardizing authorities, field and office methodology, philology, linguistics and census names. The remaining topics are international aspects (including transfers between writing systems) and historical sources. On the agenda of this conference the topic of international considerations appropriately comes up after national activities have been explored.

For more than a decade now it has been agreed all over the world that a successful international programme must be based on international acceptance of nationally standardized names. It is the prerogative of each country to make official decisions on the names of geographical entities in areas within its jurisdiction, and to say how they shall be written at home. It may be recalled that the programme circulated in 1958 by the United Nations Secretary-General was explicit on that

point, and that the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations convened the First Meeting of the Group of Experts in 1960 primarily to consider problems in the standardization of domestic names. The Group of Experts each drew upon his own and his colleagues' experience at home to discover together, and to state, the near-universality of the major problems in the standardization of geographical names. In doing this the Group provided by its own performance a convincing example of the value of international co-operation in working out approaches to these problems.

At the First United Nations Conference on Standardization of Geograpical Names, the agenda was therefore arranged to provide at the outset reports by each delegation on national activities and programmes, and on each nation's experience with the problems identified in the 1960 report of the Group of Experts. As in that 1960 meeting, these discussions established that much of the problem is indeed common to all countries, that at the same time each country has some unique or special problems, and that the positions of national standardization programmes cover the whole gamut from unstarted

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to practically completed. Further, it was demonstrated that enthusiastic international co-operation in this field is possible before full agreement is reached on everything, as long as the people involved have confidence in and respect for one another. While the principles of international acceptance and national prerogative are basically simple, some complications are encountered in the course of their implementation and some limiting forces are brought out. Even if there are no legal checks on the powers of the national standardizing authority, the actions have to be acceptable to be really effective. No matter how authoritative, official name-standardizing actions are likely to be either quietly ignored or loudly repudiated if the public, or that part of the public concerned with the names or name at issue, feels that the actions are unjustified and autocratic. Regularizing and systematizing have real advantages, but the local people may not see those advantages readily without help when the process produces some forms not in local use. The imposition of changes by force that has been tried at various times and places has generally managed only to produce discrepancy between official names and local names. Fortunately, while human behaviour patterns in name-using are far from being fully understood, the evidence to date does suggest that people will accept name-changes that make sense to them. The time and patient effort that may be required to clarify the advantages for them, or even to readjust the actions to take account of special local problems, are more than justified. Popular veto is an effective check. In a way, geographical names belong to people.

However, the circle of people to whom the names may be said to belong is widening faster and faster. Millions of people now talk about or send something to or even go to places that their grandfathers either never heard of or considered so remote that the local name didn't really matter. These millions of people have a stake in names outside their own countries, and their acceptance is a further check on the prerogatives of national name-authorities. When the number of geographical names of concern is only a few hundred, one has little trouble remembering them and their proper written forms. An individual probably can manage a few thousands, but not millions and tens of millions, and in a dynamic world it requires international co-operation just to keep up with changes.

ADP (automatic data processing) will both make the problem bigger and help solve it. The storage of names in computers will make possible the use of standard names in unprecedented volume, the continuous maintenance of an up-to-date name bank, almost instantaneous withdrawals from the name bank by anyone anywhere who is or can be tied into the computer, and, eventually, automatic placing of the standard names on maps or their photocompilation in gazetteers or texts. This may significantly increase the number of names that the international acceptors ask the national standardizers to provide, but it could provide economies in manpower requirements to offset the additional costs.

It is already clear that, if the nationally standardized names are to be internationally accepted, the international acceptors may need from the national standard-izers some help not ordinarily provided to domestic users. An example would be an indication of the proper grammatical form to use when names that are normally inflected in context are used in isolation. A number of such problems were referred to in the 1960 report of the Group of Experts, and practical problems will be dealt with by the new Group of Experts under the topic of information exchange.

The practical problems of the national standardizer in supplying such information have not yet been fully brought out, but they should not be insoluble. As far as possible they should be anticipated. Stated negatively, the international acceptors cannot accept until they have the information they need. Stated positively, the easier it is for the internatonal acceptors to assimilate the nationally standardized names, the faster and the more completely it will happen.

International acceptance of names standardized in the acceptor's general writing system—the roman alphabet, for instance—will still inevitably involve acceptance of written forms containing features foreign to the writing of the acceptor's language, such a diacritical marks, or modified, ligatured or other special letters. Since it is natural for one to reject as meaningless anything of which one does not know the meaning, some educational steps may be prerequisite to full popular support of innovations. It may also be helpful for national standardizers to distinguish between elements of the written forms if any, that may be dispensed with without inviting confusion, e.g. distinctions preserved in writing but no longer made in speech in Thai or Amharic.

The problems of the standardization of geographical names for which in the past hundred years it has been most difficult to agree on solutions have been those of transfer from one writing system to another, especially the transfer from other systems into Roman letters. There has not even been full agreement on the meaning of the terms used to refer to the transfer process. There has been wide use of the term "transliteration" to mean the matching of letters of a receiver alphabet with letters of a donor alphabet, and of "transcription" to mean the matching of letters or other characters of the receiver writing system with the sounds represented by the characters of the donor writing. The draft programme circulated by the United Nations in 1958 used the terms in that sense, but how fully they have been accepted in those connotations is not known. At least one country, commenting on the draft programme, appeared to be using the term "transcription" to mean copying a name from one piece of paper to another without change, while still others appeared to be equating it to any transfer involving change. The Group of Experts wisely took time at the beginning of its meeting in 1960 to explore suspected semantic pitfalls and to draw up a list of terms, including "transliteration" and "transcription", with the connotations in which it was agreed to use them during those meetings. This proved to be useful. The list was appended to the report simply to make the report itself more nearly unambiguous.

When the Group of Experts met in 1966 to help the

United Nations organize the Geneva conference, the list of terms and definitions was looked at again; and an attempt was made to improve the definitions, with special attention given to terms for the status of languages (e.g. "official language") and terms for transfers between writing systems. By this time the term "romanization" had come into use for all transfers into the Roman alphabet, but the distinction between procedures was still important and the distinguishing terms were examined. While the exercise did not produce any new definitions, it was highly instructive, for it forced a recognition that too many things were not wholly this nor wholly that. For example, the statuses of the different languages in those countries where several are spoken are so varied that the group was unable to devise new and better simple categories for purposes of the standardization of names. Nor is the differentiation between "transliteration" and "transcription" a simple question of whether one works from letters or sounds: letter-for-letter "transliteration" is of course very mindful of the sounds for which the letters are symbols.

For a letter-for-letter transliteration to accomplish a faithful transfer of sounds, or for a sound-for-sound transcription to be accomplished by a mere equating of symbols, it would be necessary for the donor and receiver languages to have precisely equivalent sound stocks, to record in their writing all the sound distinctions made in speech, and pesent one-to-one correspondence between sound and symbol, i.e. have only one symbol for a sound and one sound for a symbol. If those conditions were satisfied, then the letter-for-letter transfer would be in fact a transfer of sounds and the sound-for-sound transfer we call "transcription" would be in fact an equating of symbols. Since langyages do not comply with those conditions fully, it is necessary in the transfer systems to adopt conventions, to make judgements, choices, compromises. In doing so advantage has been taken of the fact that, while the sound stocks of no two languages fully coincide, all languages do have many sounds that are used or approximated in other languages; of the fact that most languages do reveal in their writing their principal sound distinctons even though they do not reveal them all; and of the fact that most languages show at least considerable correspondence between sound and written symbol, even if none has fully one-to-one correspondence. Since languages differ greatly in the extent to which these statements apply, every combination of languages or writing systems involved in transfers presents at least some special problems. It is small wonder that it has been infinitely easier to devise systems for bilateral transfers than for multilateral ones.

Attitudes towards this problem are in one way complicated and in another way simplified by the fact that the written symbols not only stand for sounds but also, in combination, constitute names that stand for geographical entities, and are capable of recognition as such by the eye, irrespective of the sounds. One tends to defend the written forms of names to which one has become accustomed, and to hesitate over a system that produces something else. On the other hand, the importance of eye recognition was implicit in the internatonal consensus that the writing can be standardized if "mispronunciation" is accepted as indeed it must be.

The national standardizers could not make the pronunciation of geographical names precisely uniform within their jurisdiction even if they tried, and international acceptors could not reproduce the original pronunciations exactly even if provided with them in unambiguous writing, but both can make approximations. In a transcription type of transfer, someone has to supply the sounds if the usual writing does not. If the national standardizer does not do so, the international acceptor is on its own. It is obvious that some mispronunciation of names can be tolerated without failure of communication. We need to know more about the limits of tolerable variation and the governing factors in the process in all kinds of situations. We know we cannot reach perfection: we do not know yet how much or what kinds of imperfection we can stand at this stage. This is just one of a number of areas proposed for co-operative international study, for which we now have new international machinery.

At the meeting of the Organization of Central American States (ODECA) in San Salvador last February, Francis Gall reported on the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in Geneva in September 1967. Appended to his report were the resolutions adopted by that conference, including one on regional and subregional meetings that has been cited in the calling of this conference. The first two of the Geneva resolutions were addressed to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, which had convened the conference. The first resolution recommended the creation of a United Nations permanent committee on geographical names, consisting of experts, to provide for continuous co-ordination and liaison among nations to further the standardization of geographical names and to encourage the formation and work of regional groups. It also recommended that the composition of the group reflect linguistic/geographic distribution, that the United Nations furnish staff services, and that the members meet annually beginning in 1968 at the expense of their Governments.

Since the Council could not consider these resolutions until its meeting in the spring of 1968, the Conference set up an *ad hoc* group of experts to function in the interim, with membership like that proposed for the new Committee. That group met and elected as officers M. F. Burrill (United States) Chairman, A. M. Komkov (USSR) Vice-Chairman and F. Nédélec (France) rapporteur, with a representative of the United Nations Cartography Section, C. N. Christopher, to serve as co-ordinating secretary.

The second Geneva resolution requested the Economic and Social Council to convene a second conference three years later. These matters were put on the agenda for the meeting of the Council in May and were duly considered. The severe financial straits of the United Nations put both recommendations in jeopardy, but the success of the Geneva conference and the enthusiastic support of several of the member states of the

Council led to a compromise. The Council requested the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts set up at Geneva to carry on the functions that had been recommended for the Permanent Committee, thus avoiding the creation of a new United Nations body, and requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations to consult with the Group of Experts on the holding of the next conference not earlier than 1971.

The machinery is now in being. The atmosphere for co-operation is cordial. The matter is in our hands. The first regional conference on the standardization of names in the Americas is now nearly concluded. We are on our way.

In a co-operative programme based on international acceptance of nationally standardized names, what happens in each country is important to all other countries. Each is both a national standardizer and an international acceptor and must help the others in each of those capacities. Each must have a genuine and continuing concern with the acceptance of standard names at all levels from the locality to the world.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES: THE 1967 CONFERENCE*

Report presented by the United States of America

The United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names that was held in Geneva from 4 to 22 September 1967 differed in significant respects from all of the many previous meetings at which the subject had been considered.[1]

Discussion of the standardization of geographical names at international meetings goes back almost a century to the first congress in the series of which this is the twenty-first, the Congress of Geographic, Cosmographic and Commercial Sciences held at Amsterdam from 14 to 22 August 1871. The subject was discussed at subsequent International Geographical Congresses and has been taken up at many international meetings held under other auspices.

Four features, however, made the 1967 Conference new and significantly different. It was the first conference of world-wide scope devoted entirely to the subject. It was attended principally by professional name-standardizers, people technically competent in the subject and associated with official national name-standardizing bodies or with international organizations having a stake in the matter. It was deliberately designed to facilitate world-wide exchange of national experience with the problems of the standardization of geographical names, the identificaton of the extent and degree of consensus and of differences, the exploration of steps to extend the consensus further, and the development of international machinery for international co-operation in this sphere. Finally, the Conference was preceded by preparatory meetings, discussions and world-wide circulation of proposals for study and comment by Governments, followed by collation and circulation of the comments received.

There are great differences between a conference devoted to as specific subject and one at which that subject is only one of many. To begin with, the objectives are usually different. The single-subject conference usually aims at exploration in depth, the identification of a central problem and its ramifications, solutions applicable to specific problems, or something similar that involves principally group participation and group accomplishment during the meeting. The one with many subjects usually emphasizes reports on recent research by individuals, and to a lesser extent reports on activities by committees or groups. When the subject is one of many, it usually gets only a small fraction of the total time, either in formal sessions, or in the informal discussions in the corridors and lounges or at coffee-breaks and meals or in working-group sessions that hammer out proposals. The small amount of time it does get may be further split up in ways that make exploration in depth difficult if not impossible. The contributions are likely to be reports on research and thinking done long before the contributor came to the meeting, rather than group conclusions arising from joint examination of a problem at the meeting. The two kinds of meetings are likely to be structured quite differently. When meetings are structured to permit almost anyone to talk about almost anything, that is usually what happens. The people who go are largely self-selected and they talk on subjects of their choice. This produces a heterogeneous group with a wide variety of interests. Some people have been known to give papers simply so that they could be sent to the meetings. In contrast, the presentation of papers had little if anything to do with who attended the 1967 Conference. No one read any papers aloud. More than 80 papers and reports were distributed, studied and referred to, but these were not necessarily written by persons attending the Conference. Governments were asked particularly to send the people most closely concerned with the standardization of geographical names, and generally did so, but expertise was drawn upon wherever it was to be found. More than 80 per cent of those attending were professional and technical people, concerned in practical ways with the matters discussed, and were able to draw upon some experience in the field.

At the 1967 Conference attention was directed continuously at the subject for three weeks; ramifications were explored at length; arguments were presented and weighed, accepted or rebutted, revised and incorporated into new positions; alternatives were compared, and a consensus developed point by point. The deliberate

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* The original text of this paper, prepared by Meredith F. Burrill, was contained in document E/CONF.61/L.54.

[1] The *Report of the Conference* was published in 1968 as volume 1 of *United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.68.I.9).

structuring of the meetings to facilitate this contributed in no small measure to the successful outcome.

The Conference did not have to start at the very beginning in its consideration of the problems. A large amount of preparatory work had already been done. A Group of Experts on Geographical Names was convened in 1960 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations pursuant to resolution 715 A (XXVII) of the Economic and Social Council. The Group was asked "(i) to consider the technical problems of domestic standardization of geographical names, including the preparation of a statement of the general and regional problems involved, and to prepare draft recommendations for the procedures, principally linguistic, that might be followed in the standardization of their own names by individual countries; (ii) to report to the Council ... on the desirability of holding an international conference on this subject...". The report of the Group was circulated a few months later by the Secretary-General and was subsequently published in volume 7 of *World Cartography*. It was widely studied and commented upon before the 1967 Conference was called. A tentative agenda and a statement on the nature and scope of the proposed conference were also circulated. In 1966 the available members of the Group of Experts, with some additional help, assisted in the preparations for the Conference, incorporating all suggestions made by member states to the Secretary-General, and adapting procedures used at United Nations conferences to the objectives and probable composition of this one.[2] The antecedents of these developments between 1953 and 1962 were outlined in *World Cartography*, vol. 7, and will not be detailed here. Suffice it to say that in this period there was formulated and generally accepted a simple conceptual base for international co-operation in the standardization of geographical names. The question posed in 1871 was whether the Congress could lay down the adoption of a uniform orthography of proper names both on maps and in geographical treatises. The answer suggested then was that among Roman-alphabet countries all could and should write names as spelt in the country where the named entity was. However, long discussion failed to bring agreement on the difficult problems of a "phonetic system", and the question was referred to the next Congress. Pronunciation was then, and continued to be, the Gordian knot that repeated attempts failed to untie. The knot was finally cut by acknowledging that uniform pronunciation is not possible, but that accepting variation in pronunciation makes possible the acceptance of uniform writing within a given writing system. This in turn made feasible the international acceptance of nationally standardized written names.

When one starts from this simple conceptual base and goes about the business of national standardizing and international accepting, things rapidly become more complicated. It was the basic purpose of the Conference to illuminate these complications. The specific objectives of the Conference[3] were:

"(a) Removal of any remaining doubt that nationally standardized names are the proper basis for international standardization and that an international alphabet is not feasible;

"(b) Development of a greater willingness on the part of each country to take account, in its standardization programme, of the problems that other countries might encounter in receiving and assimilating those geographical names for their own use. This process would involve, on the part of the donor country, all the elements of the original scripts and other linguistic details necessary for proper conversion into other scripts;

"(c) Comparison of problems and programmes of various countries;

"(d) Identification of topics, areas and categories of names which currently merit further study, and formulation of principles relating to international standardization;

"(e) Formulation of principles applying to the transfer from one writing system to another;

"(f) Romanization from other writing systems for international standardization to be sought from the United Nations Roman-alphabet languages: English, French and Spanish;

"(g) Consideration to be given to the establishment of systems for internatonal standardization based on the Cyrillic alphabet and the Arabic alphabet;

"(h) Identification and discussion of categories of names of features extending beyond the sovereignty of a single country, e.g. oceans, rivers, mountains, undersea features etc., and examination of possibilities of standardization;

"(i) Development of machinery for international exchange of information;

"(j) Proposals for the establishment of a programme of regional conferences or working groups to operate after the Geneva Conference;

"(k) Promotion of the establishment of names standardization bodies in all countries."

These objectives were essentially achieved, and since final answers were not expected there was no feeling of frustration if they were not forthcoming on any particular question. Progress was registered on nearly every matter considered, and plans for making more progress were agreed upon.

Four committees were formed, one each to deal with national standardization, geographical terms, writing systems and international co-operation. Since the committees did not meet at the same time, all could participate in their discussions. Special working and drafting groups were formed by volunteers representing very well the range of opinions or viewpoints. Each committee developed a series of resolutions in its particular field of study. All actions taken by the Conference were unanimous. It is indicative of the enthusiastic spirit of co-operation generated at the Conference that the two resolutions considered most important related to the maintenance of the momentum that had been gained. The first resolution called for establishment of a United

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[2] See annex III of the *Report of the Conference*.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 21.