

**Ninth United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names**

New York, 21 - 30 August 2007

Item 6 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

**Meetings and conferences:**

**United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names**

**United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN)  
2002-2007: meetings and work**

Submitted by the UNGEGN\*\*

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**United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN)  
2002-2007: meetings and work**

## **Summary**

Since the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in 2002, the UNGEGN has held two sessions: the 22<sup>nd</sup> in New York in 2004 and the 23<sup>rd</sup> in Vienna in 2006. Both sessions were well attended, had many papers filed and included special presentations on topics of general interest to UNGEGN participants.

Between UNGEGN Sessions, much of the ongoing work has been undertaken by the 22 geographical/linguistic divisions and the 10 working groups of UNGEGN. A Task Force on Africa has been established to address the challenges faced in geographical names standardization on the continent.

The UNGEGN Sessions have been tracking work on the Conference resolutions and have ensured the publication of two manuals to assist with the basic and technical work of standardization. The UNGEGN website has expanded and is now a portal to UNGEGN documents, national databases and national names authorities.

## **1. Sessions of UNGEGN**

Since the 21st Session of UNGEGN and the Eighth Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in Berlin in August 2002, UNGEGN has convened twice:

- the 22nd Session took place in New York, 20-29 April 2004, and
- the 23rd Session in Vienna, 28 March-4 April 2006.

### ***Participation***

At both sessions, the participation was most encouraging:

- in 2004 in New York, 190 participants from 63 countries and 15 observers;
- in 2006 in Vienna, 250 participants from 67 countries and 24 observers.

At each session, 21 of the 22 geographical/linguistic divisions of UNGEGN were represented. As well as encouraging participation of experts, an important aspect of UNGEGN's work is to spread information about geographical names administration to the users of toponymic data – hence liaison with user groups and encouragement/facilitation of their participation at Conferences and UNGEGN Sessions is significant.

### ***Special presentations***

Both sessions had full agendas, each with over 130 papers filed, many reporting on considerable progress made by countries in the various aspects of standardization and dissemination. Special presentations and demonstrations were included in the programmes. The recent direction has been to present issues of common interest to UNGEGN participants. So far, topics covered have included:

- the difficulties for geographical names standardization work in Africa (presentation and also a panel discussion);
- the work of ISO / Technical Committee 211 Geographic information/Geomatics
- the need for available worldwide geographical names data sets for support of humanitarian aid;
- geographical names in structured digital datasets of the future;
- the building of an UNGEGN multilingual, multiscriptual geographical names database of countries, capitals and cities over 100,000;
- a summary of work submitted to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Session in regard to resolution VIII/9 referring to cultural aspects of naming.

### ***Distribution of documents***

Since the Eighth Conference in 2002, the website of UNGEGN ([unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/)) has been developed to include a greater range of documents and information about the standardization of geographical names.

- This has started to facilitate the distribution of papers in advance of the UNGEGN Sessions.
- The website now lists all documents (over 2000) that have been presented at the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and at UNGEGN Sessions.
- The full texts of many documents are on the UNGEGN website; others have been made available to UNGEGN experts through links to the UN Map Library. In keeping with resolution VII/14 of the Seventh Conference, liaison with the UN Map Library has provided us with many scanned documents from previous sessions and conferences. The valuable assistance of the staff of the UN Map Library in providing this help is most appreciated.
- The reports of the recent UNGEGN Sessions, as well as of UN Conferences, are available on the UNGEGN website as pdf files in the six languages of the UN.

## **2. UNGEGN Working Groups**

UNEGGN has followed up on the Conference resolutions (in particular those from the Eighth UN Conference) at the UNGEGN Sessions and through the structure of the UNGEGN Working Groups.

During the past five years, UNGEGN has been operating 10 working groups, has created a Task Force on Africa and has continued the coordination of toponymic guidelines.

The *Working Groups have been convened as follows:*

- |                                       |                                |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| • Training Courses in Toponymy        | Ferjan Ormeling (Netherlands)  |
| • Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers | Randall Flynn (USA)            |
| • Toponymic Terminology               | Naftali Kadmon (Israel)        |
| • Romanization Systems                | Peeter Päll (Estonia)          |
| • Country Names                       | Leo Dillon (USA)               |
| • Publicity and Funding               | David Munro (UK)               |
| • Evaluation and Implementation       | Ki-Suk Lee (Republic of Korea) |
| • Exonyms                             | Milan Orožen Adamic (Slovenia) |

- Pronunciation /Peter Jordan (Austria)
- Promotion of Indigenous and Minority Group Names Doñall Mac Giolla Easpaig  
Brian Goodchild (Australia)  
/William Watt (Australia)

*Task Force on Africa:*

- At first convened by Ridwan Brimah (Ghana), then the initiative taken over by Brahim Atoui (Algeria)

*Toponymic Guidelines for map and other editors, for international use:*

- Convenor: Isolde Hausner (Austria)

All the working groups have met formally and informally at the time of the two UNGEGN sessions, and most have held special gatherings in between. Some meetings have been joint sessions with other working groups or with one of the UNGEGN divisions.

### **3. UNGEGN Divisions**

Since 2002, UNGEGN has supported grass roots standardization work through 22 divisions. Some are very active, meeting regularly and undertaking joint projects between countries of the divisions; others, however, have been less active and have been unable to address the many questions of geographical names standardization in the countries of their division.

In keeping with the resolution to hold joint meetings for divisions and working groups, several divisions (e.g. Baltic Division, Dutch- and German-speaking Division, Romano-Hellenic Division and East Central and South-East Europe Division) have organized such cooperative ventures. Other divisions have met in conjunction with training courses (e.g. Arabic Division, French-speaking Division), conferences and other related activities (e.g. Norden Division, Asia South-East Pacific South-West Division, USA/Canada Division, Asia South West (other than Arabic)). Some divisions have met several times and involved members from nearby divisions in their meetings (e.g. Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia) or orchestrated training courses for member states (e.g. Africa South Division).

The Latin America Division has moved forward to restore activity to the Division and efforts have been made to rejuvenate some divisions in Africa (e.g. Africa West, Africa Central, Africa East). In addition, it is anticipated that a Portuguese-speaking Division will be formed in the near future.

#### **4. Communication and information distribution**

During the past five years, UNGEGN has followed up on a publication plan to distribute material for those just starting up, of already involved with, a standardization programme. The Statistics Division at UNHQ has guided the publication process for:

- The *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names ...* English version (2006), with other language versions to be completed in 2007.
- The *Technical reference manual for the standardization of geographical names ...* English version (2007)
- *Geographical names as vital keys ....* (a brochure aimed at surveying, mapping and GIS institutions, to be published in 2007)
- Two issues each year of the *UNGEGN Information Bulletin* (formerly *UNGEGN Newsletter*)

Several Working Groups have been involved with the preparation of these documents (in particular the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, the Working Group on Romanization, the Working Group on Country Names, and the Working Group on Publicity and Funding). The efforts of all experts who have contributed to these publications are most gratefully acknowledged.

In 2007, the Working Group on Exonyms arranged for the publication of *Exonyms and the international standardization of geographical names* (as Wiener Osteuropa Studien, 24), a collection of articles addressing various issues on this subject.

The Working Group on the Promotion of Indigenous and Minority Group Names has gathered nationally supplied information and, to promote such activities, has produced a summary report together with an interactive world map providing the locations discussed. This initiative addresses resolution VIII/1.

In addition, the UNGEGN website ([unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/)) has seen much development, to provide a portal for information on UNGEGN and the Conferences, access to documents, and links to national authorities and national databases. Major updates are made at least twice a year. The two new manuals, the *Glossary of terms for the standardization of geographical names* (2002), the earlier UNGEGN brochure *Consistent use of place names* (2001), and the *UNGEGN Information Bulletin* are all available on the UNGEGN website.

#### **5. Addressing shortcomings: Task Force on Africa**

One of the main thrusts during the five-year span has been for UNGEGN to focus attention on the African countries, in many of which work and progress on geographical names standardization has been minimal.

At the 2004 UNGEGN session, Peter Raper (South Africa) was invited, as former UNGEGN Chair, to make a presentation on issues relative to Africa. A task force for Africa was then established and is now led by Brahim Atoui (Algeria).

Training courses have been offered in Sudan (2003), in Mozambique (2004 and 2006) and in Tunisia (2007); support has also been provided for African participation at a colloque offered in Paris (2007). Geographical names were included on the agenda for CODI V held in Adis Abeba in 2007 under the umbrella of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and a proposal that the next UNGEGN Session be hosted in Africa was passed. The African Organization for Cartography and Remote Sensing (AOCRS), the Regional Center of Remote Sensing for North African States (CRTEAN), the Arabic Division, the Africa South Division and the French-speaking Division, together with the UNGEGN Working Group on Toponymic Training, have recently contributed to the revitalization process in Africa.

In the past few months, efforts have been made in the Africa West Division to ascertain the level of geographical names standardization activity in the countries of the Division, with a view to re-invigorating the work of the Division. In addition, arrangements are being made with the International Geographical Union to hold sessions on geographical naming, particularly in relation to Africa, at the 31<sup>st</sup> International Geographical Congress to be held in Tunis, 12-15 August 2008.

## **6. General comments on progress**

The past five years have certainly brought accelerated growth in digital aspects of geographical names standardization, as well as in the communication of the names information around the world. The documents presented at the past two UNGEGN sessions have provided considerable incite and information on how the challenges of media and globalization are being met in different countries, and how best practices are being developed.

While the handling of issues relating to toponymic databases has been the focus of many documents, a number of papers have reported on progress in the establishment and development of national names authorities. Others have focused on important cultural heritage aspects of names and naming, and the discussion around romanization and exonyms has remained strong.

Much has been accomplished in different parts of the world in the past five years, but clearly much remains to be done in the field of geographical names standardization! No doubt the questions we have been addressing since 1967 will continue to be important, and likely will increase in complexity as geographical names grow as a key entry point into so many digital information systems.

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