Economic and Social Council

**Tenth United Nations Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names**
New York, 31 July-9 August 2012
Item 11 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Toponymic data files and gazetteers: content requirements

The four faces of toponymic gazetteers

Submitted by Australia**

Summary*

Gazetteers compiled by jurisdictional naming authorities have tended to focus on including officially sanctioned names associated with their feature types and location information. These gazetteers have heavily favoured the publication of one name for one place as related to populated places, points of interest and government infrastructure. However, recent times have seen the proliferation of GIS and associated public access to digital maps and there has subsequently been a rise in demand for non-traditional gazetteer information. These types of information requests typically relate to unofficial names (i.e. colloquial, temporal or commercial names) or names which have not yet been officially approved (i.e. the data has been collected and proposed to the national authority, but due to lengthy quality assurance processes will not be published for 6 to 18 months). In addition, location data attributed to features has generally been limited to x and y coordinates, and operational boundaries for areas such as census, postcode and fixed assets have generally not been included in jurisdictional gazetteers.

The report proposes that member States of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names consider developing definitions of gazetteer and data types that encompass the range of location referencing modes in common use. It is suggested that gazetteers be reimagined as having four faces, namely:

• A record of official place naming processes

_____

- A repository of unofficial place names

- A reflection of the cultural associations of place names

- An information delivery mechanism

It is recognized that there is some overlap in these aspects, but as they are considered, insights can be gained into the structure of gazetteer databases and their potential for being repositories and representatives of a wide variety of geospatial data.

Within the resolutions and policies of the Group of Experts and indeed within the wider research literature, there do not appear to be commonly accepted definitions for the terms "official" and "unofficial" as they relate to gazetteers and their data. Rather, there seems to be a proliferation of the terminology used to define both the types of data which are incorporated into gazetteers and the gazetteers themselves ranging from "official" and "authorized" to "unofficial" and "informal". In this regard, an outline of the different terminology has been sketched as an attempt to commence the conversation on how gazetteers and their data can be defined.

The report lays out a rationale for why national naming authorities should be considering increasing the scope of their data collection and approval methods, to focus not only on traditional official name data but also on meeting end user requirements for rapid access to information on points of interest and unofficial names. The need for the officially sanctioned gazetteers to be of a high quality in terms of accuracy and completeness of available data is increasing rapidly and if the needs of communities are not met by official entities, other unofficial providers will do so. The member States of the Group of Experts are strongly encouraged to commence the conversation on defining gazetteer and data types with the aim of developing robust definitions and increasing the relevance of the systems we currently maintain. There is potential to expand the scope of official data collection and name approval methods in order to allow national gazetteers to incorporate both official and unofficial names, which fulfil the information requirements of communities.

———————————