

## The geographical name game

*With tens of thousands of unrecorded place names, and variations aplenty, the question “Where are you from?” may not be so easy to answer after all.*



The oldest city of South Africa is Cape Town. It is also Kaapstad, eKapa, Le Cap, Kapstadt and Kapkaupunki. Which of these names is correct?

Which are in current use? Place names may vary due to language, Romanization methods, even politics, but successful communication depends on an appropriate use of names on maps, in the media, and in legal documents. At the ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which opens on 21 August in New York, experts from around the world will gather for ten days to discuss the myriad challenges of promoting accuracy and consistency in nomenclature.

While it is tempting to think of the globe as Terra Cognita, in fact many places have names known only to the local people, or are so new that gazetteers and cartographers have a hard time keeping up. In China alone, rapid development is generating more than 20,000 new urban names every year. Meanwhile, in nearby Indonesia about half of the 17,000 islands making up the archipelago have not yet been labeled on maps. The government has had to embark on an intensive field survey, visiting each of the islands to ask locals how they refer to their own home.

More than a curiosity, lives and livelihoods depend on knowledge of local geography and availability of a reliable toponymy to match. In Pakistan, provision of humanitarian aid to the victims of the 2005 earthquake was delayed by lack of information on inhabited areas, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Not surprisingly, OCHA has expressed the need for a global toponymic database to address urgent humanitarian needs. Tensions can also arise from changes in usage linked to political developments, boundary changes, or recognition of local customs that call common toponyms into question.

The need for reliable, authoritative and accessible toponymic data, which is common to each of these examples, provides “great opportunities, but for most, also many challenges and issues,” recognizes Helen Kerfoot, Chairperson of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names which will meet on 20 and 31 August, immediately before and after the main event. The Conference and the expert group meeting will give participants a chance to discuss problems of authorizing, storing, and disseminating geographic information in an easy to access and timely fashion. About 300 representatives from 100 countries are expected to take part, among them diplomats, senior officials from national surveying and mapping institutions, scientists and academics.

### Asserting national authority

Experts will deal with the technical problems involved in the domestic standardization of geographical names, and will prepare draft recommendations for the procedures, mainly linguistic, that might be followed in the standardization of their own names by individual countries. But what does “standardization of geographical names” mean? According to the UN Group of Experts Manual for the National Standardization of Geographical Names, published by DESA, determining and selecting the best or most appropriate place names in their written form is the answer. “Standardization means being consistent, having a systematic approach in recognizing names used within countries, an approach based on formalized rules,” says Ms. Kerfoot. These rules can be modified with experience and as needs evolve.

A nation’s people regard geographical names as an essential part of their cultural heritage. The UN experts recommend creating a national names authority in each country to establish and record official place names, rather than relying on nongovernmental or international map-makers, atlas publishers and gazetteers. According to Ms. Kerfoot, “Having a single names authority avoids overlapping work among government departments which do not have a clear authority to say how a name should be spelled.” And, she adds, such authorities could play an important part in preserving the oral tradition of indigenous people and minority groups.

That said, the conditions for standardization will depend on the resources and organization of each government, the number of languages involved and the cultural or political relationships within and among regions of a country. No two countries with

effective programmes approach standardization in the same way and their organization, principles, policies and procedures vary widely. According to the standardization manual, no one method is preferred to than another as long as each sets “consistently written names that are nationally accepted and agree with local spoken and written usage.”

Fifty countries currently have some form of national authority on names. In some cases, decisions on names are handled by national governments, while in others provinces or states may register official names under the guidance of a central committee, as is the case in Australia, Canada, and Malaysia. National standardization is the cornerstone on which international standardization is based, Ms. Kerfoot reminds us. “Clearly a UN goal is that every country have such a mechanism in place and can provide their names data for international use.”

Standardization of geographical names in developed countries certainly did not occur overnight. It is an expensive proposition requiring a great deal of time and effort. Yet developing countries do not need to walk the same path, says Yacob Zewoldi, head of the Statistical and Geographic Conferences Unit in the Statistics Division in DESA. They can study the experiences of other countries to find shortcuts, and they can take advantage of the support provided by the UN Group of Experts. Mozambique, which has recently hosted two training courses on geographical names with the assistance of the expert group, is a case in point.

### The role of names in development

In Mozambique, some place names are written in Portuguese but not in the local language, marked in the wrong place, or not marked on maps at all, a situation that is common in low-income countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Given the continent’s 2,000 languages and dialects and limited government budgets, standardization of geographical names is seriously hampered “either by lack of resources, lack of expertise or both,” says Mr. Zewoldi.

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are obviously more pressing needs than a set of good maps, but standardization of place names is crucial for air travel, road transport, and inter-jurisdictional exchange, all preconditions for expanded trade, which can, under the right conditions, spur development and fight poverty.

“For the good of humanity, toponyms certainly do not rank as highly as clean water or health,” says Ms. Kerfoot, “but do contribute to the well-being of society if they are well known, unambiguous and can contribute to the infrastructure for rural and urban planning, risk management, postal and services delivery, mine removal, etc.” Geographical names are pivotal to presenting the practical results of spatial data analysis and interpretation in such areas as tsunami warnings, danger of forest fires, loss of natural habitat and climate change vulnerability. In all those cases, clear place names are essential to the planning and provision of emergency and humanitarian aid.

### Jumping on board the internet

Today, the massive use of internet and other multimedia tools to disseminate information and growing demand on cartographic services face experts on geographical names with important challenges. “Although technological advances in communications have given us a great boost,” acknowledges Ms. Kerfoot, “the new environment is certainly demanding: there are bigger expectations to meet.” Geographical names can now be shared and used around the world. Last year, an estimated one hundred million people across the globe used Google Earth, a virtual planet drawn from the superimposition of images obtained from satellite imagery and aerial photography on a three-dimensional globe within a geographic information system.

Three years ago, the Group of Experts on Geographical Names recommended the development of a global data storage system to collect, manage and disseminate names of countries and major cities in the world with a population of more than 100,000. As a result, the Statistics Division in DESA, which houses the secretariat of the Expert Group, will be releasing a global database prototype at the conference in a multilingual, multi-scriptural and geo-referenced format. In the database, names for places in the world link to a map, so that information on names, spelling and pronunciation can be accessed, including links to standardized forms. Websites of national governments can have links to the new UN database, providing countries and general users with a reliable and consistent source of information on geographical names.

Yet this much broader audience only enhances the need to give a greater impulse to the standardization process, stresses Ms. Kerfoot. The relatively unreliable nature of place names on the web is a

weak point. For this reason, the Group of Experts on Geographical Names is working with Google Earth to ensure that reliability on geographical names is at the heart of the services offered by this application. A pilot project between the two is being set in motion.

The UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names is correcting inaccurate place names contained in Google Earth, starting with Finland's geographical names. This country has claimed that about thirty percent of Finnish toponyms in Google Earth contain some kind of error due in large part to the omission of names that have been approved in more than one language (Finnish, Swedish and Saami), and the misrepresentation of characters in the written forms of names in these languages. The Conference on Standardization of Geographical Names will be also hearing a presentation by a representative of Google Earth. "We have to jump on board rather than pretending that Google Earth does not exist," Ms. Kerfoot underlines. "We clearly want to work with them. We do not want geographical names to be the best kept secret, but rather to make them as well known and accessible as possible."

*Complete information on the Conference, and the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names, can be found at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/>.*