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agenda**

**GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL  
NAMES AUTHORITY, STANDARDIZING NAMES AND CREATING ARCHIVES**

**(submitted by H.A.G. Lewis)**

Guidelines for establishing a national geographical names  
authority, standardizing names and creating archives

Corrigenda

- Page 2: third line from end of page: delete comma after "however"
- Page 3: second paragraph fifth line, delete: "the question of"
- Page 4: next to last line: for "proposal" read "proposals"
- Page 6: first paragraph, line 6: for "system" read "systems"  
third paragraph, line 4: insert full stop (period) after  
"original"  
ninth line from the bottom of the page: for "name" read "names"  
for the first word on the line
- Page 8: paragraph 2, third line from end: for "if" read "is"  
paragraph 8, last line: insert "and" between "topographical"  
and "cadastral"
- Page 9: sub paragraph A: for "appreciated" read "appointed"
- Page 14: note 2: second line, for "information file" read "authority  
archive"

Guidelines for establishing a national geographical  
names authority, standardizing names and creating archives

1. Geographical names

A geographical name is a means of identifying, in speech or in writing, a geographical entity located on or beneath the land or water surface of the Earth. The object of the name is to provide an identification of the place or feature to which it pertains but it may also distinguish between one feature and others near to or far removed from it. The name may also indicate some common characteristic shared with other places or features.

It is important to recognise that geographical names are proper names even when their appearance resembles a common noun, an adjective or when the name is in some other way descriptive. Common nouns and adjectives invite translation. Proper names are not truly capable of translation in the same way. Recognition of this important quality of geographical names is fundamental to the general study of geographical names. A geographical name may have an individual form in each of two or more languages. One name may actually be a translation of another name but that does not mean that geographical names may be arbitrarily translated from one language to another or that parts of names should be translated simply to preserve the meaning of the name. On the contrary, the name should be preserved as a name in its own right in each of the languages in which it occurs locally. For the purposes of communication, the name may be transliterated or transcribed but that is not the same as translation.

2. Writing

Geographical names are a part of language and were thus used in speech long before writing became part of communication. There are still areas in the world where geographical names are only spoken and have never been written down.

Writing is the means of communication between those who are too far apart one from another to allow oral communication. Additionally, writing is a means of disseminating information. It is, incidentally, a means of recording and this function of writing is a basic necessity to geographical names. When speech alone is used for communicating geographical names, the transmitted name has a life no longer than the time taken to pronounce it. Its subsequent transmission depends upon how accurately it is received by the listener and how near to the original the name is re-transmitted orally. Writing provides unlimited scope for dissemination among the literate. Unlike speech which is instantaneous and lost to all time the written

word or name once written remains for posterity, so writing confers a degree of permanence and stability never attainable by speech.

Because geographical names are a part of language they tend to change in the same way as language itself changes. When names are not written down they tend to become distorted and corrupted to the point where they are no longer recognisable. This process of change can be seen in the way the same geographical name has a totally different appearance and sound in each of several languages which have all evolved from a common origin. Locally, the change is of no day-to-day importance. As spoken names they are recognisable unambiguously at every stage of their evolution by the local population. As written names they are encapsulated for all time in the form in which they are recorded. Beyond the local area the name may be difficult to assimilate in either spoken or written form.

Writing has two effects, therefore, on geographical names. It allows widespread dissemination but it also gives the recipients a range of names representing some or all of the changes which have occurred over a certain period. Any one of those changes will be of no concern locally, as has been said above, but elsewhere, a variety of names may be in current use, in some cases established by long usage, in others deliberately modified to suit the recipient's language or writing system. It may happen that one of these corrupted or out-of-date forms gains ascendancy over the current local form and replace it. Thus, the act of writing geographical names has conferred, on the one hand, stability and on the other, an instability. Apart from deliberate re-naming or changes in national orthographies, there has been a marked tendency towards more stable geographical names in the past few decades.

### 3. Dissemination of names

The wider a geographical name is distributed, the greater the probability that it will become distorted. That statement is true even when the geographical names are in a single language and the written names are disseminated to only those who speak that language.

Many such names in current use today have been corrupted to the point where the original name is no longer recognisable. Nonetheless, however, corrupted they may be, they are valid in their present forms and there is little merit in attempting to restore them to something like their original form.

Names, particularly those which are descriptive or commemorative, are often repeated many times as geographical names of places sometimes quite close together as well as other places far apart. In order to distinguish one from another it is frequently the practice to add some clarifying element, upper, lower; greater, lesser; higher, lower; first, second, third; old, new. The geographical name comprises the specific element plus the qualifying element, the two together making up a single name unit constituting the true name. Alternatively the name of a river or a regional or administrative name may be used to supplement the specific name element to give the place or feature a less ambiguous means of reference. The full name in this case too comprises both the specific name and its qualifying element.

Names of the type just described are often used in every-day reference without the qualifying element. If the context is clear, no doubt will be raised as to which place is intended. If there is no means of supplying intuitively the qualifying element there can be no certainty as to which place is intended. In other words, some may be able to resolve the question of which is the place in question others may never be able to do so without additional and amplifying information.

When geographical names are widely disseminated they become subject to other fundamental changes. The farther away from the named place or feature the more likely it is that the name will be applied to the wrong place or feature or to some part of it instead of the whole. The same name can be taken by one person as applying to a different area, place or feature from that understood by another. As was stated earlier, geographical names are part of language and are subject to distinct and separate interpretations in the habits of one speech as compared with the customs or traditions in other languages.

Such are the problems generated when geographical names are used outside the immediate community in which they originate geographically. Added to which is the fact that local people may not feel the need to allocate names to certain topographic or regional features whereas others find the need for names absolutely imperative. Add to all the above, the vastly more complex process of transferring names from one language to another and the whole discordance of geographical names begins to be revealed.

#### 4. Transfer between writing systems

In transferring names from one writing system to another there has always been conflict between the urge to recapture the pronunciation of the name and the desire

to reproduce the equivalent of its written form as nearly as possible. Throughout history names have been derived by both methods. The results can be seen in historical cartography and also in literature. Names derived in both ways have sometimes become deeply embedded in national culture achieving a measure of permanency in consequence. We refer to some of those names as exonyms, foreign versions of true names. In many cases, however, the so-called exonym has a greater validity than its original counterpart by virtue of its widespread, perhaps universal, currency or its convenience in respect of its pronunciation or because it is casier to commit to memory and writing. Such names are not easily extirpated. Their roots are too deep in the national culture whereas the original name is not. When a name is so well established it is unjustly described as an exonym. It is a genuinely alternative name, established by tradition, and more aptly called a traditional name. One serious risk in trying to regularize, or standardize names, is the temptation to try to restore ancient names out of character with current usage and less convenient in practice than the names they are replacing.

Change is not always beneficial. It may be disruptive to the point where disorder is created out of all proportion to the advantages gained. If there is no real advantage ensuing from the change, the proposed change should be resisted. Stability is of fundamental importance in geographical names. A geographical name is more than a case study in onomastics. It is, or can be, of importance in administration, in legislation, in education, in literary reference, in cadastral and topographic mapping and above all, in local usage.

##### 5. Standardization of Geographical Names

A first step towards a stable toponymy is the regularizing of geographical names. That involves removing ambiguities; reducing or eliminating variant forms of names; resolving doubts about location and extent of the named place or feature; establishing its administrative status in relation to its topographic application; correcting errors made in dealing with the generic element in the whole geographical name; in the case of multilingual areas determining which language has precedence. Resolving questions of this kind is a preliminary to ultimate standardization.

Standardization of geographical names becomes a matter of concern when there is uncertainty about the correct form of the name; when variant forms of names lead to doubt about the identity and true location of the place or feature; when names are treated inconsistently. A combination of such factors led to the first proposal for the standardization of geographical names.

Within a local community such variant forms of names and lack of uniformity in other respects can generally be tolerated because the full circumstances tend to be known. For those not informed on the local factors the doubt and confusion are not tolerable. The farther away from the local community, the greater tends to be the inability to resolve the inconsistencies and the corresponding desire to remove them. Thus the pressures for international standardization, for arriving at a uniform way of writing geographical names, tended to divert attention from questions involving national standardization.

At the very first United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in Geneva in 1967, the Conference resolved that international standardization would be based on national standardization.

National standardization is by no means as easily achieved as is sometimes thought. The preparation of "toponymic guidelines" promises to reveal some of the complexities in national standardization. In creating a national names authority and planning a national standardization programme the differences in concept between international standardization and the measures required for national standardization have to be understood fully, especially where questions arise concerning the transfer of names from one writing system to another.

#### 6. Transliteration and transcription

It is impossible to render accurately the sounds of one language in the writing system of another language without ascribing special phonetic values to the elements of the writing system or adding special letters or characters. When geographical names are transferred from one writing system to another the process involves the creation of a new name to add to the name that existed before. This is true even though the new name may correspond closely or exactly with the original name. That is simply an indication that the two writing systems are compatible for that particular name. The pronunciation, however, will be very different in each case. A name like Leningrad, for instance, is an accurate letter-to-letter conversion of the Russian. This spelling is common to French, English and German amongst other languages. Yet the pronunciation is far from identical in the three languages and none approximates to the Russian pronunciation. The disparity between Russian pronunciation and that of the three languages is much greater in the case of other Russian names which are similarly transliterated identically into all three.

For purposes of international standardization of geographical names a long-

established principle, accepted by the United Nations Conferences for the romanization of geographical names predicates that a romanization system adopted will do no more than give the letters, diagraphs etc which correspond as nearly as possible with the phonetic value of the letters of another alphabet without attempting to arrive at an approximate native pronunciation of the name. Thus if the romanization system can be agreed and they are applied to names already standardized nationally, then internationally agreed standardization will have been accomplished. Ideally a strict letter-to-letter conversion would be made.

In considering the transfer of roman alphabet languages into non-roman alphabets no such principles have been enunciated. Yet they are relevant. When national standardization is considered in multi-lingual nations, the enunciation of principles is less simple. Geographical names which are written in a lengthy alphabet with complex sounds represented by diagraphs or trigraphs and which also contains many irregular pronunciations is not easily transliterated into a shorter alphabet, covering a relatively small range of sounds. Transliteration, strictly speaking, that is to a letter-to-letter transfer, may be less desirable than transcription based on syllable-to-syllable conversion.

Transfer to a language written in a syllabary as opposed to an alphabet requiring the conversion of syllables to syllables may prove impossible without gross distortion phonetically. Conversions of this kind depend entirely on the capacity of the recipient writing system to accommodate the phonetics of the original syllable to syllable conversion may then prove impossible without gross distortion in pronunciation. A choice then has to be made either to increase the basic number of syllables and devise new characters to represent them or to accept that the converted names may be considered as not satisfactory equivalents of the original name. In that case, standardization would be in terms of the original alphabetic form of the name with the syllabic conversion representing something rather like an exonym, a conventional name devised for the syllabic language. In such an event, international standardization could be in terms of the alphabetic rendering of the names with the syllabic form given as an alternative subordinate name. That would be a departure from the frequently voiced opinion that each place should have only one name for the purposes of standardization. This goal, by the way, is not always attainable in national standardization, the question then arises as to how far it is achievable in international standardization. An alternative course of action in the case in question may be to have two separate bases for standardization, a national standard in the form of a syllabic rendering of the names with the alphabetic



version retained as a local subordinate name but serving as the base for international standardization. In this way the name finally taken for international standardization will be nearer the original, local form of the name than the syllabic rendering.

#### 7. Languages with no writing system

For unwritten languages, it is customary to look for an alphabet which when supplemented by modified letters and diacritical signs will represent the consonants and vowels of the unwritten language. This again, is by no means as straightforward in practice as it appears in theory. A simple imitation of the sounds is made when names are collected in the field by those who lack a knowledge of the unwritten language. Such recordings may be scorned by linguists especially those who know the unwritten language. Linguists who are specialists in the phonetic rendering of such languages would construct a special alphabet; as mentioned above with modified letters and diacritical signs. The modified letters etc may prove to be too alien to public taste to be used in practice. In that case the modified letters tend to be dropped from use and normal, unmodified letters, less suitable linguistically are used instead. Local or national pronunciation may be unable to accommodate the sophisticated academic rendering. Suppose the letters "oc" or "ee" are replaced by the more elegant "u" or "i" respectively. The word ending - "up" would be pronounced by English speakers almost invariably as - up' with the vowel short instead of long. Likewise the name "Seeb" rendered as "Sib" would be written popularly as "Sib" and would likewise tend to be pronounced with a short vowel instead of a long vowel. Again, a popular pronunciation would have been generated quite contrary to what was intended. One must, therefore, ask which is the preferred solution, that which seeks to educate the public perhaps with no hope of success or that which finds favour with popular usage but is held in disfavour by those who are linguistically more refined?

These simple illustrations are not cited for the purpose of advocating one solution in preference to another but simply to draw attention to practical applications of names work which are sometimes overlooked. The essential point is the indisputable fact that quite crude systems may result in better popular readings of names than linguistically more elegant systems. The more elegant systems may lead to incorrect pronunciations becoming the standard.

#### 8. General considerations

All that has been written so far concerns some of the general considerations which

must be taken into account when a national names authority begins its work of establishing a national archive. There are other general factors of a wholly practical kind.

Long names and compound names consisting, for example, of the name and its administrative location are difficult to handle in text but are especially troublesome in mapping and gazetteers. Maps are important to geographical names since they show the location and extent of the named feature in a way not easily matched in other forms of documentation. Long names of any kind are anathema to the cartographer. The longer the name, the more space is taken up and the fewer other names can be accommodated. If a generic term is combined with the specific element to which it applies and the result is a multi-syllabic name, the name cannot necessarily be handled cartographically. In that case contractions or abbreviations may be called for.

#### 8. Names collection

What is the best method of collecting names? Which names are to be collected.

Field collection of names is rarely carried out by experienced linguists. They are usually collected by field surveyors in the course of their surveys particularly at the field completion stage for topographical maps. How far linguists can be used depends on the linguistic structure of a country, the number of linguists available for the work and the economics of employing persons of so specialized a character in addition to the field staff engaged on topographical cadastral mapping.

#### 9. Administrative names

It may generally be assumed that the major administrative structure of the country is determined at national level and the names of the major divisions are those handed down for use by all departments. In certain cases the administrative names are retained in a conventional form and avoid the dislocation of government which a change for purely academic purposes may create.

In some countries, the names requiring approval by central authority include street names, road names and the names of minor urban districts like small housing estates or blocks of buildings. In other countries names of this kind are left entirely to the local administrative organization. In those circumstances, the names are not subject to national approval and so do not fall within the scope of national standardization.

## 10. National Names Authority

### A. Initiating action

National names authorities have almost always come into being as the result of the work of a study group or working party appreciated to consider the need for such a body and decide the scope of its work.

### B. Mapping Agencies

Because field surveys and mapping are inextricably involved in names, it has been customary to make the names authority part of the national mapping organization. That is not always the case, however. Wherever the body concerned with names is located administratively, it must, of necessity, work very closely with those engaged in national mapping. Mapping programmes go hand-in-hand with economic and industrial development. Completion of maps must not be unduly delayed by names standardization. The process of name collection and approval must, therefore, be integrated with the map production programme. At the same time, it must be said, the names which appear on maps should, as far as possible, be in their finally approved form.

### C. Linguists

Linguists are important but they may not be required to form part of the national names authority. Their input may be perfectly adequate if provided through a separate advisory body. Much depends on the linguistic composition of the country. Linguists acting in concert may work more effectively in a purely linguistic forum provided their conclusions and recommendations are properly taken into account by the names authority.

### D. Historians and archivists

Creation of a national names data base will rarely entail the abandonment of all previously existing names. Geographical names are the vestiges of those who have gone before. They are part of the history and the culture of a country. National names archives should begin with the collection and correlation of all existing and past names. It will not be necessary to have a number of historians and archivists serving on the national names authority. A representative of those who are expert in names, past and present, may with merit be a permanent member. There are two particular functions which this group of experts can fulfill. They can advise on commemorative naming and prevent frivolous eponymous naming. As a general principle, the names of living persons should not be used in geographical names.

#### E. Government officials

Officials representing some or all of the departments responsible for the under-mentioned may serve as members of the national names authority.

1. Transport
2. Postal service
3. Internal affairs
4. Defence
5. National population census
6. Topographic mapping
7. Cadastral mapping, if separate from topographic mapping
8. Hydrographic surveying
9. Environment
10. Agriculture and Land-use.
11. Tourism
12. National parks

#### F. Private bodies

Representation from private organizations and the public at large may also be considered advantageous. Examples are:-

1. Universities and other academic bodies
2. Cultural and historical societies
3. Conservation groups
4. The general public itself

#### G. Regional or provincial offices

Linguistic or administrative considerations may require state, regional or provincial offices either autonomous within their area or subordinate to a national authority. The composition of an office of that kind will be decided by the type of representation outlined above for the national names authority.

#### H. Status and functions of a National Names Authority

A National Names Authority may be a body which has full legal status with the power to decree which names are approved for official use. It may, on the other hand, be an advisory body without the power of sanctioning the use of names. The following questions need to be addressed:

1. Will the Authority be established by legal decree?
2. Will it have responsibility for naming?

3. How will its rulings or recommendations be implemented or approved.
4. Under which government department will it serve?
5. Over which names will it have authority? Will the names include major administrative divisions? Will they include street names and similar minor, local names?

I. Suggested title for a National names authority

Depending on its constitution and function, the national names authority could be the following:

- a. Board on Geographic Names
- b. Permanent Committee on Geographical Names
- c. National Geographical Names Authority.
- d. Department for Geographical Nomenclature. (This type of title is applicable when the names authority is part of the national mapping organization or some other body).

J. Support staff

In order to implement the decisions of the names authority a permanent technical support staff will be required. The size of this staff depends on the magnitude of the work load. Their function will be to acquire data; maintain archives; conduct research; issue guidance on names questions; implement decisions; act as intermediary between the names authority and official and private bodies as well as the general public; assess the impact of names policy and names decisions.

11. Action to be taken as a preliminary to standardization.

- A. Assess the adequacy of sources of names.
- B. Extract names which are adequate for standardizing.
- C. Review the inter-relationship between official national languages and the relationship of the national language (or languages) to the local languages.
- D. Where different alphabets or scripts are used determine the standard method of writing each of them.

- E. Where a language has definite or indefinite forms decide which will be used for geographical names.
- F. Where two or more dialects are in current use determine whether one or other prevails and whether accord should be taken of the others.
- G. Where two languages have equal official status decide how each will be used, the limits to which each applies or whether both are equally applicable.
- H. Attempt if possible to work towards the goal of one name for one place or feature.
- I. Review the national orthography and assess its suitability for geographical names taking account of the following:
- a. Are there letters or characters which are difficult typographically or which are inclined to be mis-read?
  - b. Are there letters or diacritical signs which are difficult to apply to maps?
  - c. Is the national orthography suitable for the writing of minority language name?
  - d. Are new or special alphabets required?
  - e. Consider the effects of the change in orthography or new forms of geographical names on
    - i. Administration (national and local)
    - ii. the nation as a whole
    - iii. education
    - iv. the local community
    - v. external communication
- J. Establish a naming policy bearing in mind:
- a. change is not conducive to standardization.
  - b. commemorative naming should be used with caution because it may prove to be ephemeral. It should not involve the use of names of persons now living.
  - c. new names have to be devised and principles of naming are therefore required.
  - d. new names and approved existing names need validation and promulgation.

How will that be done remembering that maps take a long time to produce and may not reach all interested parties?

- e. lengthy names are difficult to handle in names lists, gazetteers and maps.
- f. generic terms need specific rules.
- g. Ultimately, names will be handled by computer.
- h. rules for abbreviations will be required.
- i. rules for capitalization and hyphenation may also be required.
- j. rules for alphabetizing names or arranging them in script order are necessary.

## 12. Names Archives

### A. Records files

Record files on geographical names will contain:

- a. the history of the name beginning with the first name known or the first relevant name (see below)
- b. administrative status with date of enactment.
- c. subordinate or higher administrative authorities.
- d. changes of name or administrative status with dates and authorization.
- e. language in which name is written.
- f. other language forms where more than one language is currently in use.
- g. Population where applicable or extent of feature.
- h. limit of area or extent for features or units of areal or linear character.

Note: How much of the history of the name is to be retained in the national names authority archives will depend on the state of the toponymy from the linguistic point of view and the length and intricacy of the history of settlement. In Europe, generally, only recent history is relevant to the national names archive. The rest is more appropriately left to the realm of history and onomastics. Within the national names authority, research into onomastics and the history of names is only warranted in those cases where the names are unsatisfactory from the linguistic standpoint. It must be remembered that a national geographical names archive in the present context is an up-to-date and comprehensive inventory of contemporary toponymy.

## B. Card files

Card files are required as well as record files. Three types of card may be employed.

### a. Basic card

A basic names card will contain:

- i. Name
- ii. Description (type of feature including coded designation to be used in names lists and gazetteers, for example, populated place (PPL))
- iii. coordinates of latitude and longitude
- iv. grid coordinates
- v. elevation (where appropriate)
- vi. authority for the name
- vii. map series with sheet number
- viii. reference number of records file
- ix. reliability of the name
- x. names in other local languages or alternative national language.

Note 1. The authority for the name may be a state, provincial or county office where detailed names records are held.

2. Reference number of the records file may be the file in the national names information file or the state, province etc files.

3. Reliability refers to the evaluation of field or documentary evidence.

### b. Supplementary card files

Supplementary file cards will give more detailed information on administrative status, reference to enactment of the name decrees, relevant high-lights of history (if necessary), amplification of linguistic accuracy, error in geographical location, population etc.

### c. Map files

Map files are created to record the names as they appear on each major map series. There will be a card for each scale. Coordinates will be those of the name rather than the position of the feature to which it refers. Map files give the type-face and size of type used. Feature designation is coded. The whole file forms the base for



computer-assisted cartography. It will be prepared for computer filing, sorting and output. It may be prepared specially for the computer data bases or it may be generated from them.

### 13. Conclusion

This document has been written with the object of indicating, in general terms, matters which relate to the creation of a national geographical names authority and an associated geographical names archive. There can be no clear and firm directive on how either is to be formed when the subject is of world-wide extent with extremes in many senses to be covered. There are, for example, large federated states where each component is almost or wholly a self-contained entity. There are large and small multilingual countries and at the other extreme large and small monolingual countries. In some countries, the geographical names are very stable, in others the names are subject to continual change. Even the alphabets and writing systems undergo wholesale change or modifications. In all those circumstances it is not possible to say "This is the way to do it". The most that can be done is to draw attention to the pitfalls and show the general road to be taken.