
United Nations
Group of Experts on
Geographical Names

Working Paper
No. 82

Eighteenth Session
Geneva, 12-23 August 1996

Item 20
of the Provisional Agenda

OTHER MATTERS

Problems attached to the practising
of the Place Name Law in Norway

Submitted by Botolv Helleland, Norway

**Problems attached to the practicing
of the Place-Name Law in Norway
(Applies to national standardization)
Submitted by *Botolv Helleland*, Norway
Eighteenth Session of UNGEGN, Geneva 12-23. August 1996**

1. Introduction

The Place-Name Act was passed by the Norwegian Parliament on 18 May 1991 and came into force on 1 July 1991. The regulations of the Law were laid down by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs on 5 July 1991, with amendments on 14 October 1993. The Place-Name Law has thus been in operation for over five years and it is time to look into how well it is working. Next year the Ministry of Cultural Affairs is to effect an evaluation of the Law.

2. The Main points of the Place-name Law.

The Place-Name Law applies to the choice of and use of the standardized forms of the place-names in official contexts. The aim of the Law can be summarized in two main points:

(1)

Place-names are historical features and the orthography should as far as possible reflect the historical origin and the traditional local pronunciation, at the same time as the current principles of spelling are heeded.

(2)

When the spelling of a place-name has been decreed it should be used by all official bodies.

The regulations give more detailed specifications of the rules for the standardization of place-names. In order to put the Law into practice a number of Place-Name Offices with consultant functions have been set up, four for Norwegian place-names at the universities of Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, and Tromsø, and one for the Sami and Finnish place-names in Northern Norway at the Sami College in Guovdagaidnu.

The official body which is responsible for the site/object in question makes a decision on the spelling of the name in consultation with the appropriate Place-Name Office and after a hearing in the local community. The Mapping Authority determines the spelling of the majority of place-names, for instance of names of natural features and of farm names. According to the Place-Name Law the Mapping Authority or other authorities or organizations propose changes in the spelling of names which they believe is being used in an incorrect form. If the Place-Name Office agrees to the proposed change it will normally be effected. The proposed change may be rejected if the consultants at the Place-Name Office find it to be against the Place-Name Law, or the change can be enforced by the body which proposed it against the advice of the Place-Name Office. Such cases happen when the two sides act on different interpretations of the Law. In cases where there is an appeal against a name change the losing part can present the case to the appeal body for place-names who has the final decision.

3. Practical Experience

After five years in use it must be said that the Law has only partly functioned according to its intentions. There are a number of conditions which make it difficult to put the Law into practice:

(1)

The number of names to be dealt is enormous. The Place-name Offices cannot deal with cases speedily because each case requires very careful processing with cross-checks and hearings. The responsible authorities also frequently have difficulty in keeping pace with the numbers and the result is that place-name cases remain pending at various levels in the system.

(2)

The Law and its regulations are not precise enough. Phrases like "as a rule" and "can be used" leave openings for different interpretations. In practice place-name consultants and lawyers may see different aspects of a rule as being decisive.

(3)

Public authorities or individuals within such bodies are sometimes reluctant to act on place-name decisions especially when these involve a change of established spellings. In particular there has been a reluctance to use Sami and Finnish place-names in multilingual areas in the North of Norway.

(4)

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs does not have the power or resources to take action against bodies which neglect to put into use the revised forms of place-names.

Despite the weaknesses the Place-Name Law is an important instrument in the work of standardizing Norwegian place-names based on linguistic and historical consideration. An additional consequence of the use of the Law is that the majority of ordinary people have become more aware of the standardization process and of place-names in general, which must be seen as beneficial.

Can the Place-Name Law be improved?

In order to improve the practical implementation of the Law a number of measures can be taken:

Increase the resources of the Place-Name Offices,

Increase the information about the Law and the standardization process available to public authorities and to the general public,

Clarify and define any imprecise points in the Law and its regulations,

The authorities which make decisions on the standardization of place-names should be willing to have the courage to follow up the advices of the Place-Name Offices.

Public bodies and private organizations, firms and individuals should be more

willing to use the forms of names which have been determined according to the Law.

4. Place-Name Conservation

As mentioned above one of the intentions of the Law was that it should help to conserve the nation's place-name heritage. However, the Law contains no direct statement about place-name conservation, unlike the proposed Swedish equivalent law. Nevertheless it appears that many people are concerned about the correct use of place-names, for example that names should not be moved or used of places that have no previous connection with the name. There are many examples of traditional names which sound good being used in business, for example tourist facilities or housing estates. Many people have objected to this and have suggested that the Place-Name Law be extended to include not only the orthography of names but also their usage.

Another area where place-names are at risk is the widespread revision of addresses in towns and villages. The majority of local councils have revised the addresses in their area using as a basis the through roads and streets. This has reduced the number of farm names in official addresses and they are now in danger of being used less regularly if not forgotten.

Modern society requires convenience and efficiency in communication, which can conflict with traditional place-name usage and thus also with the conservation of an important part of the national heritage. It is important to keep a watchful eye on the situation and to bring about any necessary measures to prevent the loss of place-names. This point of view should be taken into consideration when the Place-Name Law is going to be revised.