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English

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**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names  
2019 session**

**New York, 29 April–3 May 2019**

**Item 7 (a) of the provisional agenda \***

**National and international standardization of geographical  
names: names collection, office treatment, national authorities,  
features beyond a single sovereignty and  
international cooperation**

## **National standardization of geographical names: what has been done so far and suggestions on how the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names could facilitate further progress**

Submitted on behalf of the UNGEGN Bureau\*\*

Summary:

One of the key roles of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names since its first meeting has been to encourage and facilitate the establishment and continuity of national names authorities within States Members of the United Nations. Each country should take responsibility for the standardization of the written forms and applications of geographical names for features and places within its jurisdiction.

In the full report, the author indicates that, over the course of the 11 United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names, many papers have been presented detailing the work and responsibilities of geographical names authorities and their associated offices. A number of resolutions adopted at the Conferences directly address national standardization, a continuing core area of importance for the Group of Experts. Furthermore, the author points to a number of measures that have been taken by the Group of Experts to encourage and assist the establishment of national names authorities, namely: training (on-site and online courses); developing pertinent documentation (manuals, brochures); providing information on national best practices on the website of the Group of Experts (in the information bulletin or by posting sample national materials); creating a special Task Team for Africa; assisting individual countries through international cooperation; inviting guest speakers to the Conferences and to the sessions of the Group of Experts to promote the practical uses of toponymic standardization; and organizing discussions on standardization at academic conferences.

Indications are provided of progress made over the decades in establishing national names authorities. However, the Group of Experts clearly still has much work to do in order to achieve its goal of each Member State taking responsibility for national names standardization on a continuing basis.

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\* GEGN.2/2019/1

\*\*Prepared by Helen Kerfoot (Canada), former Chair, UNGEGN

As the “new” United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names looks to the future, how will it assess the obstacles to achieving the objective of geographical names standardization? Some suggestions for approaches are put forward, with a view to initiating discussion among experts (and, where appropriate, encouraging cooperation with the working groups of the Group of Experts). Topics proposed include: upgrading and expanding the existing material pertinent to national standardization on the website of the Group of Experts; identifying the principal restrictions experienced by Member States in establishing appropriate national names authorities; determining the best approaches to capacity -building to address differing situations; increasing the awareness of management to the significance of geographical names standardization; leveraging links with other scientific and academic groups to further geographical names standardization; and creating a dedicated group to provide leadership in directing and promoting this aspect of the Group of Expert’s work. Experts will be invited to provide suggestions on how the Group of Experts should try to achieve national standardization of geographical names worldwide, and, in doing so, address a significant component of its mandate in the coming years.

## ***Introduction***

As indicated in the UNGEGN Media Kit, “Geographical names constitute the most widely used reference framework for indicating location”. To avoid ambiguity and confusion, their written forms and their applications need to be clearly defined, or “standardized”. This is basic to accurate and efficient administration and communication - locally, nationally and internationally. An authority established nationally provides savings in resources, it eliminates overlap of work effort between government departments and allows increased operational efficiency. One set of consistent geographical names data can be used cooperatively by government, industry, commerce and education. The benefits can be technical, economic, social and cultural and are practical advantages for emergency services, land registers, road signposting, mapmaking, tourism services, law and order, the media, and all aspects of geographic information management. Not only are these important national uses, but nationally standardized names are also needed internationally. For example, availability and accessibility of standardized names are important for humanitarian relief agencies, for world health statistics, and for addressing natural disasters that recognize no national borders.

From its inception, and based on ECOSOC resolution 715 A (XXVII) of 1959, the Group of Experts has been tasked with providing encouragement and guidance to nations to take responsibility for the standardization and co-ordination of geographical names for features/places in their country and to designate and maintain an organization that includes this mandate.

In the current Guiding Principles of UNGEGN (GEGN2/2019/2), the first aim is stated as “To emphasize the importance of the standardization of geographical names at the national and international levels and to demonstrate the benefits to be derived from such standardization;” while working with the stated objective: “To develop procedures and establish mechanisms for standardization in response to national requirements and particular requests”.

The agendas established for the eleven UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and for the 30 previous sessions of UNGEGN indicate the wide-ranging issues associated with toponymic standardization, including the structure and functioning of national names authorities. All agenda items focus on aspects associated with “standardization”, but an important agenda item included in all eleven Conferences has been: *National standardization*. The core elements<sup>1</sup> have been: Field collection of names, Office treatment of names, and National names authorities.

## ***Documents presented at Conferences and Sessions***

Many useful and insightful papers have been presented at UN Conferences and Sessions by individual countries and are now accessible on the UNGEGN website. Within this framework, interest in the topic of *National standardization* has been high. Over the eleven Conferences, this agenda item has seen 216 papers submitted from 52 countries (19 Europe, 16 Asia and Oceania, 10 Americas, 7 Africa). (In addition, since 1982, 76 papers were presented on *Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors*.)

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<sup>1</sup> Initially gazetteers were included, but by the Third Conference in 1977 a separate agenda item addressed databases and gazetteers; at the Fourth Conference in 1982 *Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors* were added to this agenda item; at the Tenth Conference in 2012, a separate agenda item on Cultural Heritage was added and transferred some of the documents on heritage and cultural issues, and at this First new Session of UNGEGN in 2019 Features beyond a single sovereignty and international cooperation is combined into this agenda item.)

Presentation topics have been varied, but have included iterations on the following key areas of national standardization:

**Field collection of toponyms:** methodology in different countries; written guidelines; marine and island names; data collection; names collection forms; crowd sourcing.

**Office treatment:** naming in bilingual and multilingual areas; written forms of names – spelling, grammar and orthography; guidelines for name proposals; naming guidelines; processing of records; administrative names; minor feature names; street naming; cultural heritage elements; maritime and littoral names; relief features; research; indigenous names; minority names; coding standards; commemorative naming; names for living people; undersea features; effects of spelling reforms; names and maps; reference materials; urban names; status of names; addressing; former names; merging municipalities; commercial naming; non-standardized names; settlement names; name changes.

**National names authorities:** administrative structure; establishing and developing authorities; activities of authorities; examples of authorities; organization of work; principles, policies and procedures; managing programmes; names laws; legal status of names; regional and local committees; strategic plans; processes of standardization; good place name practice; accomplishments and challenges.

This broad spectrum of topics facing national standardization of geographical names stems from resolution I/4 of the First Conference in 1967 (see *Resolutions ...* below). The contents of these various reports have led to the inclusion of examples of good practices being made available on the UNGEGN website, have influenced the content of toponymic training courses offered by UNGEGN, have led to the increased emphasis placed by UNGEGN on cultural issues associated with names standardization, and have directly affected the creation of UNGEGN working groups to address indigenous and minority language names recognition, as well as a Task Team for Africa to promote standardization measures on the continent (see *Supporting ...* below). In addition, every five years, under the agenda item of National standardization, countries have filed “country reports” on their state of national names standardization, thus providing a significant body of valuable reference work over the past 50 years.

### ***Resolutions pertaining to National standardization***

Among the resolutions passed at the eleven conferences from 1967 to 2019, sixteen can be said to refer directly to “national standardization” (see Appendix A). Resolution I/4 from the First Conference covered basics of national standardization that are often quoted many years later. Part A. addresses National Names Authorities and recommends:

“that, as a first step in international standardization of geographical names, each country should have a national geographical names authority:

- (a) consisting of a continuing body, or co-ordinated group of bodies, having clearly stated authority and instructions for the standardization of geographical names and the determination of names standardization policy within the country

Part B addresses Collection of geographical names, Part C Principles of office treatment of geographical names, Part D Multilingual areas, Part E National Gazetteers

Later resolutions addressed a number of issues relating to national names standardization: advocating for financial assistance for field collection and office treatment for developing countries; dissemination of decisions of national authorities; reliability of names data in documents; name changes only being recognized if made by competent national authorities; collection of data by the Secretariat on the structure and functions of national names authorities; urging the establishment of national names authorities; the need to collect and record names, where possible authorizing names in current local usage; preservation of minority and indigenous group culture with respect to toponyms and providing guidelines for their field collection and sharing such experiences; national guidelines on commemorative naming; emphasizing a wider understanding of inherited toponyms with respect to heritage and identity; safeguarding toponyms as intangible cultural heritage through UNESCO; establishing criteria for protecting names for cultural heritage; and discouraging commercialization of geographical names.

These resolutions have certainly influenced the direction of UNGEGN in the development of its working groups to focus on issues of importance to the Group of Experts, and no doubt have influenced individual countries in their progress on national standardization. Endeavours have in the past been taken to evaluate the impact of resolutions on individual countries. However, although some results were issued in W.P. 31 (1989, 14<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN Session) and W.P. 55 (1991, 15<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN session), it remains rather an open question as to which of the resolutions have aided most in the establishment of national names authorities.

### ***Supporting the establishment of national names authorities***

From 1967, it was clearly stated in resolution I/4 that a names authority should have “status, composition, function and procedures ... consistent with the governmental structure of the country”. At all Conferences Member States have reported on these issues and developments in their countries – creating points for discussion, examples of best practices, and a valuable body of reference material.

As indicated in resolution I/4, there is not one way or approach that can be adopted by UNGEGN as the blueprint for creation of a national names authority. For each country, the type of names authority could depend on an array of factors, including government organization, language situations, population distribution, historical records, finances, public involvement, etc.

UNEGN has put forward various possible structures in its publication *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names* (2006). The *Manual* also addresses standardization issues – from programme requirements to field collection, office treatment, decision-making factors for authorizing names, legislation, and social and cultural values. This and other similar materials have been used since 1982 by instructors teaching at 26 UNGEGN training courses organized on all the continents (Africa 14, Asia and Oceania 6, Europe 4, Americas 2). In parallel with UNGEGN, the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) has run toponymy training courses in South and Central America to encourage the administration of geographical names standardization, and they have reported regularly to UNCSGN and UNGEGN.

On-line training courses have been developed to assist with the upgrading of capacity where needed. In French, « Formation et expertise en toponymie dans le monde francophone » is a distance training course created with the support of the Organisation internationale de la francophonie (OIF) (<http://coursfad-public.ensg.eu/course/view.php?id=118>). In English, an on-line toponymy training programme has been created in cooperation with the International Cartographic Association and can be

accessed on the UNGEGN website at [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEgn/docs/\\_data\\_ICAcourses/index.html](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEgn/docs/_data_ICAcourses/index.html). Additionally, UNGEGN compiled and published the *Toponymy Training Manual* in 2017 (<https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEgn/publications.html>) for the benefit of national names authorities and interested individuals.

Also found on the UNGEGN website, the *Information Bulletin* (<https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEgn/bulletin.html>) since its inception in 1988 has carried information relevant on national names authorities. In particular, since 2013 several thematic numbers have focussed on issues such as: *Benefits of geographical names standardization* (no. 29, Nov. 2015), *National names authorities – structures and operations* (no. 51, Nov. 2016), and *Legislation on geographical names* (no. 55, Dec. 2018). Member states have contributed the status and work in their countries on these and other related topics.

In 2004, UNGEGN took steps to improve the situation of geographical names standardization (or lack of it) in Africa, by establishing a Task Team for Africa. The Team has had input into training (as in the above paragraph), has improved relations with United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and cooperated with both UNECA and other regional mapping and environmental management organizations in Africa to develop plans (e.g. Gaborone Action Plan) to improve geographical names standardization in Africa and to include the subject of geographical names in sessions of UNGGIM Africa.

In some cases, assistance has been provided by individual countries, primarily through their international affairs programmes, to developing countries. Such examples have been seen to support projects that involve geographical names as significant components of other projects ... for example, national topographic mapping, elimination of personnel mines. Involved in these projects is the aim of establishing a national names authority to take on responsibility for toponymic standardization.

In addition, UNGEGN experts have made presentations and organized panel discussions on national toponymic authorities at technical and academic conferences over the years. For example, on the UNGEGN website (<https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEgn/naa.html> - Presentations) presentations from a discussion on toponymic authorities at ICOS XIV in Barcelona in 2011 can be accessed, providing the situation on national standardization in six countries.

UNGEgn has also arranged to have presentations at UN Conferences and UNGEGN Sessions, by countries, by UN agencies and by representatives of industry providing scenarios where the need for readily available standardized geographical names has been important in real life situations. Or conversely, that lack of such data has led to problems of relief in emergency situations, has been a deterrent to improving life in slum conditions where no addressing exists, or has hindered development of useful integrated databases for emergency preparedness.

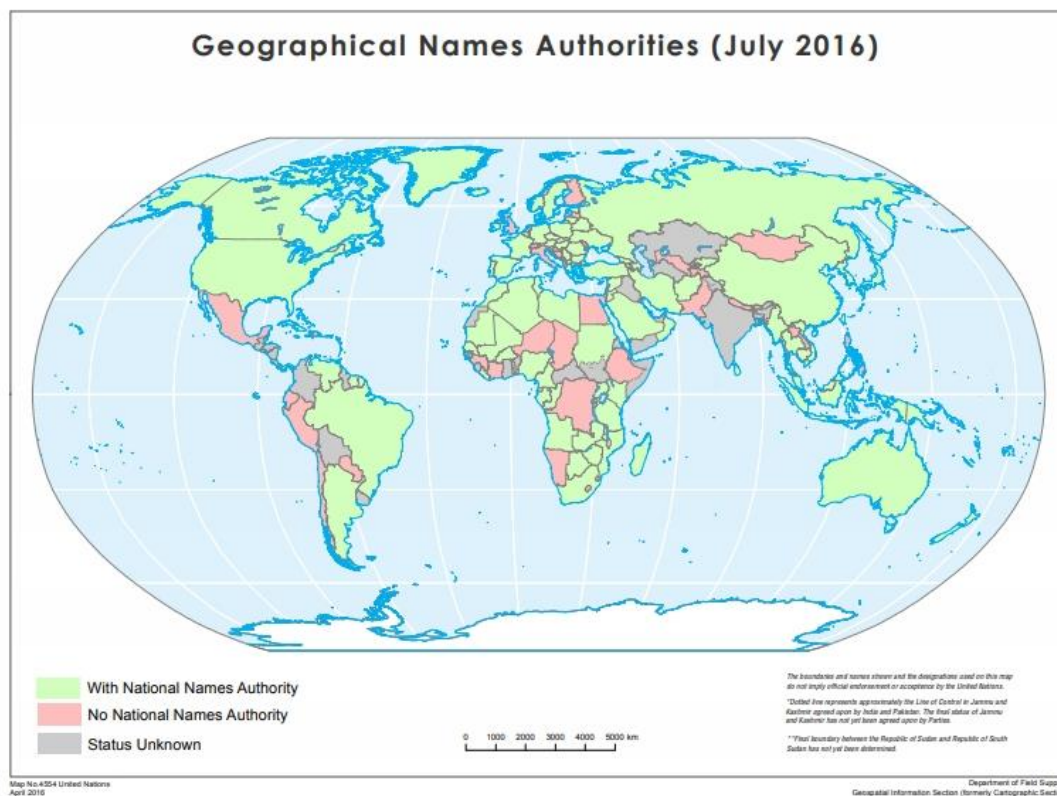
### ***What progress has been seen around the world in establishing national names authorities?***

As encouraging geographical names standardization at the national level is a key part of the work of UNGEGN and to developing consistency internationally, we should look at the results obtained so far. Not only is national toponymic standardization key to UNGEGN itself, it is also significant to the contributions that UNGEGN can make to the provision of authorized, standardized, geographical names around the world for use by governments, decision makers, media, emergency management, delivery services, tourism, and so on.

Among the users today, can now be included the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM), as well as other international groups, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), requiring clear and unambiguous names in a timely fashion. UNGEGN is aware, too, that to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) a robust net of authoritative toponyms is a fundamental global data set that should be available for all users. UNGEGN's vision could be considered as every country having a process for authorizing the standardized names for places/features within their jurisdiction and having a process for making the names available and easily accessible to users. I and other experts have been asked whether UNGEGN has finished the task of geographical names standardization after over 50 years. But, while languages modify, names change over time and countries have not all created a viable and reliable method of standardizing their geographical names, UNGEGN still needs to pursue its "dream" - a vision of global geographical names standardization, based on national authorization.

In considering the establishment of national names authorities (which may exist under a variety of structures) what progress has been made?

On the UNGEGN website, a world map indicates countries that have self-identified as having established names authorities, those that have not, and those where no data has been submitted on the status quo. The data shown here is dated 2016 and is accessible under Documents - Summary world map of authorities under <https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEGN/naa.html>



A total of 93 countries have declared that they have an authority responsible for geographical names. If this information is broken down over time:

- 12 existed before the first meeting of the Group of Experts in 1960;
- 20 were formed during the 1960s and 1970s;
- 27 were created during the 1980s and 1990s; and
- 26 have been created since 2000.

In addition, 8 other countries have identified a names authority, but provided no idea of the date of its creation. From these figures it can be concluded that the work of UNGEGN has been producing results – showing 81 national authorities responsible for names created since its inception and the start of its work.

This clearly shows progress since 1960. However, there are some other considerations to bear in mind. 93 countries still constitute less than half the number of Member States of the United Nations. In addition, not all the countries that have a naming authority, even if it was established by legislation, have a situation that is currently functioning to handle the naming challenges faced in the country. Another area of discussion is whether the authority has responsibility only for names as they appear on cartographic products and GIS systems of a particular government department, or whether the names are authorized for all national and international uses (i.e. for all government and public uses, including road signage, atlases, etc.).

Despite the efforts of UNGEGN and of individual Experts and their government departments, for some countries there remains resistance (or at least reluctance) to establishing names authorities and for others either a well-established names coverage or a small territory may cloud the relevance of national geographical names standardization. Some countries apparently have the intention to standardize their names, but the process does not materialize. Certainly, in past and present discussions on the challenges faced by individual countries in establishing – or maintaining – a mechanism for national standardization some common deterrents are noted, such as: lack of financial support, lack of trained human resources, lack of political will, absence of managerial awareness, inadequate government infrastructure and lack of cohesion, no central focus of organization, poor computer equipment and technical support, etc.

### ***Looking to the future***

As we move forward with the work of the “New” UNGEGN, we have a responsibility to assist and encourage countries to have standardized geographical names readily available. How can we facilitate improving the world situation with regard to standardized geographical names? This subject has certainly been discussed in the past, but still remains a thought-provoking challenge today. Some points are included here to start discussion on this important core issue of UNGEGN’s mandate.

- (1) **UNGEKN website.** Examples of good naming practices, legislation, policies and practices, economic benefits of having a national names authority, users of nationally authorized names, etc. could be included on the UNGEGN website. A start was made a few years ago with “Useful references”, including Overviews of names authorities; Legislation for a names authority; Policies, principles and procedures; Place names acts; Publicizing the work; Annual reports; Forms and guidelines for public submission of names (<https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEKN/naa.html>) This could be updated and expanded in content, made more comprehensive, including further documents in languages other than English.



- (2) **UNGEGN website.** The world maps, lists and details of **national names authorities**, together with their contact information should be updated on the UNGEGN website on a regular basis, with the possibility of further information on the authorities and their structures being added. This will let all countries and individuals see the most up-to-date information available for all countries.
- (3) **Factors affecting whether countries are in a position to create national names authorities.** Although the various challenges have been discussed on past occasions (e.g. at Conferences/Sessions, training courses, in producing UNGEGN pamphlets), the challenges faced should be gathered and collated, so that reasons for resistance or inability to create national names authorities are generally understood. This base would allow the development of solutions to see the realization of national names authorities.
- (4) **Raising management and political awareness.** It has often been pointed out that the lack of awareness of management to the significance of geographical names standardization, together with lack of resources holds back progress. UNGEGN has created brochures and a media kit (recently updated) to be used to help ameliorate the degree of awareness. How should this situation be handled systematically? What else is necessary on UNGEGN's work plan? How can UNGEGN seek appropriate funding? Such discussion could be under the auspices of the Working Group on Publicity and Funding.
- (5) **Capacity building.** On completing evaluation sheets at past Conferences and Sessions, various countries have requested assistance for their names programmes. Training courses have been offered, but going forward what are the best ways to develop capacity in countries that need it? Are in-person courses the answer, or should more emphasis be put on resources and training materials on the web, or is personalized training in country or elsewhere a manageable alternative? Does awareness raising need to precede this? How can such initiatives be funded? This discussion could be elaborated under the auspices of the Working Group on Toponymy Training and by referring also to the link established with universities offering toponymy courses (International Consortium of Universities for Toponymic Education, ICUTE) and the ICA/IGU Commission on Toponymy.
- (6) **Resolution I/4** has provided the basis for national standardization. Should this resolution be reviewed for possible restatement in the context of 2020, rather than 1967? Would it be helpful to countries considering the establishment of a national names authority to have a small brochure/handbook indicating the rationale and value for establishing a process for national geographical names standardization. (Much of this material is found in the UNGEGN Media Kit, the existing brochures and the *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names*, but could be collected in a new format.)
- (7) Now that the *UNGEGN Bulletin* includes thematic material, are there certain aspects of national names standardization that could be addressed in the *Bulletin* or elsewhere on the website to assist and influence the work of national names authorities?
- (8) **UNGEGN works in conjunction with UNGGIM and other scientific and academic groups** relevant to standardization. How could we lever these links to help create or maintain viable national names authorities? Are there other UN or scientific groups (e.g. United

Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues) with which we should build liaison to raise the awareness of authoritative geographical names?

- (9) **An UNGEGN structure to advocate for national names standardization.** Although we currently have 24 geographic/linguistic divisions, and countries within divisions help others within the same division, often it appears that the countries most needing help belong to a division that in itself barely functions. Should some other structure be developed to promote the establishment of national names authorities? Do we need a devoted group to focus on this issue - a Working Group or other type of group that can take action – at least provide leadership on some of the items noted above? Together with ongoing documents from countries for each Session, a special working group report could provide progress on national names standardization and authorities to achieve this from a global perspective.
- (10) **Availability of standardized names.** With nationally standardized toponyms available for many countries, how can UNGEGN move towards making this authoritative data easily and widely accessible? Discussion could be extended through the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers.

***The Group of Experts is requested to:***

- (1) Take note of the effort UNGEGN has made to encourage national standardization of geographical names and of the status quo of global progress on the creation of national names authorities.
- (2) Endorse the necessity for UNGEGN to continue, and appropriately accelerate, its efforts to encourage toponymic standardization at the national level.
- (3) Make recommendations on ways that UNGEGN should move forward to assist more State Members of the United Nations in achieving ongoing standardization of geographical names.

***Appendix A***

**Conference resolutions pertaining to national standardization**

(note: many other resolutions relating to database development, gazetteers, romanization, exonyms, etc., although classified under other headings in the groupings of resolutions, could also have implications to national names authorization; all are accessible through the UNGEGN website)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Conf. No.</i>	<i>Title</i>
1967	I/4	National standardization
1977	III/27	Assistance for programmes of field collection on names and of office treatment of names
1977	III/32	Dissemination of decisions by national authorities
1977	III/4	Reliability statement on geographical names in documents
1977	III/16	National standardization
1987	V/12	Collection of basic information on the national standardization of geographical names
1987	V/15	Establishment of national geographical names authorities

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1992	VI/9	Recognition of national standardization
1998	VII/5	National standardization based on local usage
2002	VIII/1	Promotion of minority group and indigenous geographical names
2002	VIII/2	Commemorative naming practices for geographical features
2002	VIII/9	Geographical names as cultural heritage
2007	IX/4	Geographical names as intangible cultural heritage
2007	IX/5	Promotion of the recording and use of indigenous, minority and regional language group geographical names
2012	X/3	Criteria for establishing and evaluating the nature of geographical names as cultural heritage
2012	X/4	Discouraging the commercialization of geographical names