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

**Information Paper  
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**Twentieth Session  
New York, 17 – 28 January 2000**

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**Item 3  
of the Provisional Agenda**

**REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN**

20th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names

New York, 17 to 28 January 2000

Report of the Chairman

Dear Mr Habermann, Ms Kerfoot, Mr Payne, Ms Javier, UNEGN  
Experts, Colleagues and Friends

In the forty years which have elapsed since the Group of Experts first met in 1960, a great deal of progress has been made. Many countries have established, enhanced or upgraded their national geographical names authorities. Geographical names laws have been promulgated in several countries. Standardised geographical names have been published in maps and gazetteers. Some thirty countries have produced toponymic guidelines for map and other editors. The advent of electronic media has revolutionised communication and dissemination of standardised geographical names. A Report on Toponymic Data Exchange Formats and Standards has been prepared. The preparation of Romanization systems for non-Roman scripts has received intensive attention. Four editions of the Glossary of Toponymic Terminology have been prepared in English, and translations into the other languages of the United Nations is receiving attention. The List of Names of Countries has been updated, and the UNEGN Brochure has appeared. Standardisation in the French-speaking world has been boosted by the publication and distribution of the Toponymic Information Bulletin of the French-Speaking Division of the UNEGN. Training courses on geographical names have been presented in several countries, and toponymic education at the tertiary level has been expanded. The English version of United Nations Documents on Geographical Names was purchased in 58 countries. This book has been translated into Arabic, and is being translated into Chinese, French and Spanish.

The activities of the UNEGN have been given publicity at other levels as well. Special sessions were devoted to geographical name standardisation at the UN Regional Cartographic Conference for Africa in Ethiopia and most recently at the 20th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Spain in September 1999. Lectures on the UNEGN, the Conferences and geographical names standardisation were presented in Ethiopia, Finland, Japan, Korea, Namibia and South Africa. An edition of the ICOS journal, *Onoma*, is to be devoted to the standardisation of geographical names. UNEGN experts Ms Isolde Hausner and Mr Botolv Helleland were elected President and Vice-President respectively of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences, reflecting the recognition of the standing of the UNEGN by the Council.

In spite of phenomenal progress achieved by some experts and their countries, when viewed at the global level the lack of success in some fields becomes painfully evident. Of all the toponymic guidelines produced to date, for example, only three are from south of the Equator, and only one is from Africa. To

the best of my knowledge, only three geographical names authorities have been established or enhanced in Africa during the period under review, namely in Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa, and only Botswana and Mozambique have published gazetteers of their standardised names. Even at the ICOS Congress in Spain, only two African countries were represented, namely Niger and South Africa.

These facts indicate that, after forty years, the Group of Experts has not succeeded in reaching many developing countries. In other words, the social and economic benefits of geographical name standardisation still elude the southern half of the world. The lack of standardised names means that we are still facing wastage of energy, time and money, and that precisely in those countries where such wastage can least be afforded. At the start of the 21st century this is one of the major challenges of the UNGEGN.

I deeply regret not being able to chair this meeting, but my application for funding to do so was not approved by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. I therefore tender my apologies, and those of my compatriot, Lucie Möller, whose application, too, was rejected.

I take this opportunity of thanking the Chairpersons and members of the Divisions, the Convenors and members of the Working Groups, the UNGEGN Secretariat and support staff, the liaison officers, the Rapporteurs and all the experts for their continued hard work and excellent co-operation. I wish you all a pleasant, profitable and successful 20th Session of UNGEGN.

PETER E. RAPER  
Chairman