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

GEGN/22/8

**Twenty-second Session
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**Item 3
of the Provisional Agenda**

REPORT OF THE CHAIRPERSON

Submitted by Helen Kerfoot, Chairperson, UNGEGN

Report of the Chairperson

First, for newcomers to UNGEGN activities, I would like to provide a small amount of historical background information.

In 1948, the United Nations Economic and Social Council debated the coordination of cartographic services and the problems of standardization of geographical names for international purposes. In 1956, Canada and Ecuador drafted a resolution for ECOSOC requesting a general framework for this, and in 1959 another ECOSOC resolution (715 A - XXVII) requested the Secretary-General to provide encouragement to nations with no national organization to standardize geographical names, to encourage the production of national gazetteers, to create a clearing-house for geographical names information, and to set up a small group of consultants to consider the technical problems of domestic standardization of geographical names. Such a group first met in June 1960. These early activities have been described in detail by a former Secretary of UNGEGN, Mr. Max C. de Henseler, in document E/CONF.85/CRP.3 at the Sixth Conference in 1992.

Now it is over 55 years since these first discussions, and over 40 years since the first expert group met and made their recommendations. Since then, many steps forward have been taken by individual countries, by UNGEGN divisions and working groups, and indeed through the eight UN Conferences held every five years since 1967. From the data on Conference participation compiled by Mr. de Henseler, one might have thought that interest in geographical names standardization peaked with the Third Conference in 1977, however, after adding the data on recent conferences, it is clear that during the last three conferences the number of delegates and the number of countries represented have continued to grow (see Annex 1) and several countries previously not represented have recently participated in one or more conferences.

UNEGN is responsible for following up the resolutions of the Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and at this time is holding its 22nd Session. I note from the United Nations website that UNGEGN is currently one of ECOSOC's six active standing committees and expert bodies.

Names standardization activities over the last four decades have made progress against the backdrop of an ever-changing world – in the political, cultural and technical sense. The technical changes must be used to our advantage, as today we have the opportunity to distribute accurate geographical names information more easily and to a far wider audience than ever before. Standardized geographical names are now being recognized as an essential element of a country's national geo-referenced framework data, and an important part of geographical information systems. As such, this gives us a natural access point to support many facets of our increasingly knowledge-seeking and media-

aware world. Accurate toponyms are significant to many diverse projects – from management of city infrastructures, seaport activities, forest fires, coffee marketing, elephant habitat, and irrigation systems to creating travel maps, providing in-vehicle navigation, predicting tornados and preserving cultural artifacts. By way of illustrating the ripple effects of GIS - last November for the fifth year a GIS Day was held as part of National Geographic's Geography Awareness Week 2003 and some 100 countries participated.

Equally important is the role of geographical names in communication – in our sense of place with regard to language, history, culture and belonging.

Although we talk of accomplishments of UNGEGN over the years – new names authorities, gazetteers made available, toponymic guidelines published, romanization systems established, etc. – we also realize that many challenges still remain before us, just as they faced those experts discussing standardization in 1960.

I tried to conceive the ideal world situation in the realm of geographical names standardization. It went something like this:

- Every country has a process for standardization, with an authority and trained staff.
- All standardized names are available for global use in single authorized Romanized (and other) forms
- All UN resolutions have been implemented
- For cartographic purposes, users of geographical names all use the standardized versions and can verify and understand existing exonyms
- All are fully aware of the work in this field of endeavour and we contribute significantly to global communication and harmony in the world.

May be there is more – but I was humbled, realizing how much further we have to extend ourselves and to outreach to others. Certainly from this perspective our work seems to have hardly begun.

Some activities since 2002

We see from the reports submitted to this session that considerable work has continued in UNGEGN divisions and working groups, as well as in individual countries. Several divisions and some of the working groups have met in person since the Eighth Conference. In 2003, I personally was able to participate in sessions of two divisions (the East Central and South-East Europe; and the Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Divisions) and of two working groups (Exonyms; and Evaluation and Implementation). I was most happy to see the excellent organization, the enthusiasm of participants, and the work being accomplished on these occasions.

I think the key to much of UNGEGN's recent work has been collaboration and cooperation – both between experts and with outside organizations.

I am pleased that individuals are reaching out to other scientific and technical organizations. For instance, we continue to have good relationships with organizations such as the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS), the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), the International Cartographic Association (ICA), various parts of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), etc. and I appreciate the work of our liaison officers in this regard. The ICA congress in Durban in 2003, the forthcoming International Geographic Congress in Glasgow in August 2004 and the 2005 meeting of ICOS in Pisa have been, or will be, examples of venues where the work of UNGEGN can be promoted to a wider audience.

Another example of progress through collaboration, has been the production of texts for two UNGEGN manuals to be published by the United Nations as recommended in resolution VIII/15. A basic manual was developed to replace Donald Orth's original text on national standardization processes published in *World Cartography* in 1990. A second more technical manual on data base standards, romanization systems and country names was compiled by the UNGEGN working groups addressing these issues. I would particularly like to thank the experts who so diligently worked on the various texts, and who provided editorial comment and suggestions, so that the Working Group on Publicity and Funding could submit these documents to the UNGEGN Secretariat in a timely fashion in early 2004.

Important, too, has been our interaction with the UNGEGN Secretariat staff. Financial support was received to hold a toponymic training session in Sudan in early 2003, and has also been set aside for 2004, to support particularly this UNGEGN session as well as training courses to be offered in Australia and Mozambique. We have received continuing assistance from the UNGEGN Secretariat staff – Mr. Amor Laaribi and Ms. Jenny Javier – notably with production and distribution of the UNGEGN Bulletin (formerly the Newsletter), the updating of the UNGEGN website (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo>). Both are important means for UNGEGN to continue its outreach to those involved with the administration and use of geographical names.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank, on behalf of all experts, Mr. Laaribi and Ms. Javier for their continued hard work and most valuable help with the activities of UNGEGN.

At this 22nd UNGEGN Session

The change to the Statute and Rules of UNGEGN proposed in Berlin to allow for two Vice-Chairpersons and two Rapporteurs was approved by ECOSOC in October 2002, so we are pleased now to have both Mr. Brahim Atoui and Mr. Jörn Sievers as UNGEGN Vice-Presidents and both Mr. Brian Goodchild and Mr. Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig as Rapporteurs.

The evaluation sheets that many of you completed following the Berlin Conference have been reviewed – and some of the ideas will be further explored by the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation. Although we have accomplishments to celebrate, we are continually aware of significant shortcomings - for example, our difficulty in reaching out to countries that have so far been unable to participate in UNGEGN or Conference activities and have not made standardized names available for worldwide use. To help us address this issue, we are pleased to welcome back Mr. Peter Raper, former Chair of UNGEGN, to make a presentation on the status of geographical names standardization in sub-Saharan Africa and to provide some guidance and recommendations to us on this key issue – how to extend the work of UNGEGN to more developing countries.

We must continue to strive to make our work better known, and I remind you of the useful UNGEGN brochure still available in the six United Nations languages, as well as some translated forms prepared through UNGEGN divisions. It is important for us to speak up and publicize our work on geographical names standardization, and its significance, to our governments, to users of geographical names data, and to the public in general.

It is said that nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. We are making a good start today and I wish everyone an interesting and productive meeting. I will certainly do all I can to help make this a reality.

Helen Kerfoot
April 2004

Annex 1

