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Some challenges in the standardization of geographical names
in sub-Saharan Africa*

* Special presentation by Peter E. Raper, Former Chairman, UNGEGN

SOME CHALLENGES IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

PETER E. RAPER
Former Chairman, UNGEGN

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) was established in 1959 by the United Nations to advise that body on the national and international standardization of geographical names. The UNGEGN is one of only seven standing expert bodies established by the United Nations to advise it on problematic issues. This may be regarded as an indication that geographical names are one of the seven most problematic issues facing mankind.

To date 22 sessions of the Group have been held, and eight UN conferences on the standardization of geographical names. The Group has deliberated on geographical names issues, identified problems and challenges, and sought and found solutions to these problems. At the UN conferences on the standardization of geographical names, resolutions have been formulated and adopted, and implemented by many countries, ensuring optimal standardization of geographical names at both national and international level in those countries.

A great deal of progress has been made, and the Group and its members has been in a position not only to advise the UN on the standardization of geographical names, but to provide the UN with a range of instruments and documents to enable it to do its work, e.g. the Glossary of Terms used in the Standardization of Geographical Names, Romanization Tables for non-Roman Scripts, Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors, Resolutions by Subject Adopted at the Conferences, Toponymic Data Exchange Formats and Standards, lists and gazetteers of standardized names for many countries, and other important documents, enabling it in these cases to fulfill its mandate of ensuring peace among countries, eliminating conflict, and ensuring economic and social benefits for its member States.

The procedures of the UNGEGN, developed over decades, have been tried and tested and have proven to be effective, as evidenced by the resounding successes in some parts of the world. However, the same successes were not met with in the case of many developing countries. A perusal of the lists of participants at the UNGEGN sessions and UN conferences over the years indicates that, with a few notable exceptions, there has been a consistent lack of participation by a large number of countries. Similarly, with some exceptions, there has been a dearth of geographical name products from many of these countries.

These factors have been a cause for serious concern to the United Nations, since it needs the standardized names of each country in accessible form in order to fulfil its functions. Over the decades attempts at improving the situation have yielded limited results. The reasons for that are inter alia communicative, cultural, economic, educational, motivational, political, and technical. They vary in degree and frequency from country to country, and are difficult to identify and to counter.

The pace of progress, too, is not the same in all countries. At the 8th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in Berlin in 2002 it was reported that a Government Notice was published in Zambia in 1953 for the establishment of a national geographical names authority. This has not yet been implemented. In 1985 a proposal was minuted for the establishment of a Names Commission for Lesotho. That is also still in abeyance. In Botswana a Place Names Committee was established in 1967 through a Presidential directive. This body functioned until 1998 but since then the work was suspended

In 1991 the UN Regional Cartographic Conference for Africa held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, identified the revitalization and coordination of geographical name activities in Africa as an issue of special concern. The UN Economic Commission for Africa accordingly requested the UNGEGN to address the issue. A special section of the Regional UN Cartographic Conference for Africa held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1992, was devoted to the standardization of geographical names. The Chairman and Secretary of UNGEGN presented papers at that session, and discussed possible solutions with officers of the ECA, Dr Peter Mwanza and Mr Orlando Nino.

In pursuance of the discussions in Addis Ababa, the Africa South Division of UNGEGN was established, comprising Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Several Divisional meetings were held, as well as a special section devoted to geographical name standardization at the First World Congress of African Linguistics in Swaziland. Six UN training courses on geographical names were presented in South Africa, with eminent UNGEGN experts as lecturers and trainers, namely Mr Ferjan Ormeling, Ms Helen Kerfoot, Mr Naftali Kadmon, Mr Roger Payne, and Ms Lucie Möller, and with trainees from Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and the Sultanate of Oman. In Namibia a Cabinet decision made provision for the establishment of a national names authority, and with funds from UNESCO a UN training workshop was held in Windhoek in 1998. The national names authority of South Africa was reconstituted in accordance with UN resolutions in 1998, and the Government of Mozambique is in the process of establishing a names authority.

There is a great deal still to be done. There are some 42 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The people of these countries form an agglomerate of vastly differing cultures, religions and political convictions. The geographical names of Africa derive from some 2000 languages and dialects, ranging from the ancient Khoisan click languages of southern Africa to the little-known Ijaw languages of the Nigerian coast.

I do not believe that there are easy or quick solutions. Considering the time, expense and effort it has taken for the developed countries to attain the degree of achievement enjoyed today, a comparable input may be required to achieve similar results in developing countries. I cannot assume to have all the answers, but on the basis of my experience in UNGEGN and in the African context, I wish to offer some thoughts and recommendations that may serve as a basis for consideration and discussion by the Group

It would seem that a different strategy is required, a comprehensive strategy involving all concerned parties, a continuous, sustained and concerted effort, focused on the economic, cultural, linguistic and political situations in the countries concerned, utilizing the effective structures of the UNGEGN, as well as other relevant organizations. In view of the complexity and magnitude of the task, a range of simultaneous programmes is recommended, focussing on individual countries and on countries in general. While the situation in individual countries is being investigated for concentrated, needs-related actions based on priorities, a simultaneous programme of general focus is advisable.

Account should be given of the status of geographical name standardization in each country, with emphasis on responsibility for naming, funding considerations, availability of gazetteers and other sources of standardized names, the status of maps and gazetteers, regulations regarding languages and authorizing names, language(s) situations, reasons for lack of standardization processes, where applicable, and for lack of participation in UNGEGN activities. These details will be useful for planning purposes.

Contact should be made both at official level and at local level, and both by correspondence and personal visits. Relevant, informative, easy to digest documentation should be provided to the contacts (e.g. UNGEGN Brochure, UNGEGN Bulletin, guidelines, and other).

A sustained comprehensive strategy is required, a new approach. It must be decided what requires to be done, how it should be done, and by whom it should be done. There should be a clear understanding and agreement of what UNGEGN and the UN want and need: the standardized names of each country in accessible form (lists, gazetteers, electronic media), toponymic guidelines, etc.

More than a decade ago a former Secretary of the Group, Dr Max de Henseler, pointed out that most of the substantive issues had been solved, but that the remaining problems were related primarily to communication. Assuming that implementation of relevant resolutions will yield the desired results, and assuming that informing and persuading relevant persons and bodies will lead to the implementation of these resolutions, the needs of the UN, the prerogatives of the countries and the benefits to be derived from geographical name standardization should be advertised and made known to consulates and embassies, relevant state authorities, agencies and individuals.

It would seem reasonable as a first step to concentrate on communication and publicity, by means of the UNGEGN Bulletin, brochure and other documentation, and the media.

Since international standardization must be based on national standardization, the nationally standardized names of all countries are needed. Each country must be persuaded and urged to exercise its sovereign prerogative of standardizing its geographical names. One would ascertain at what level the country is, and plan strategy according to needs. There may be a mapping program, or an existing office or committee that needs upgrading or stimulating. Namibia, for example, has already had a training workshop, and that should be followed up.

The UNGEGN has a structure of Divisions and Working Groups that has been tried and tested, and proven successful. These will naturally function within the programme as and when needed and appropriate. For example, the Working Group for Evaluation and Implementation may be the appropriate one to evaluate and initiate; then the Working Group for Publicity and Funding for the budget; then Working Group for Education and Training for training; WGEI for monitoring progress, ensuring follow-up, etc. WG for Publicity and Funding is the one to prepare and publish/disseminate interesting and informative/persuasive articles in local press, radio etc.

The UNGEGN Secretariat will obviously be central in the operationalization of the strategy.

To achieve the desired results, it is recommended:

- That the standardization of geographical names in sub-Saharan Africa be identified as a matter of importance and urgency, and that the necessary resources be made available;
- That the Group consider which body would be the most appropriate to launch and coordinate the programme. This could be the Working Group for Evaluation and Implementation, by virtue of its aims, functions and mandate, incorporating the Conveners of all relevant UNGEGN working groups; or a new Working Group on African Countries; or a Coordinating Committee; or a Facilitator appointed for the task;

- That an investigation be undertaken to determine and evaluate the status of geonym standardization and all relevant aspects in the countries concerned, and to identify the needs of each country, with a view to determining priorities, budgeting, etc., perhaps from digital Index of Conference Papers prepared by Ms H Kerfoot; and on that basis which countries need assistance, and of what kind – establishment of names authority, training, guidance, etc.;
- That co-operation be sought, where necessary and relevant, with UNGIWG and its member organizations, e.g. to acquire data on the needs of countries in relation to natural disasters, conflict, economic status, expertise available, humanitarian considerations, etc.;
- That the underlying cultural, economic, linguistic, political, social and other reasons be determined for less that maximal progress in each country, and that measures be devised and implemented to counter these;
- That a systematic programme of action be drawn up, and a budget for this, and that the necessary actions be taken to ensure the optimal implementation of resolutions and the concomitant effective and practical standardization of geonyms, including dissemination and submission to the UN, and that country priorities be determined on the basis of these data to ascertain the feasibility of implementing an effective strategy;
- That a letter of introduction, with Brochure, to be sent to Consulates, Embassies, Permanent Missions, relevant State departments and individual ministers of the relevant countries, followed up by personal visits when deemed appropriate and desirable;
- That optimal use be made of the UNGEGN Bulletin, including explanatory articles on work of UNGEGN, the benefits of standardization, etc.; that Divisional chairpersons and country experts from Africa report on the status of geonym standardization, progress made, problems encountered, etc. UNGEGN Bulletin should regularly contain articles encouraging countries, explaining matters indicating the responsibility and sovereign rights of countries, news on individual countries' status, progress, training, etc. The Bulletin should be sent to all relevant persons and bodies – ambassadors, permanent representatives, State officials, and the media; consulates and chairs of divisions, for further distribution; also to local newspapers, radio stations, etc. and to the ICOS and to local and regional names societies for inclusion in their newsletters etc. ECA should be involved to a great degree in distribution of the Bulletin in Africa.
- That consideration be given to visits to identified countries by a small group of experts to enlighten, inform, and encourage the establishment of a geographical name programme;
- That consideration be given to education and training, preferably at venues in Africa, where as many as possible of the countries' delegates can be prepared to participate;
- That consideration be given to what extent the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) is to be involved, e.g. as regards co-ordination, distribution of documents, provision of addresses, liaison, funding, actual co-operation; delegation of certain activities, and what these should be. Perhaps the ECA should always be represented at UNGEGN meetings and UN Conferences. Perhaps the ECA could be considered as the contact organization in Africa, and material, invitations, etc. could be distributed from ECA headquarters;

- That consideration be given to the possibility of Regional UNGEGN meetings in Africa, perhaps in collaboration with the UNECA and/or the UN Committee on Development Information (CODI);
- That geographical name standardization be included in programmes of the CODI, ICA and other UN bodies;
- That chairpersons of the African Divisions (Africa East, Africa South and Africa Central) be encouraged to take responsibility for ensuring dissemination and distribution of relevant documents to experts of member countries;
- That contact be made with the International Cartographic Association (ICA), the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS), the Committee on Development Information (CODI) and similar bodies to obtain names and addresses of local experts who can be approached individually and personally in cases where other methods fail;
- That contact to be made with local persons in the countries – government officials, academics, expert individuals, members of local name societies, etc. If necessary, an identified individual may be the starting-point;
- That contact be made with existing and/or past representatives of African countries to UNGEGN and UNCISGNs;
- That the WG on Publicity and Funding work out a budget and that it be submitted for approval and allocation;
- That consideration be given to the appointment of a small staff of professional experts to advise, assist, guide, or even to do the work on a full-time basis, from country to country.

The present session of UNGEGN presents the ideal opportunity of initiating the programme, since many of the experts are present and can take immediate cognizance of the needs and recommendations. As an immediate step may be considered utilizing the opportunity presented by the Government of Mozambique. This government is offering a training course on geographical names in September this year. Every effort should be made to use this training course to reach the rest of the African countries south of the Sahara, using the contacts and strategies mentioned above. Mr Luis Abrahamo of Mozambique is the Chairman of the Africa South Division. He may be contacted in connection with the promotion of geonym standardization.

I understand that the President of Mozambique, Mr Joachim Chiassano, will be officially opening the Congress of the Names Society of Southern Africa that follows the training course. Mr Chiassano is currently the President of the African Union. That opportunity may be ideal for bringing the Standardization of Geographical Names to the attention of the African Union and soliciting its support and co-operation.

Recommendations to Countries

Each country has the sovereign prerogative to standardize its geographical names, i.e. to decide what the name for each feature in that country should be, and how that name should be written. In pursuance of UN resolution 4 of the First UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, countries are urged to exercise this right and to commence with their

Conclusion

Obviously solutions to a perennial problem of such magnitude, complexity and sensitivity cannot be found by an individual, nor fully deliberated within the constraints of a presentation. The recommendations, proposals, suggestions and ideas expressed in this paper should be deliberated upon, analyzed amended and extended as necessary and desirable to ensure maximum effectiveness and efficiency. All the necessary and feasible resources of relevant and concerned bodies, organizations, governments, and persons should be coordinated and implemented on a sustained and continuous basis.

Resolutions that recommend funding, training and other support to developing countries have already been adopted. The UNGEGN chair and secretariat have expressed their enthusiastic support and have already made financial support available. All that is needed is that immediate action be taken to implement these resolutions.

I thank the Officer-in-Charge of the United Nations Statistics Division, Mr. Willem de Vries, for inviting me to present this paper, and I thank Mr. Amor Laaribi and the UNGEGN Secretariat for their assistance in enabling me to accept the invitation.

A special word of thanks to the Chairperson of UNGEGN, Ms. Helen Kerfoot, for her initiatives, insight and vision in this matter.