

**Twenty-second Session
Vienna, 28 March- 4 April 2006**

**Item 20 of the Provisional Agenda:
Preparation for the Ninth United Nations Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names**

**The United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names ...
Looking to the future**

Prepared by Helen Kerfoot, Chairperson, UNGEGN .

The United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names

... Looking to the future

Conferences ... should we be looking for change?

Sixty years have passed since the United Nations was established and it is forty years since the experts of the day were preparing for the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) held in Geneva in September 1967. Many of us have been to a number of the UN Conferences – some were even at the first Conference and have an enormous breadth and depth of experience in the matters of geographical names standardization.

With geographical names issues we have doubtless made progress in many ways – names authorities, publications, training, etc. - even though some of the same issues as were significant over 40 years ago still need to be addressed today by the Conferences and UNGEGN. However, from a technical and communication standpoint much has changed, and links around the world can be instantaneous, and the demand for information – accurate and authoritative information – is very much on a “right now” basis.

At the United Nations you may see people wearing the buttons declaring “60 years - time for renewal”. Surely we should consider this, too. The question that arises then is: Are the Conferences as we have seen them, the way we would suggest for the future? Or should UNGEGN be pro-active in making some recommendations for rejuvenation? Remembering that the Ninth Conference to be held in 2007 makes recommendations for the Tenth Conference, anticipated in 2012, change will take time ... and this seems to be a moment when we should be looking ahead, with a view to playing our role in the UN’s “time for renewal”.

Some thoughts for discussion

From responses to questionnaires circulated at previous Conferences (most recently in Berlin, 2002) and UNGEGN Sessions, as well as from discussion at the 2005 joint meeting of the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation and the Working Group on Publicity and Funding, and at various informal gatherings, several items come forward for possible discussion.

Hopefully without losing sight of the big picture, as well as the varying needs of different Member States and interest groups, a few suggestions are put forward here as a starting point to look at possible avenues for change. You may have other suggestions. Indeed you are invited to express your opinions on the attached form.

(1) *Length of the Conference*

Just by way of synopsis, we can see the following (excluding the time allocated to UNGEGN):

<i>Year</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Working days</i>
1967	Geneva	4-22 September	15
1972	London	10-31 May	16
1977	Athens	17 August – 7 September	16
1982	Geneva	24 August – 14 September	16
1987	Montréal	18-30 August	9
1992	New York	25 August – 3 September	8
1998	New York	13-22 January	8
2002	Berlin	27 August – 5 September	8
2007	8

In recent years, the Conferences have stabilized at 8 working days, with a day allocated to UNGEGN, both before and after the Conference itself.

We have recently decided to cut down on the length of UNGEGN sessions, should there be any changes recommended regarding the length of Conferences?

(2) *Change of emphasis*

The agenda for Conferences has been modified somewhat over the years, and the Provisional Agenda for the Ninth Conference (available in Vienna as an UNGEGN document) has been formulated to cover many major issues in the standardization of geographical names – including issues of both national and international standardization, as well as economic and social benefits, and implementation of resolutions. However, the format is generally based on the submission of documents against agenda items.

Should we be encouraging the approach of including more invited presentations on topics of common interest – for instance, “best practices” on a particular culturally related issue? Should we be urging the agenda, papers, presentations to be more issues and problem driven – for instance, addressing the need for readily available worldwide compatible toponymic data integrated into GIS, to provide rapid response on questions related to natural disasters, emergency, relief, climate change, etc .?

(3) *Country reports*

Data included in individual country reports is a vital and important way of sharing our knowledge and our approaches, and exchanging information on methodology and projects – both successful and less successful. However, presentation of every country report is certainly time consuming (for example, there were some 57 country reports presented at the Eighth Conference in 2002). Most certainly a commitment to gathering and recording this material to meet a deadline is often the catalyst we all need to

formulate our thoughts and to make this information available. Undoubtedly in our work, these written reports are most valuable. However, should we be suggesting a different process for their presentation at Conferences?

(4) *Divisional meetings*

Responses to past questionnaires have indicated that it would be advantageous for Divisions to be able to meet more easily during Conferences. Often this is the opportunity for new countries to join Divisions, and one of the few times when Division participants can meet face to face. In some cases this has been an occasion for revitalization of Divisions that have been dormant or functioning only at a low level. Though we realize that times before and after sessions, as well as at lunch breaks, are available for small meetings, the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation and the Working Group on Publicity and Funding would like to propose that one hour be cut from one of the formal Conference sessions and be freed up as an opportunity for the meeting of Divisions.

(5) *Resolutions*

After eight Conferences there are now 184 resolutions, with some 165 being of a substantive nature. Working Groups have been assigned to study the resolutions and evaluate their implementation. This has proved a difficult task ... efforts have been made to classify the resolutions, to find the “most significant” resolutions, or even to consider how new resolutions could restate some of the existing ones. Yes, it is clear that some resolutions have been replaced by later ones, that some are augmented by later ones, and that some are even rather in conflict with later ones. So far no effective results have been obtained in rationalizing the resolutions, short of rewriting a new set of resolutions! Resolutions vary considerably in nature – some resolutions are for implementation by the United Nations, others are instructions or guidelines for Member States to follow, some are for the user community ... regarding their implementation, some can be measured, others prove definitely illusive.

Are resolutions considered as an expression of the success of a Conference? Should resolutions (in reality recommendations to ECOSOC) be limited to those that are for United Nations (perhaps the UNGEGN Secretariat) to undertake and implement? Should more general directional guidelines or good practices, be gathered under some other title? However this is undertaken, better preparation of resolutions/guidelines would seem necessary.

(6) *Training courses and other activities associated with Conferences*

In recent years, training courses that have been offered by UNGEGN, have been attached to some associated geographical names activity (e.g. names board meetings, academic conferences), to provide an added dimension to the training. In 2002, training was linked to the Eighth Conference in Berlin and in 2006 training has been linked to the 23rd UNGEGN Session in Vienna.

This approach is very useful to provide a wider context to participants, and yet clearly this is not a viable option for all Sessions and Conferences, particularly those held in New York and Geneva. However, should greater encouragement be given to organization of one or more half-day workshops immediately prior to the formal Sessions and/or Conferences? If so, what topics would be most useful to address?

(7) *Participation*

To improve future Conferences it is certainly desirable to have greater participation of Member States whose activities in geographical names standardization are low and/or little known. On various occasions this has been a topic of discussion by UNGEGN - including special presentations and reports in the UNGEGN Bulletin. Efforts to communicate the economic and social advantages of consistent, authorized names have been made through working papers, and the UNGEGN publicity brochure has been widely circulated. A new brochure is currently being developed through the Working Group on Publicity and Funding to bring these issues to the attention of surveying, mapping, cadastre, land administration and GIS agencies in countries less frequently participating in standardization activities. Clearly financial and economic priorities affect Conference (and UNGEGN) participation ... and overall our outreach efforts have had but small and ephemeral success.

At this stage do we have particular suggestions to make to the Conference to address this ongoing concern?

(8) *Links to other organizations*

Should more attention be given at Conferences on how to get the standardization of geographical names onto agendas of associated agencies, those who could help promote the work (for example, the Committee on Development Information/UN Economic Commission for Africa –CODI/ECA), or those who use geographical names?

As work today requires integration of data, collaboration with different provider and user groups and the best possible use of communication media, how do we suggest increasing the Conference participation of international agencies, publishers, communicators, software developers, financiers, etc.?

(9) *Miscellaneous*

- Maintaining worldwide records in a current manner poses problems. Do we have suggestions for the better maintenance of records of national names authorities, their contacts, or the mapping agencies responsible for standardized names?

- At this time, do we have recommendations for the better organization and access to the vast array of technical documents (over 2000 items) that have accumulated at the UNGEGN Sessions and Conferences since the 1960s? We now have a compendium of document titles, etc. (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/documents.htm>) and more of them are becoming available through the UNGEGN website or the UN Map Library website (<http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/maplib/ungegn.htm>), but little grouping has been made by topic at this point in time.

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These thoughts are just some that have come forward in discussion for “renewal” of the Conferences – and doubtless, some apply to UNGEGN equally well.

Your suggestions would certainly be very much appreciated, and the attached form provides an opportunity for you to contribute. The information will be reviewed by the UNGEGN Bureau and the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation, and suggestions that are well supported will be noted on the UNGEGN website, before being formally proposed to the Ninth Conference.

Helen Kerfoot
Chair, UNGEGN

Ottawa, February 2006

**TOWARDS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR “RENEWAL”
OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCES
ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES**

*Please return the form to the UNGEGN Secretariat (Room C-431 in Vienna)
or by fax to New York (+212-963-9851)*

Name (optional):

Country (optional):

Topic	Level of Importance of change for Low=1; High=5	Your suggestions
Length of Conference	1 2 3 4 5	
Emphasis •Presentations	1 2 3 4 5	
Country Reports	1 2 3 4 5	
Divisional Meetings	1 2 3 4 5	
Resolutions	1 2 3 4 5	
Associated Activities • Training • Workshops • Other	1 2 3 4 5	

Participation of Member States	1 2 3 4 5	
Outreach to other organizations	1 2 3 4 5	
Miscellaneous • records • archiving	1 2 3 4 5	
<i>Other:</i>	1 2 3 4 5	
<i>Other:</i>	1 2 3 4 5	
<i>Other:</i>	1 2 3 4 5	
<i>Other:</i>	1 2 3 4 5	
<i>Other:</i>	1 2 3 4 5	
<i>Other:</i>	1 2 3 4 5	