



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General

16 May 2012

Original: English

---

### **Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names**

New York, 31 July – 9 August 2012

Item 5 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports on the work of the United Nations Group of Experts  
on Geographical Names, its divisions, working groups and  
task teams since the Ninth Conference**

### **United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) 2007-2012: meetings and work**

Submitted by the UNGEGN\*\*

---

\* E/CONF.101/1.

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

# **United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) 2007-2012**

Helen Kerfoot, Chair, UNGEGN

## **Introduction**

Since the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in 2007, UNGEGN has convened two sessions: the 25<sup>th</sup> in Nairobi in 2009 and the 26<sup>th</sup> in Vienna in 2011. Both sessions were well attended, had many papers filed, and included special presentations, workshops, exhibitions and informal meetings of divisions and working groups.

Between UNGEGN Sessions, ongoing work has been undertaken by countries, by the 23 geographical/linguistic divisions, 10 working groups, a Task Team for Africa and a coordinating group for Toponymic Guidelines.

UNGEGN Sessions have followed advances in implementing UN resolutions, often through the activities of the UNGEGN working groups, and have assured the continuity of training both through courses around the world and through web-based toponymy course units. UNGEGN has made special efforts to raise the profile of geographical names standardization in Africa, has coordinated with the International Geographical Union and the International Cartographic Association to realize the establishment of a joint working group/commission linked with the needs of UNGEGN, and has ensured the publication of a press kit and promotional postcards for the Sessions, and promoted the work of UNGEGN at the recent UNGGIM initiatives.

The UNGEGN website has expanded to include archival documents of most Conferences and Sessions, a World Geographical Names Database, sample national documentation relevant to standardization, and a portal to national authorities and online toponymic databases. UNGEGN has established or maintained liaison with a variety of international organizations having connections with geographical names, their use, their study, or the standards involved.

## **1. Sessions of UNGEGN**

Since the Ninth Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in New York in August 2007, UNGEGN has convened twice:

- 25<sup>th</sup> Session in Nairobi, 5-12 May 2009, and
- 26<sup>th</sup> Session in Vienna, 2-6 May 2011

In keeping with other similar meetings at the United Nations, the length of the UNGEGN Sessions has now been reduced to one week (five days), and the agenda has been reviewed and updated.

### ***Participation***

The 25<sup>th</sup> Session was the first to be held in Africa, but unfortunately the participation of African countries, which we had hoped to encourage with this locale, was no stronger than for other venues.

- In 2009 in Nairobi, there were 138 participants from 53 countries and 14 observers; 21 of the 23 UNGEGN divisions were represented;
- In 2011 in Vienna, there were 170 participants from 60 countries and 13 observers; 20 of the 23 divisions were present.

As on previous occasions, experts present agreed that the opportunities to network, to learn of new work and solution solving processes, to interact both inside and outside the sessions, and to liaise with user groups of geographical names are significant to the UNGEGN Sessions and the Conferences.

### ***Special presentations***

Both UNGEGN sessions had full agendas, with over 100 documents filed at each, indicating progress in field collection, office treatment, authorization, storage and dissemination of geographical names, as well as highlighting links to other geo-referenced data, use of names in disaster management, their role in cultural heritage, and the opportunities and challenges of the internet and social media. At the two sessions, special presentations were invited on topics thought to be of general interest to experts, including:

- UN Second Administrative Level Boundaries (SALB)
- UN Habitat – difficulties in addressing
- UN Spatial Data Infrastructure – Gazetteer Framework Project
- UN Global Geospatial Information Management (UNGIM)
- UNGEGN World Geographical Names Database
- UNECA – Africa GeoNyms software and gazetteer
- Google Earth and geographical names
- Unicode - transliteration
- Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) – its work with URLs
- International Council on Indigenous Place Names (ICIPN) – establishment and aims
- EuroGeoNames – creating a network of names databases for European countries
- Geographical names in disaster management – the example of Australia

### ***Exhibition, workshops, side events***

At both UNGEGN sessions, an exhibition of posters, maps, gazetteers, etc. has been created, with contributions from UNGEGN Working Groups, Divisions and countries. Before, at lunch time, and after the formal session hours, many workshops have been organized by UNGEGN and numerous informal small group meetings have been held.

### ***Africa essay and poem contests***

At the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> sessions of UNGEGN, we endeavoured to raise the level of awareness of geographical names in Africa by organizing an essay and poem contest for the continent. Interesting submissions were received in Arabic, English and French; the 2009 contest was won by Mr. Pax Mbuyi Mucici from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the 2011 contest by Ms. Naima Friha from Tunisia.

### ***Distribution of documents***

As far as possible, UNGEGN has moved to paperless sessions. This has been promoted by the use of an enhanced UNGEGN website ([unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN)) where, in addition to the complete list of documents presented at past UNGEGN sessions and UN Conferences, the documents themselves are being made available for download in pdf format. The help of the UNGEGN Secretariat and the UN Map Library with this archiving project is much appreciated.

### ***UNGEGN Bureau***

Over the past five years, the Bureau has consisted of:

Chair: Helen Kerfoot (Canada)  
Vice-Chairs: Brahim Atoui (Algeria)  
Ferjan Ormeling (Netherlands)  
Rapporteurs: William Watt (Australia)  
Leo Dillon (USA)

## **2. UNGEGN Working Groups**

To follow up on the Conference resolutions and to further aspects of geographical names standardization of general interest, UNGEGN has had 10 working groups, a Task Team for Africa and a coordinator for Toponymic Guidelines during the past five years.

These groups have been convened as follows:

- Training Courses in Toponymy Ferjan Ormeling (Netherlands)
- Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers Pier-Giorgio Zaccheddu (Germany)
- Toponymic Terminology Staffan Nyström (Sweden)
- Romanization Systems Peeter Päll (Estonia)
- Country Names Leo Dillon (USA)
- Publicity and Funding David Munro (UK)
- Evaluation and Implementation Ki-Suk Lee (Republic of Korea)
- Exonyms Peter Jordan (Austria)
- Pronunciation Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig (Ireland)
- Promotion of the recording and use of Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names William Watt (Australia)
- Task Team for Africa Brahim Atoui (Algeria)
- Toponymic Guidelines for map and other editors, for international use Isolde Hausner/Hubert Bergmann (Austria)

Many of these groups have met in person either in the framework of the UNGEGN sessions or at special gatherings between sessions, sometimes in conjunction with other UNGEGN or international activities.

### 3. UNGEGN Divisions

At the 24<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN Session (held in conjunction with the 9<sup>th</sup> Conference) the Portuguese-speaking Division of UNGEGN was created, thus providing 23 divisions to support grass-roots standardization work across the world, based either on common languages or geographical proximity. Some divisions remain very active, some have been regenerated over the past five years, but unfortunately others still remain unorganized and inactive – a situation we have not yet been able to remedy. In particular, efforts are in hand to revitalize the divisions of Africa.

Resolution VIII/5 advocates holding joint meetings of divisions and working groups to provide synergy between the groups. Several divisions (e.g. Dutch- and German-speaking Division; East Central and South-East Europe Division) have benefitted from such cooperative arrangements. Some divisions have met in conjunction with training courses or workshops (e.g. Africa Central Division; Africa East Division; Africa West Division); some with conferences and other meetings (e.g. Arabic Division; Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division; Asia South-West Division (other than Arabic); Norden Division; US/Canada Division). Some divisions have met on more than one occasion (e.g. Baltic Division; Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division) and some divisions have invited participants from other divisions.

A number of divisions have set up their own websites (e.g. Arabic Division; Baltic Division; Dutch- and German-speaking Division; East Central and South-East Europe Division; French-speaking Division; Latin America Division; Norden Division; Portuguese-speaking Division) and links are found to these on the UNGEGN website.

### 4. Communication and distribution of information

#### *Publications*

The UNGEGN publication plan for 2002-2007 included the publication of the *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names ...*; the *Technical reference manual for the standardization of geographical names ...*; the brochure *Geographical names as vital keys ...* (aimed at surveying, mapping and GIS institutions); and two issues annually of the *UNGEGN Information Bulletin*.

Following up during the 2007-2012 timeframe, UNGEGN (particularly through its Working Group on Publicity and Funding and with the help of the UNGEGN Secretariat) undertook to produce an illustrated kit to be used for the media and for promotion of the concept of geographical names standardization. This includes:

- An UNGEGN folder/cover for holding information sheets and brochures
- 12 information sheets:
  - The media kit (purpose and content of the kit)
  - Geographical names – part of our social and cultural values
  - Geographical names in a changing world
  - Geographical names – from cards to online databases: facing today’s digital challenges
  - What is the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) and what does it do?
  - How does UNGEGN work?

- Resolutions of the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names
- Why do we need geographical names standardization?
- Where to find out more about geographical names
- Other organizations involved in the standardization of geographical names
- Frequently asked questions
- What's in a name? Quotable quotes
- Postcards for experts to use to promote awareness of geographical names standardization: *A map, a name, an identity ...* focussed on the location of the UNGEGN sessions, Nairobi and Vienna
  - A third postcard is being prepared for the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference in New York
- A poster, based on the media kit cover, was prepared for UNGEGN's use in exhibitions
- Two issues of the *UNGEKN Information Bulletin* were prepared each year since the 2007 Conference (Issues 33 to 42)

The efforts of all who contributed to these outreach documents is gratefully acknowledged. These materials, together with reports from Sessions and Conferences have been made available for training, to UN groups interested in geographical names work, and to outside conferences for the increased awareness of UNGEGN's activity.

The Working Group on Exonyms has been very active in arranging publication of documents related to its meetings: *Exonyms and the International Standardisation of Geographical Names* (2007); *Geographical Names as a Part of the Cultural Heritage* (2009); and *Trends in Exonym Use* (2011).

### ***Outreach presentations***

Many UNGEGN experts have over the last five years been involved with the organization of academic groups with interest in toponymy and have made presentations or participated in discussion groups at conferences on matters of standardization - so spreading an awareness of the work of UNGEGN. Since 2007, the UNGEGN Chair has made a number of international presentations, including keynote addresses to the South-East Asia Survey Conference (2009); the International Cartographic Conference (2009); the Fifth International Symposium on Marine Geophysical Data and Undersea Feature Names (2010); and the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (2011).

### ***UN Global Geospatial Information Management (UNGGIM)***

In October 2011, the UNGEGN Chair and Vice-Chairs, together with members of the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation and the Working Group on Publicity and Funding met in conjunction with the High Level Forum on Global Geospatial Information Management (UNGGIM) in Seoul and were able to present an exhibition of aspects of geographical names standardization and to provide short lunch-time lectures on the relevance of UNGEGN's work to GGIM. This proved a successful approach to reach out to a number of countries not regularly participating in UNGEGN sessions.

### ***UNGEGN website***

The UNGEGN website ([unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN)) has been redesigned since the 9<sup>th</sup> Conference and has become more robust with addition of a considerable amount of content.

- It is a valuable source of information about standardization, including Conference and UNGEGN Session reports and documents dating back to the early gathering in the 1960s,<sup>1</sup>
- Upcoming UNGEGN-related events are noted and then kept for archival purposes
- Information and contacts are available on Working Groups and Divisions
- UNGEGN publications are available as pdf files, and examples of standardization documents from various countries are available for download
- Links are provided to countries: their national names authorities, their interactive databases, their toponymic guidelines
- Links are given for international and UN agencies involved with geographical names
- An interactive multilingual, multi-scriptual World Geographical Names Database has been designed and created, for users to access in map and tabular format the names of countries and capitals in the six UN languages and in the language(s) of the country itself, as well as the endonyms of cities/towns with a population over 100,000 (including their pronunciation through audio files). This contains over 7000 entries and is still in the process of development.
- Compendiums of UN Conference resolutions from the nine conferences are available as pdf files in English and French. In addition, the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation undertook the development of a database to access resolutions (in English) by conference, by subject or by word search. This is housed on the website of the National Geographic Information Institute (NGII) of the Republic of Korea and is linked to the UNGEGN website. At this time, through the French-speaking Division, a similar database is being developed for the resolutions in French.

### ***Database being created for UNGEGN Glossary***

The Working Group on Terminology is addressing the development of a database for the multilingual entries in the UNGEGN *Glossary* and *Addendum*. An online querying capability will be advantageous for users and such a database will facilitate the addition of new terms and definitions, some of which may be developed through collaboration with the ICOS terminology group.

### ***Training***

The Working Group on Training has also been using the web for the benefit of developing and distributing training materials. The UN Statistics Division has assisted financially for the update and finalization of the toponymic web training units (in English) that were started through the International Cartographic Association (ICA). Completion of this material and its availability to the public is anticipated by the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference (see <http://toponymycourses.geog.uu.nl/ICAcourses/index.html>). During the past five years, some training materials in French have also been put on the web through the French-speaking Division (<http://www.toponymiefrancophone.org/DivFranco/Formation/accueil.htm>). From 2007 to 2012, a number of courses have been organized and supported in part by finances from the countries

---

<sup>1</sup> “Missing” documents from earlier Conferences and Sessions are being tracked down and UNGEGN experts may be asked for their assistance with those remaining.

concerned, by groups such as AOCRS and RCMRD in Africa, and UN Statistics Division, in: Burkina Faso, Romania, Kenya, and Cameroon.

## **5. Liaison**

UNGEGN's liaison with other technical and scientific groups is an important opportunity for the promotion of the work on geographical names standardization and an opportunity to integrate various areas of knowledge with compatible data from different sources. As more groups have shown interest in this endeavour, UNGEGN has expanded its outreach.

Formal liaison has been maintained with the International Cartographic Association (ICA); the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO); the Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research (SCAR); and the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS). Through the UNGEGN Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, liaison has been established with ISO TC/211, the Unicode Consortium, and more recently with the United Nations Spatial Data Infrastructure (UNSDI) Gazetteer Framework. Since 2007, we have also established connections with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and with the International Council on Indigenous Place Names (ICIPN). In addition, European experts have been and continue to be important links to the EuroGeoNames project and data standards of the Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe (INSPIRE). Hopefully in the future, association can be expanded, for example, to connect better with UNESCO, and with the Association of American Geographers interest group involved with temporally enabled historical gazetteers.

Following the 26<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN Session in 2011, steps were taken by the International Geographical Union (IGU) and the International Cartographic Association (ICA) to establish a joint IGU/ICA Commission/Working Group on Toponymy. We are very pleased that UNGEGN experts can participate in this and that research subjects of interest to UNGEGN and the standardization of geographical names will be an important focus.

## **6. Progress with geographical names standardization in Africa**

In 2004, a Task Team on Africa was established within UNGEGN to address the lack of progress on geographical names standardization within African countries. Since 2006, the Team has been coordinated by Brahim Atoui (Algeria) and has established close ties with the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). The Team has worked with the African Organization for Cartography and Remote Sensing (AOCRS) to offer training in various parts of Africa (Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Kenya, and Cameroon). In addition, at international conferences in Africa the Team has been promoting awareness of the value of nationally standardized geographical names.

Most recently, Task Team members participated in a consultative workshop organized by UNECA and the Government of Botswana (2011) and drew up the Gaborone Action Plan (GAP), which was presented to StatCom-Africa in January 2012. This progress was followed up in Johannesburg in April 2012 and included advances in the design by UNECA of the free Africa GeoNyms software for database and gazetteer development for African countries. To maintain this momentum and to make positive strides forward on the African continent, leverage of pan-African and regional organizations is necessary, levels of awareness of management still need to

be raised, venues such as CODIST need to be fully utilized to increase the outreach, and capacity building in individual countries must be pursued.

Further details can be found in the various reports of the Task Team for Africa and in the *UNGEEN Information Bulletin*.

## **7. General remarks on UNGEEN's progress**

Over the past decade many countries have made great progress in the development of geographical names databases, some accessed through the web and linked to other geospatial data. On the other hand, the gap between the countries with advanced systems and those that have made little progress with geographical names standardization appears to increase. UNGEEN still has work to do in convincing managers of the value of geographical names from the technical, economic, and socio-cultural perspectives. This is needed in many parts of the world, not only in Africa, which has been a major focus for UNGEEN since 2004.

The benefits of geographical names standardization in querying other knowledge-based systems, and the great impact of the social media in bringing together volunteer geographical names information are now being experienced. The future of geographical names administration becomes even more challenging! The principles may remain the same, but the processes are ever changing.

In addition to databases and the establishment of geographical names authorities, papers submitted to UNGEEN have focussed on a variety of toponymic issues, including romanization systems, cultural heritage issues, exonyms and toponymic guidelines.

We are often asked whether the work started by the first group of experts in 1960 is nearly finished. I think we can surely say that we have made progress, but as the political face of the world changes, as languages never stay constant, and as technology and communication media sweep us forward, geographical names will continue to challenge us in the years ahead. We need to address the particulars of geographical names standardization, so that they can be used unambiguously by others and be useful key entry points for information – whether for the provision of humanitarian aid following a natural disaster, the planning of urban and rural infrastructures, census data collection, research into the identity and cultural diversity of our countries, or a vast array of other situations.

## **8. Appreciation**

I should like to pass on the thanks of UNGEEN to the UN Statistics Division – Paul Cheung, Stefan Schweinfest, Yacob Zewoldi, Sabine Warschburger, Amor Laaribi, Sibylle Marxgut, Vilma Frani, Li Wang, Jaspreet Doung, Paul Narain, and many other colleagues who have provided most valuable assistance and support over the past five years.

I personally would like to thank the Bureau members, Working Group convenors, Division chairs and many experts who have contributed so much to further the work of UNGEEN by their

knowledge, their enthusiasm, their dedication and their willingness to go the extra distance to move us forward.

**Further references**

Further details of the progress of UNGEGN can be found in:

*GEGN/26/10 Rev.1* 26<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN, Vienna, 2011

*GEGN/25/10* 25<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN, Nairobi, 2009

Messages from the Chairperson in each *UNGEGN Information Bulletin*

Ottawa,  
May 2012

---