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English  
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**Eleventh United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names**  
New York, 8-17 August 2017  
Item 9b of the Provisional Agenda\*  
**National Standardization: Office treatment of names**

**Guides for Sound Management of Urban Place Names**

Submitted by Canada\*\*

**Summary**

Since 2008, the majority of the global population has become urban, living in areas that typically have a great number and high density of geographical names, which are used by a large number of people.

Most of the time, national names authorities let cities and municipalities manage their place names, which are largely street names, as they see fit. Although a large number of cities are careful in the selection and display of urban geographical names, there are some that proceed without fully understanding the rules of the game. But the significance of geographical names in urban environments is indisputable. Therefore, it is in the public interest for the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names to take an interest in urban toponymy.

In Quebec, the management of urban names is a shared jurisdiction between local governments and the Commission de toponymie, which is the provincial names authority. To make its mandate and standards better known and to promote quality toponymy among local governments, the Commission recently published three guides: le Guide toponymique municipal [municipal toponymic guide], le Guide de l'affichage odonymique [odonymic posting guide] and le Guide des termes génériques [guide to generic terms].

We encourage national names authorities to take a close interest in the management of urban geographical names, and we are recommending that the adoption of a resolution on the importance of dedicating resources to the management of urban geographical names be considered by the Conference.

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\* E/CONF.105/1

\*\* Document prepared by Marie-Ève Bisson, Commission de toponymie du Québec, Canada.

## **Resolutions related to this document**

### **Principal resolution:**

**I/4** *National standardization (Recommendation C. Principles to apply for the office treatment of names)*

### **Secondary resolutions:**

**X/4** *Discourage the commercialization of geographical names*

**VIII/2** *Practices in relation to commemorative toponymic designations*

**VIII/9** *Geographical names as cultural heritage*

## Rise in urban toponymy

Since 2008, the majority of the global population has become urban, and the number of urban dwellers has continued to rise, year after year.<sup>1</sup> One of the challenges of global urbanization is obviously the management of urban zones as areas for living, working and education. The treatment of urban geographical names is one of these management challenges.

Most of the time, national names authorities give cities and municipalities the freedom to manage their place names as they see fit. Although a large number of cities carefully select and post their building, park and street names, among other places, this is not the case across the board. Practices that run counter to the recommendations of the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names are frequent, such as assigning the names of living people or giving commercial names to places.

Yet the importance of urban geographical names as reference points is indisputable. Urban areas typically have a large number and high density of geographical names, which are used by a huge number of people. Identification problems in relation to an unreliable toponymy often comes at a high cost to urban centres, especially with respect to the security of people and property, and the efficiency of travel and transport.

Furthermore, quality toponymy adds value to places, particularly to urban centres, by enhancing the cultural strength of urban communities. Place names that showcase local heritage or that pique curiosity or arouse wonder have the ability to strengthen the public's sense of belonging to its community. This aspect of toponymy is most often ignored by city administrations, which thereby miss an opportunity to preserve their heritage and stimulate citizen and visitor interest. Yet, the Conferences have long since recognized the undeniable value of place names as aspects of a country's cultural heritage.

It is therefore in the public interest for United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) to respond to the phenomenon of growing urbanization by encouraging national names authorities to guide, supervise and advise cities on urban toponymic matters. That way, the Conferences' resolutions can be implemented not only nationally, but also locally.

We are recommending that the adoption of a resolution on the importance of optimal management of urban geographical names and the relevance of dedicating resources to them be considered by the Conference.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014). World Urbanization Prospects. The 2014 Revision. United Nations.

## **Quebec**

In Quebec, local governments (cities and municipalities) and the Commission de toponymie, which is the provincial naming authority, share the jurisdiction over the management of urban toponymy.

Local governments are responsible for choosing the names of streets, public parks and public buildings. They must, however, make those choices in compliance with the standards set by the Commission so that the Commission can officially approve the name chosen.

The management of urban place names is therefore accomplished by collaboration between two administrative levels. This approach occasionally gives rise to difficulties, but it allows the Commission to play an advisory role in toponymic matters with cities and municipalities and to standardize urban geographical names throughout Quebec.

The Commission officially approves the place names chosen by cities and municipalities, as long as they comply with the toponymic standards in force. Then it disseminates them in its provincial database, called Banque de noms de lieux du Québec. The names are usually disseminated with a note explaining their origin, meaning and ties to the places they designate.

### **Guides for cities and municipalities**

As well as its rules on writing and its criteria for choosing names, the Commission and its mission are little known or not known at all by some local governments. The rules are sometimes difficult to understand and apply. Various situations can arise resulting in cities and municipalities having their name proposals rejected or in the Commission being unable to perform its duty of giving official approval.

In addition, cities and municipalities sometimes underestimate the importance of geographical names as essential reference points and invaluable local heritage components.

The 1st Conference recommended “that the names authority give adequate publicity to these principles and practices”. The Commission therefore implemented various means to make its mission and standards better known and to promote quality toponymy among its partners and clients. In Quebec, the dissemination of standards that apply to municipal names dates back to 1979. Since then, the Commission has refined its teaching tools and continually updates them.

It was in this context that a new collection of guides for cities and municipalities was introduced. Three short user-friendly guides with compelling graphics have been released since 2015. The

guides are free and available in print or in PDF format in the section [Toponymie municipale > Guides et documents](#) [French only] on the Commission de toponymie website.

### **Guide toponymique municipal**

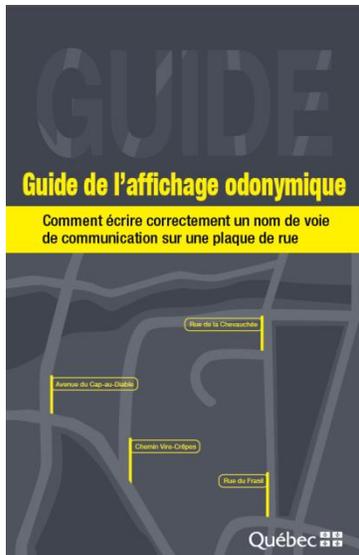
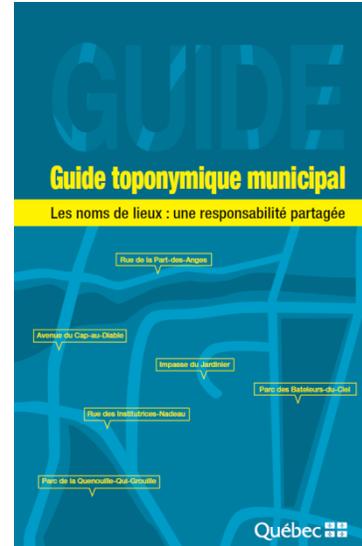
***Les noms de lieux : une responsabilité partagée*** (2015)

[French only]

*Municipal toponymic guide*

*Place names: a shared responsibility (2015)*

This guide informs cities and municipalities of the importance of toponymy, the reasons that justify official approval of place names by the Commission, the appropriate way to choose and write place names, the procedure for processing place names in cooperation with the Commission, the contraindicated practices, such as assigning the name of a living person or a trademark to a place, as well as the work of local toponymy committees.



### **Guide de l'affichage odonymique**

***Comment écrire correctement un nom de voie de communication sur une plaque de rue*** (2015) [French only]

*Odonymic signage guide*

*How to correctly write a name on a street sign*

This guide goes into detail about how to post an odonym according to the Charter of the French language, which is the legislation governing the management of place names and the use of language in Quebec. Typographical and abbreviation rules are also set out, as well as other information that may appear on a street sign, for instance, the name's origin.

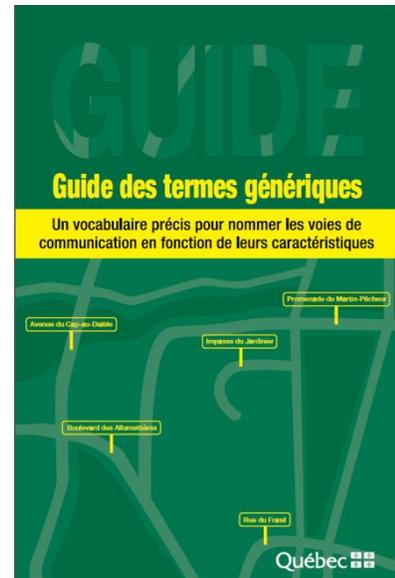
## [Guide des termes génériques](#)

***Un vocabulaire précis pour nommer les voies de communication en fonction de leurs caractéristiques*** (2017) [French only]

*Guide to generic terms*

*An accurate vocabulary for naming streets and roads based on their characteristics*

This guide provides a selection of generic terms for streets and roads (*impasse, avenue, boulevard, crescent, place, etc.*). It introduces terminology and definitions of various types of streets and roads approved by the Office québécois de la langue française, the body that works with the Commission de toponymie in the area of geographical terminology. Various examples and illustrations come with these explanations to guide cities and municipalities in the choice of generics that are in keeping with the configuration of the streets to be named. Eighteen generic terms that can be components of toponyms are explained and presented in a summary table.



These three guides contain a variety of real examples. Special attention is given to the choice of original and evocative toponyms to encourage the creation of quality place names.

## **Disseminating toponymic information**

The guides are intended for all city and municipal stakeholders so that they are well equipped to manage their geographical names. The primary stakeholders are city and municipal staff who must, for instance, plan the opening of new streets and choose their names, or interact with real estate developers, residents and elected officials. The latter should also review the content of these guides, since they are the ones who approve the names as members of municipal councils, and they may be questioned by residents regarding the choice of names.

Therefore, the aim is for the widest possible circulation of these guides. A dissemination program was developed for this purpose. It includes advertisements on social media and web media dedicated to urban issues and linguistics. In addition, hard copies of the three guides have been mailed to all cities and municipalities (1,110) in Quebec and a targeted information email was sent to all players in this field.

The guides have been very well received. In light of the success and obvious usefulness of these tools made available to the Commission's partners, there are plans for another guide(s) for local

governments in the future. The next one could address urban commemorative names, for instance.

The objective of these guides is to remedy the most commonly encountered problems and answer frequently asked questions in relation to geographical names in cities and municipalities. Therefore, it is on the basis of this objective that the topic of the future guide(s) will be selected.

We encourage the national names authorities to do the same and take a close interest in the management of urban geographical names. Without assuming the management of urban toponyms, they can at least implement awareness-raising activities among city administrations to make them aware of the Conferences' recommendations in the area of geographical names standardization and the national geographical naming standards. This is how to bring about an increased and genuine awareness of the benefits that a community can derive from the standardization of the geographical names of the area it lives in. Knowledge in toponymy can only add to the healthy development of cities, which are now the living environment of most of the world's population.