

Document prepared by Ad-hoc Group of Evaluation Committee  
(Randall, Lee, Narkli, Omeling) asked to devise a brochure

## THE UNITED NATIONS AND GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Geographical names, such as Lillehammer, Firenze, and Fuji San, are elements of basic information needed to refer to places in the world. Expressed in their standardized forms they support effective national and international communication.

Names are important to each of us ...

Names identify	* our landscape
Names express	* our national identity
	* our cultural heritage
Names create	* our framework of orientation
	* our keys to the electronic age
Names promote	* our awareness of the world around us

Globally, they impact on the work of the United Nations ... in environmental management, sustainable development, peacekeeping operations, economic aid, the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People ...

The spelling and application of names of cities, villages, land and water features must be clear, accurate, current, and unambiguous. Effective communication depends on appropriate use of these names on maps, in the media, and in legal documents. Inaccuracy and misrepresentation may lead to inefficiency and misdirection.

### CLARITY OR CONFUSION?

Names spelled in different ways; frequently changing names; one name applied to more than one feature; more than one name applied to one feature. These are but a few elements impeding effective communication.

The problems can be compounded when the names are also expressed in different writing systems ... Arabic, Chinese, Cyrillic, Hebrew, Japanese, and so on. Ways of converting these scripts to the Roman alphabet ("romanization") may be many. Map and atlas users might wonder which name is correct, Jenissei, Ienissei, or Yenisey, all used for the same river in Russia.

Journalists and the public may not understand each other when Basra and Al-Bassrah are used for the same place in different transcriptions of the original Arabic name; or when Cape Town, Kaapstad, Ekapa, Le Cap, Kapstadt, or Kapkaupunki are used interchangeably, even though in different language texts. News from Wien may not be seen as identical to that from Vienna, Wenen or Bécs!

## UNITED NATIONS ROLE

In 1959 the United Nations initiated a systematic approach to resolving obstructions in the use of geographical names for effective communication. The United Nations established the milieu for the meeting of a small international group of experts. Following their study and recommendations, the first United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names was held in Geneva in 1967. Since then, to develop principles of national and international names standardization, there have been another five such conferences held at five-yearly intervals.

To follow up the work of the conferences and to undertake and promote the implementation of conference resolutions, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) was formed. This brings together geographers, cartographers, linguists, and historians from different geographical/linguistic divisions, which in turn promote the aims of UNGEGN within their own parts of the world.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS

National and international standardization of geographical names is fundamental to effective communication and essential to our socio-economic development, in such fields as

- \* trade and commerce
- \* population census and national statistics
- \* property rights and cadastre
- \* urban and regional planning
- \* environmental conservation
- \* security strategy
- \* search and rescue operations
- \* natural disaster and emergency preparedness
- \* map and atlas production
- \* automatic navigation
- \* tourism

## GOALS OF UNGEGN

In order to improve world communications, UNGEGN has developed a programme that aims to:

- \* stimulate the establishment of an authority in each country for national names standardization (with particular attention to issues associated with multilingual areas and names used by indigenous peoples)
- \* provide or encourage training courses to nations wishing to form national names authorities
- \* promote the use of nationally standardized names on maps and in documents
- \* encourage the dissemination of standardized names through the publication of national gazetteers (alphabetical lists of names, with coordinates and other data)
- \* promote the development of national automated data processing capabilities and international technology exchange
- \* encourage collaboration between countries on standardization of names for transboundary features

## ACHIEVEMENTS OF UNGEGN

Encouraging results on the standardization of geographical names have been achieved with UN support, since the first conference was held in 1967:

- \* many nations now have names standardization programmes
- \* toponymic training courses have been offered to different language groups and held on different continents
- \* national gazetteers and guidelines for the use and application of geographical names have been published by a number of countries
- \* romanization systems for geographical names in some non-Roman scripts have been adopted
- \* many countries now have digital data bases of geographical names, often in conjunction with national mapping programmes
- \* an initial glossary of terminology and a methodology for geographical names collection have been published
- \* links have been forged with cartographic and hydrographic agencies, and other organizations, to encourage their use of standardized names

## THE FUTURE

Geographical names are living elements of our culture and change over time. There remains a considerable amount of work for UNGEGN to do, in particular to address the many questions that arise as the political patterns of the world change and management of our environment becomes ever more crucial.

The members of UNGEGN, through divisional and plenary activities, must develop programmes to implement national and international names standardization as identified at the six conferences, and must actively address:

- \* outreach to developing countries that do not have names standardization mechanisms, data bases (digital or manual) or national gazetteers
  - \*\* through training courses and technical assistance
- \* development of single romanization systems for scripts still not treated systematically
- \* dissemination and wider use of nationally authorized names
- \* publication of pertinent tools to assist UNGEGN members, (for example, training course manuals and a dictionary on terminology)

It is essential to recognize fully the important role of UNGEGN as a forum which may relieve political pressures and help to promote peace among the nations of the world.

For information on available publications and the UNGEGN programme, contact:

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