
United Nations
Group of Experts on
Geographical Names

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MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON PUBLICITY AND FUNDING

Suggested Text for an Information Brochure
on UNGEFN

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Of what interest to the UN are geographical names?

Geographical names identify places just as personal names identify people. Normally we do not expect people to have more than one name. Places can have many names and are known to some people by one name and to others by names which may be very different.

Is that of concern to the UN?

Yes, indeed. Geographical names are in constant use in disaster relief, food and economic aid, peace-keeping operations and every aspect of UN activity. Unambiguous communication is of the utmost importance.

Why do geographical names vary so much? Surely, each place has its own name?

There may be more than one name for a given place and each of them may be written differently in the rest of the languages of the world. So, even if a place has a single name it may be spelled differently in one language from the way it is spelled in another.

Then why not have a single spelling for every name?

That would be ideal but it must be remembered that not all languages use the roman alphabet. So a uniform way of writing geographical names in other scripts would still have to be found. Nevertheless the United Nations would very much like to have a single written form for every name.

Why is that not possible?

Because names of all kinds are part of every person's vocabulary, we recognize places by the name we know. Somehow the whole world would have to agree to discard the familiar names and learn entirely new names which could prove difficult to pronounce and very hard to remember.

How did the situation become so complicated?

From early times geographical names were passed from one person to another with more or less distortion, according to the ability to reproduce the correct sounds and record them efficiently. In that way names varied from one language to another at a very early date. Once knowledge of the world expanded more names were added, each adapted to a speaker's own language. With the great expansion in topographic mapping which began two centuries ago vast numbers of names were added to the world stock but they often conflicted with earlier names and were written according to the preferences of the world's major languages. There were, for example, some 20 or more systems used for transferring Arabic names to the roman alphabet and many systems for Russian, Chinese and so on.

Is that how the UN became involved?

That was the situation when the UN came into being. Its birth coincided with the onset of a revolution in transportation and communication which, metaphorically speaking, brought the ends of the world together. A technological revolution also occurred, computers and satellites coupled with huge strides made in economic development, promised a new world. UN membership steadily increased as new nations joined the old.

When did the UN take positive action?

Until 1959 there had been constant uncertainty over the spelling of geographical names and a small team of experts recognized as prominent in the field were invited to study questions and try to find answers. They first decided to reduce the number of romanization systems and suggest a standard system for each non-roman alphabet writing system. Many geographical areas were studied and it was felt necessary to hold an international conference to try to obtain world agreement. In that manner the first Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names came to be held in Geneva in 1967.

→ too long ago

Was the conference a success?

A great deal was achieved but much remained to be done. One outcome was the creation of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names whose duty lay in studying issues affecting standardization and preparing the ground for future conferences which continue to be held at five-year intervals.

What authority does UNGEGN have?

UNGEKN has no executive authority. Its findings require international agreement at the five-yearly conferences. The aims are:

1. To promote the national standardization of geographical names.
2. To promote international standardization.
3. To study the problems of multi-lingual areas.
4. To devise and agree on romanization systems.
5. To exchange experiences and results of standardization.
6. To encourage the creation of standardizing agencies.
7. To ensure that standardized names are used on maps and in gazetteers and other publications.
8. To encourage the production of gazetteers and lists of names.
9. To promote international exchange of technologies relevant to geographical names.
10. To encourage the organization of training courses.

ad hoc Group of Evaluation
 was asked to devise a procedure for ROK and UN/NAFTA and impact
 see the merits of both proposals if they cannot be compared
 To I would propose to have the other proposal detailed as well
 discussion of jeep names

→ detracts!
 In order to get the interest of a larger public, a brochure

→ It has to tie in to current problems and issues → have some specific examples

→ it has to give examples of achievements

→ It has to have a positive tone

like the conversion systems mentioned in the brochure