UNITED NATIONS

---

Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
Eighteenth Session
Geneva, 12-23 August 1996

Working Paper
No. 59

---

Items 9 & 17
of the Provisional Agenda

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON TOPONYMIC DATA FILES
AND GAZETTEERS

IMPLEMENTATION OF RESOLUTIONS AND THE AIMS
AND FUNCTIONS OF UNGEGN

News from the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers

Submitted by: H A G Lewis (UK)

# News from the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers

My contributions to the Newsletter of May, 1995 suffered a number of editorial changes made in the United Nations. A corrigendum was issued. Unfortunately those same contributions of mine were re-issued in the May 1996 Newsletter (No.17) with the same errors plus a few more.

I give below the correct version of my contribution as Chairman of the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers and I am appending a list of corrections to all three items in the Newsletters.

## Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers

In the closing stages of the Seventeenth Session of UNGEGN, I prepared a list of matters which the Working Group should consider in the period up to the next session. Unfortunately, the list was mislaid and attempts to recover it have not been successful. I give below a modified version of it.

Four years ago, a questionnaire was sent out to UNGEGN members requesting the status of gazetteers and, in considerable detail, the particulars of equipment and methods employed in the handling of geographical names. In the case of the UK, it took six weeks to prepare answers to the questions, gathering information from the various agencies. No matter how carefully such questions are prepared, the circumstances of the recipient rarely allow positive and clear answers to be given. Furthermore, the various official agencies use different equipment and procedures. Within two years, almost all the information provided by the UK was no longer valid. Such is the rate of development in the computer world that a further two years has seen even more changes in the United Kingdom equipment and procedures.

Nevertheless, I considered, in New York, that there may be some merit in re-examining all the information provided by way of answers to the questionnaire. However, I have not yet been able to obtain copies of the completed questionnaires. In view of the continuing advances in computer systems, there may not be much to be gained by a re-examination of the results of the questionnaire.

In the past decade there have been remarkable advances in the hardware and software available for the handling and processing of geographical names and there are numerous vendors offering their equipment and services. Technology applicable to geographical names exists and it must be presumed is available to all.

The most promising development at the present time is the Geographical Names Processing System (GNPS), described by US experts during the Seventeenth Session of UNGEGN. The United Kingdom has not yet acquired this system because of further developments which are proceeding. The system is a major step forward in the integration of names databases and map production. Developments of the system will be watched with great interest.

During the Seventeenth Session, I referred to the development of computer-generated characters of script for use in mapping. There are numerous alphabets and other scripts available on the market. They are almost all designed for word-processing and desk-top publishing. Of them, few are suitable for high quality topographic maps. In mapping we require legibility; economy of space; a range of sizes and a certain variety of styles. Legibility, especially in small type sizes is not easily achieved on a highly coloured map background and the other requirements are similarly not easy to satisfy. Although this is basically a cartographic problem, the close association of names databases and maps in this age makes the subject relevant to UNGEGN.

Those who have had experience of selecting type-faces for mapping will know that of the great number of type-faces in the Roman alphabet, very few are found to be wholly suitable. For non-Roman alphabet characters, that is still more true. In those circumstances, in the absence of a ready-made type-face suitable for the purpose, it is often necessary to create one's own type faces. The disadvantage in doing so is that others associated with the same mapping will lack the identical

type-faces. For this reason, it is important that we keep abreast of the development of the kind of high quality digital characters which can be applied to mapping.

The hard-back gazetteer is a desirable object but it is a costly publication and it suffers from the added disadvantage that it is not easily updated. Amendment leaflets are not very satisfactory and production of a revised edition is also costly.

Digital cartography affords the facility of extracting names, co-ordinates of location and also some degree of names classification by type of feature to which the name refers. Names extracted in this way from all the map sheets which make up a given map series furnish us with an index of the names appearing on that series. Though such an output cannot be altogether expected to conform to the specifications set down at the First Conference (Geneva, 1967), it, nonetheless, merits the name "gazetteer".

The advantages of producing a gazetteer from a digital map series are the ability to produce a new gazetteer at frequent intervals, the possibility of providing it in hard copy, disk or tape, or through any of the digital communication channels, while at the same time guaranteeing that the data is up-to-date.

Should the need arise, gazetteers of this type can be issued for, say, 1/250,000 series or 1/50,000 series or any other scales for which the digital map data is available.

For those of us who try to maintain databases of names, there are two constant needs:

1.      We need to be informed of name changes.
2.      We need to have up-to-date administrative data, together with the means of
        plotting it, at the largest possible scale.

Ideally, the name changes should include the former name but, most importantly, as precise a location as possible and not less accurately than one minute of latitude and longitude.

Some countries have provided information on name changes and that has been distributed by the Secretariat, but there is a need for the practice to continue and for information from more countries in view of the number of name changes occurring throughout the world nowadays.

With regard to administrative information, this is a useful element in the preparation of gazetteers and also in confirming the location of places. Information of this kind is available from various sources but, generally, at only a very small scale. What is required is information at the largest possible scale but not less than 1/1M.

In view of the remarks made earlier in this communication, I hope experts will agree that the issue of a further questionnaire is not desirable. At the same time, information is required on how best any help can be provided where it is needed. It is therefore requested that experts themselves state where in their Divisions procedures or equipment are felt to be deficient. The following aspects of names collection and processing are applicable, but further items can be added as required by individual experts.

1.      Field collection of names, including methods of recording and transmission.
2.      Names processing in the office.
3.      Questions involving names databases:
        (i)     Archival
        (ii)    Map production
        (iii)   Gazetteer production
        (iv)    Questions involving feature designation in databases and gazetteers
        (v)     Storage and integration of administrative data
        (vi)    Other outputs from names databases.

Members of UNGEGN are asked to give their views.

# Corrigenda to Newsletter 17 May 1996

| | |
|---|---|
| Page 3 | After "General remarks on UNGEGN" insert "by H A G Lewis (UK)" |
| Page 3, 3 lines from bottom of page | Delete "has"; insert "have" |
| Page 4, paragraph 1, line 2 | Delete "favor"; insert "favour" |
| Page 4, paragraph 4, line 2 | After "1967" insert "and" |
| Page 4, paragraph 4, line 5 | Delete "onomastic"; insert "onomastics" |
| Page 4, paragraph 5, line 3 | Delete "involved"; insert "involve" |
| Page 4, paragraph 6, sub-paragraph 1, line 1 | Delete "onomastic"; insert "onomastics" |
| Page 4, last line | Delete "geographical names"; insert "geographical name" |
| Page 5, line 3 | Delete "as"; insert "a" |
| Page 5, line 11 | Delete "eye"; insert "eyes" |
| Page 5, line 14 | Delete "ethno-morass"; insert "ethno-political morass" |
| Page 5 | After " The definition of exonym and endonym" insert "by H A G Lewis (UK)" |
| Page 5, 8 lines from bottom of page | Delete "exonyms"; insert "exonym" |
| Page 5, 7 lines from bottom of page | Delete "names"; insert "name" |
| Page 6, paragraph 2, line 3 | Delete "Geneva"; insert "Genève" |
| Page 7, line 7 | Delete "official"; insert "officially recognised" to read "officially recognised languages" |
| Page 7, lines 9 & 10 | Delete "A name of a geographical entity as written in one of the officially recognized national languages" and insert "A name of a geographical entity in a sovereign country as written in one of the indigenous languages of that country". |
| Page 15 | After the title "B. Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers" delete "Peter Raper (South Africa)"; insert "H A G Lewis (UK)" |
| Page 15, 11 lines from bottom of page | Delete "at present time"; insert "at the present time" |
| Page 15, bottom line | Delete "colored"; insert "coloured" |
| Page 16, paragraph 2, lines 1 - 2 | After "great number" insert "of" to read "the great number of type-faces..." |
| Page 16, paragraph 3, line 1 | Delete "hard-backed"; insert "hard-back" |
| Page 16, paragraph 5, line 3 | Delete "date"; insert "data" to read "data is up-to-date" |
| Page 16, 12 lines from bottom of page | Delete "off"; insert "of" |