

CLOSING REMARKS FROM THE CHAIR OF THE 20TH SESSION OF UNGEGN NEW YORK, JANUARY 2000

In this age of rapid technological change, geographical names are a basic reference for communication and are as important, or perhaps even more important, than previously. Only in standardized forms can we assure that such references are easily understood and unambiguous. As we note in the new UNGEGN brochure, fields of activity such as search and rescue, trade and commerce, planning, tourism, education and so on, require quick access to readily understood toponymic framework. By continuing to create, refine and expand our national names standardization work we are contributing to the success of national and international endeavors in many realms.

We have at this session seen the expansion and strengthening of toponymic programmes and noted the development of place name boards, and of laws to facilitate this work. We have seen the progress in various parts of the world, and in different languages, of the creation of geographical names databases, gazetteers, and toponymic guidelines. Above all we have witnessed the tremendous expansion in distribution of geographical names data and supporting documents through the World Wide Web. Greater ability to reach a wider audience – be it cartographers, publishers, educators or the general public – makes all our efforts more worthwhile. It gives us the opportunity for increased visibility of our work and, I feel, underlines the necessity for our geographical names standardization to be accurate and authoritative. We must also openly welcome liaison officers and observers – in fact, users of names – and we should encourage them to be at our sessions.

In several ways we have seen progress in addressing the UN Conference resolutions... through the achievements of divisions and through our working groups: romanization, country names, digital files and gazetteers, training courses, terminology, and publicity and funding. We have seen new and vital cultural aspects of toponymy presented in video, CD-ROM and interactive media.

Even though accomplishments have been many, our shortcomings are still evident. Although some divisions have shown very strong support, the absence of participation from Africa Central, Africa East, Africa West, and India divisions still shows our need for further outreach, particularly to developing countries. Absolutely we must continue efforts to contact and enable the participation of such countries, both at meetings and on the path to national standardization of geographical names.

The build for the future, our geographic/linguistic divisions must play their role in encouraging the work within all UN member states in their divisions; we must use the electronic media, further develop websites and provide the vital links between them. We shall continue to develop training in toponymic methods and to look for opportunities to enhance this programme.

We must make the work of UNGEGN itself more effective and we trust that the UNGEGN Secretariat will be a focal point to help us move forward towards the goals of national and international geographical names standardization.

We have gained inspiration and incentive from this session in New York. We will continue our tasks with renewed vigor when we return home, but will look forward to renewing these personal contacts and expanding our horizons in Berlin in 2002.

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