

**Twenty-third Session  
Vienna, 28 March – 4 April 2006**

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**Agenda item 3  
Report of the Chairperson**

**Report of the UNGEGN Chairperson**

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**Submitted by the UNGEGN Chairperson**

## **REPORT OF THE UNGEGN CHAIRPERSON**

As UNGEGN Chair I have the pleasure to report to you as we embark upon the 23rd Session of UNGEGN.

To put our work into perspective, I mention that it was originally in 1948 that the United Nations Economic and Social Council discussed the coordination of cartographic services and the associated problems of standardization of geographical names from an international perspective. After more than a decade of proposals and resolutions at the UN, the first meeting of an expert group was held in 1960 – over 45 years ago. From their recommendations in these early days have come the Conferences on geographical names standardization and the sessions of UNGEGN, to follow up this work between conferences. UNGEGN is currently one of only six active standing committees and expert bodies of the Economic and Social Council – so the responsibility is ours to build on the legacy of the geographical names experts from previous eras.

Of course, the world has not stood still while we have endeavoured to address questions of national and international representation of geographical names! In many respects, “change” seems to be taking place at an exponential rate. And we could certainly debate whether in our work on geographical names we are keeping up with this. The technology and communication networks that provide us with instantaneous access to information around the globe, are giving us the opportunity to show the world that we are doing our job in establishing clear unambiguous names at the national level and that we are making them easily available for international users – millions of users, who today want this information to be accurate and up to date, immediately accessible at their finger tips and in an easy to use format. Are we then doing our work to the fullest? Well, I think you will agree, that although we have come a long way since the first experts meeting in 1960, we still have far to go! Not every country has a process for authorizing their names; our goals for systematic romanization of names for international use are not yet met; those seeking authoritative names for cartographic or other purposes are still faced with numerous problems ... and so on. Sometimes it can seem quite overwhelming to consider how all this can be accomplished!

However, if we look around we see how important these basic framework data are to humanity. National and regional maps and geographic information systems are fundamental in planning, in infrastructure management, in addressing natural and human disasters – for instance, in prediction or in damage control, with respect to floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, health pandemics or mass starvation. Standardized names are a very basic and essential element in these georeferenced systems – whether we talk of paper copies used on the ground, or digital data used at control centres. Surely, in an ongoing way we should be helping to prepare this solid data foundation – and not waiting for emergency situations, when attention should be focussed on assistance, not on inadequacies of the data. In looking to solutions in such fields as environmental pollution, effects of climate change, or the UN Millennium Development Goals, clearly we should be stepping forward to provide the all-important basic geographical names data to enable the work of others in addressing these issues.

In mentioning these technical issues, I do not forget the important role of geographical names in communicating our cultural values – in establishing our sense of belonging, in moulding our history, and in giving fabric to our identity.

Although I see many challenges for us, I am well aware that much useful geographical names work has been taking place.

### **(1) Some activities since the 22nd Session (2004)**

Between UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names, UNGEGN is responsible for continuity of the work in this field, and for moving ahead with the implementation of Conference resolutions. Since 2004, focal points of our work have been distributed across the world – through UNGEGN Working Groups, Divisions, and, of course, individual Member States themselves – all undertaking various activities in the field of geographical names standardization. We have also been working closely with the UNGEGN Secretariat to move forward and to bring to fruition a number of projects for the benefit of Member States.

I feel very honoured to have had the opportunity to participate with many of you in Working Group and Division meetings in various countries. I extend a very personal thank you to all those who have shown so much enthusiasm and have organized such interesting meetings. With others, I have exchanged correspondence and information with others through e-mail.

### **UNGEKN Working Groups**

Currently we have 10 Working Groups, responsible for moving ahead issues involving names and naming, both in the area of technical georeferencing and in the realm of cultural heritage. During the past two years, many of these Working Groups have been able to meet and advance their work.

- The Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy has acted cooperatively with local organizers in Mozambique, Australia, Indonesia and Austria to offer UNGEGN-assisted training to younger employees involved in the administration of toponymy on four continents. In addition, this Working Group is moving ahead with delivering training to a wider audience through the use of courses on the Internet.
- The Working Group on Country Names met in Greece in November 2005, and will be reporting to us on their work in building up information on names of countries in the languages and writing systems of the countries themselves – this, of course, in addition to maintaining information on country names in the six languages of the United Nations.

- The Working Group on Exonyms met in Slovenia in May 2005. Members presented papers on aspects of exonyms, aiming at a greater understanding of this complex subject. A publication on exonyms is being planned and contributions of lists of exonyms to database projects was discussed.
- Members of the Working Group on the Promotion of Indigenous and Minority Group Names met in the Netherlands in April 2005, in conjunction with a symposium organized by the Dutch- and German-speaking Division. Their major task is to develop and test a template that will allow Member States that wish to do so, to contribute information on work achieved in indigenous and minority group toponymy. The goal is to finalize the template at this Session so that Member States can provide data for entry before the 2007 Conference.
- In November 2005, the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation and the Working Group on Publicity and Funding held a joint meeting in the Republic of Korea. The primary aims were to review current activities of UNGEGN and the Conferences, and to look at future directions. Both Working Groups will report and continue their work at this Session.

Other Working Groups may not have met as formally as these groups, but may well have exchanged useful information by e-mail. For instance, the Working Group on Romanization has been making advances in the romanization system for Armenian and has been following up on the implementation of some of the UN-approved romanization systems.

The activities of all the Working Groups are fundamental aspects of the work of this UNGEGN Session. The Convenors of these various Groups are invited to chair their formal agenda items and also to convene informal meetings to make optimum progress during our time together in Vienna.

### **UNGEKN Divisions**

We now have 22 geographic/linguistically based Divisions, and we are aware that some Divisions have been able to hold meetings over the last two years ... for instance: Arabic, Asia South-East and Pacific South-West, Baltic, Dutch- and German-speaking, Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia, Norden, Romano-Hellenic, United States-Canada ... and, I hope, other Divisions. Another approach has been taken by the French-speaking Division, in producing and circulating a divisional information bulletin. We certainly hope that while we are here in Vienna, Divisions will make the opportunity to hold their own meetings to reinforce the work being done in their area.

Some very interesting projects are being undertaken cooperatively in Divisions ... for example, indexes, gazetteers, and dictionaries of names; comparison of generic terminology; workshops on standardization topics; a map using only endonyms of places and features in the Division; databases of specific language exonyms; data gathering on training needs; toponymy training on the web, etc. have all progressed to various stages. No doubt these items will be included in reports to be presented here in Vienna so that we may share this useful work on standardization.

I sincerely appeal to Chairs of the Divisions to reach out to countries within the Division that have less well developed networks for geographical names work, to encourage them and to acquire points of contact within countries that are less active in the UNGEGN activities. Clearly we must also continue to try to find ways to enable Divisions that are themselves inactive.

***Cross-divisional work.*** It has been interesting to see the interaction between Divisions during the year. For instance, a number of Divisions have invited participation from neighbouring Divisions in their meetings – a worthwhile experience for all concerned. On a larger scale we certainly acknowledge the tremendous effort that is being put into developing a common base for Europe, through the EuroGeoNames project.

### **Individual Member States**

Work on standardization within the individual Member States of the UN will be reported at the Conference in 2007. However, I am aware that work in many countries continues to move forward, enhanced and encouraged by the ongoing development of electronic and communication media. It is so important for us to have our names data accurate, authoritative and available as widely as possible and to avoid the “unknown, unmaintained and unusable” syndrome.

In collecting data on the existence of national names authorities, we see that 7 countries noted a new (or revitalized) names authority since 2000, and that 12 countries are hoping to establish one in the new future. At the previous Session of UNGEGN, Malaysia and Viet Nam were the latest countries to have established national names authorities. And at this Session, I understand Andorra now has a national names authority, and that Guinea will have one by May this year. Perhaps you also have news of others that may be added to our list of contacts.

### **Work with the UNGEGN Secretariat**

Since the last UNGEGN Session, I have worked closely with the UNGEGN Secretariat, in particular with Mr. Amor Laaribi. There are a number of projects very important to UNGEGN and Member States that have been making progress. I mention them here, but am sure that Mr. Laaribi will elaborate further in the Secretariat report.

- Some basic financial support for UNGEGN training courses has now been established, and since the 2004 UNGEGN Session, has been used towards the courses in Mozambique, Australia, Indonesia and Austria.
- Based on resolutions at the 2002 Conference, two manuals were submitted in 2004 to the UNGEGN Secretariat for publication. The basic manual on geographical names standardization is currently at press in its English-language edition, with other language editions to follow prior to the 2007 Conference. The technical manual still remains to be published before the 2007 Conference.

- Another exciting project that we have been promoting since before the 22nd Session of UNGEGN, is the UNGEGN Geographical Names Database, being developed by Mr. Amor Laaribi at the UNGEGN Secretariat. To serve UN and public needs, this multilingual multisciplinary database will include names of countries, capitals and major cities, georeferenced to a world map base. It will give us the opportunity to link variants (for instance, exonyms and historical names) to the appropriate endonymic forms of the names. Modelling and database design work has been undertaken; a number of experts have provided feedback, and sample data have been gathered for demonstration purposes. This project is very important to UNGEGN, as it allows us to bring together aspects of the work that has for many years been discussed at our sessions. We look forward to presentation and discussion of this project.
- The UNGEGN website (housed within the Statistics Division) is now developing to be robust and increasingly useful. Information on upcoming activities, on Working Group and Division contacts, on links to national organizations and their data, and to past and present UN and UNGEGN documents is being built up. We are trying to keep this updated at least on a twice-yearly basis and are collaborating with the UN Map Library to help with availability of back documents.
- In following up resolutions, we also note the continuation of the UNGEGN Information Bulletin (formerly the UNGEGN Newsletter) on a semi-annual basis.

I take this opportunity to thank, on behalf of all experts, Mr. Amor Laaribi and Ms. Jennifer Javier (now retired), for their continued hard work and most valuable help. In addition, I would like to express my thanks to managers of the Statistics Division – in particular, Mr. Paul Cheung and Mr. Stefan Schweinfest – for their interest and support for UNGEGN activities.

## **(2) Work at the 23rd Session and looking to the future**

This Session gives us the opportunity to consolidate some of the work in hand since the 8th Conference, and to look ahead to the 9th Conference.

We have some changes from the past. As the Session has been reduced to six days, we shall need to work more effectively, particularly with regard to our handling of Division reporting. At the last Session we introduced the idea of a few longer, key presentations. We shall again follow this up, and hope to have special presentations on databases and their interoperability, the development of the UNGEGN Geographical Names Database, the need for geographical names data for use within the UN, and the question of geographical names standardization in Africa, as well as demonstrations on web-based training.

I thank all UNGEGN experts who are acting as liaison officers with scientific and technical organizations, and I welcome others who are joining us from these organizations. I see cooperation with such organizations as very important, and encourage all of you, to promote the work of UNGEGN to a wider audience at venues offered by these groups.

We are endeavouring to move UNGEGN forward in tune with the technical and communication advancements we are experiencing. Also, this Session provides an opportunity for us to consider whether we should be suggesting to the forthcoming Conference some thoughts for change, remembering that, like turning around a ship, it takes time to adopt operational changes for the Conferences held every five years! We have seen that participation has continued to rise at the last few Conferences, but from the survey we took in Berlin we are aware that participants might like to see some different approaches. You will have the opportunity to discuss this later in this meeting, or to provide your ideas in writing after the Session.

In concluding, I thank you for being part of this meeting in Vienna. Two of the main positive aspects of the UNGEGN Sessions have been noted as the opportunity to learn about new developments around the world and to exchange information and opinions, both formally and informally. I hope this Session will fulfill these needs. Recently I noted some of the qualities necessary for succeeding in the famous winter dogsled races in Yukon and Alaska – they seem pertinent to us as well – a keen commitment, energy, enthusiasm, and perseverance. I'm sure we measure up well, so I think we have the winning solution!

Please be assured that I will help in whatever way I can to make the Session a success, and I wish everyone an interesting and productive meeting.

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