

**Twenty-fifth session
Nairobi, 5–12 May 2009**

Item 3 of the provisional agenda

Report of the Chairperson

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REPORT OF THE UNGEGN CHAIRPERSON

2007-2009

Summary

This report indicates the continued need for geographical names administration after nearly 50 years of UN conferences on standardization and UNGEGN sessions. The particular reasons for holding this UNGEGN session in Nairobi are described and the work of UNGEGN since the Ninth Conference is elaborated. Some comments about this Session and future directions are included.

UNEGN – nearly 50 years on

As UNGEGN Chair I am pleased to report to you as we commence the 25th Session of UNGEGN.

I remind everyone that we are continuing a long tradition, as it is just short of 50 years since the first Experts group met in New York, following a recommendation from the United Nations Economic and Social Council. UNGEGN is one of the seven expert bodies of ECOSOC and as such we have the responsibility to continue the work of standardization started by the earlier experts.

The year 1960, when the first meeting was held, was certainly a very different time and a different world in the sense of technology, communications and global politics from the scenario today. Nevertheless the need still exists – perhaps with even a stronger sense of urgency – for clear unambiguous nationally approved geographical names available for all potential users. In the past we spoke of national names authorities and gazetteers, but did not have the advantage of databases for storage and manipulation of the records, nor of national data infrastructures in which names can link data sets, nor the benefits of internet which allows us to distribute names in text, on maps and in other formats, for millions of users, both in our own countries and worldwide. In the early days of UNGEGN we talked of cartographic use of names, but rarely also referred to the questions of cultural heritage and identity to which we also clearly recognize the significance of names today.

The need for geographical names in geo-referenced data sets is today fundamental around the world, clear and unambiguous names are vital for GIS used for humanitarian aid, natural hazard prediction, census data collection, infrastructure development, and so on. On the other side of the coin, is the recognition of toponyms as valued links with our history, our culture and our

identity – in the context of official and national languages, as well as indigenous, minority and regional groups.

We have, over the past 50 years, advocated the standardization of geographical names around the world and the challenges we face today remain as thought provoking as in the past. Global expectations are for correct and authoritative information to be available virtually on demand, and the proliferation of data of a dubious nature can easily interfere with the work we are attempting to achieve.

Nevertheless, I believe we have made major steps forward and will see from the documents submitted to this 25th Session of UNGEGN that valuable work is being undertaken by Working Groups, Divisions, and within the UN member states themselves.

Africa and geographical names standardization

As you know, until this Session, all Conferences on geographical names and UNGEGN sessions had been held in either North America or Europe. After discussion, particularly since 2002 and the leadership of the Task Team for Africa, it was clear that the time had come for UNGEGN to meet in Africa with a view to supporting and promoting the administration of geographical names among countries of the African continent – hence the recommendation to hold this Session in Nairobi. At the nine Conferences held from 1967 to 2007, the participation of the 53 countries of Africa can be considered spasmodic at best.

<i>No. of countries</i>	<i>No. of Conferences</i>	<i>Countries</i>
1	7	Morocco
3	6	Cameroon, Egypt, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya
3	5	Algeria, Nigeria, South Africa
4	4	Botswana, Kenya, Madagascar, Sudan
7	3	Guinea, Liberia, Mozambique, Senegal, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda
8	2	Angola, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Namibia, Zambia
12	1	Benin, Cape Verde, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Lesotho, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe, Tanzania, Zimbabwe
15	0	Burundi, Chad, Comoros, Eritrea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Mauritius, Niger, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Swaziland

UNGEEN establishes geographical and linguistic Divisions to create a way of encouraging work in smaller groups and on subjects of special interest to a region or a language. Of course, there are many ways of doing this, but essentially the current groupings have developed from the wishes of the countries themselves. African countries can participate in various divisions – by

geography: Africa Central, Africa East, Africa South and Africa West; and by language: Arabic, French-speaking, Portuguese-speaking, Dutch- and German-speaking. Some divisions flourish, some have been renewed, while others still flounder for lack of leadership or understanding of the advantages of such a forum. This scenario we must try to improve – and this session of UNGEGN provides such an opportunity.

We have learned from those in Africa who have been interested in geographical names that a variety of difficulties (aside from resources) face many countries: for instance, fragmentation through colonial languages, numerous traditional languages, poor communications, duplication of place names, collection of names only for particular map scales, political instability and constant revision of names, toponyms approved by national committees not always accepted - and above all, the view that the relevance and benefits of a country's toponyms are not generally recognized.

The Task Team for Africa, led by Mr. Brahim Atoui, has been working diligently to address such concerns and to elevate the level of awareness and understanding of the benefits of properly administered geographical names: for example, with the organization of training courses in different parts of Africa; with partnerships with other organizations, such as the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Organization of African Cartography and Remote Sensing (OACRS); with participation at GISAfrica and the International Geographical Congress and CODI /CODIST conferences in Ethiopia. We certainly hope that some of the activities of this UNGEGN session will continue this move forward in Africa. I personally believe that for many countries it is still the leaders of the mapping institutions that in reality hold the key to relevant and timely recording and dissemination of the geographical names.

Before this UNGEGN Session we organized a toponymic essay and poem contest for African countries. We will be pleased to announce the winners in Nairobi. After this pilot project the UNGEGN Bureau will consider a similar contest for other parts of the world.

I would like to draw your attention to some of the other activities that have been taking place since the Ninth Conference and the Twenty-fourth UNGEGN Session in 2007. I have been very pleased and honoured to participate in a number of meetings organized by experts – my thanks to all of you for your enthusiasm and also my apologies to those whose events I was unable to include in my agenda. I have also worked closely with the UNGEGN Secretariat in New York as we further a number of ventures to aid UNGEGN.

UNGEKN Working Groups

Currently we have 10 Working Groups as well as the Task Team for Africa and a Convenor for Toponymic Guidelines. Seven of these groups have met in person over the last year and a half, some certainly benefitting from other groups meeting in the same location. Information about Working Group activities is maintained in summary form on the UNGEGN website (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungeknworkinggroups.htm>) and links are provided to Working Group websites.

- The Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy, convened by Mr. Ferjan Ormeling, has cooperated on courses in Burkina Faso, Romania and now in Kenya.
- The Working Group on Exonyms, co-convened by Mr. Peter Jordan, published *Exonyms and the International Standardisation of Geographical Names* in 2007, containing contributions from its earlier meeting; and met in 2008 to discuss guidelines for the use of exonyms.
- The Working Group on Terminology, convened by Mr. Staffan Nyström, completed the first Addendum of the *Glossary* in 2007, discussed further additions to the UNGEGN *Glossary* and established a process for working with the terminology committee of International Congress of Onomastics (ICOS).
- The Working Group on Pronunciation, convened by Mr. Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig, met to discuss issues of pronunciation guides, in written form and sound files.
- The Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, convened by Mr. Randall Flynn and Mr. Pier-Giorgio Zaccheddu, has provided a forum for presentation and discussion of different database/gazetteer projects.
- The Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation, convened by Mr. Ki-Suk Lee, evaluated the feedback from the 2007 Conference and made arrangements to design and create a database of the conference resolutions. This project we are very pleased now enables users to select resolutions by topic/word.
- The Working Group on Publicity and Funding, convened by Mr. David Munro, looked at possible methods of publicity and funding, and started work on a press kit to assist all experts publicize the work of UNGEGN. The postcard printed for the 25th Session, is the first part of the kit to be prepared.

UNGEKN Divisions

Of the 23 divisions, at least 11 divisions¹ have held meetings, some associated with conferences (e.g. Arabic Division; Portuguese-speaking Division) or symposia (e.g. Dutch- and German-speaking Division; Norden Division) organized to coincide with and to boost divisional activities. Some divisions (e.g. French-speaking Division) rather than meeting have instead used their website to distribute pertinent information; other divisions have established or upgraded their websites or created online discussion groups since 2007. Division websites are linked from the UNGEGN website at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegndivisions.htm>.

¹ Africa West Division; Arabic Division; Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division; Asia South-West (other than Arabic); Baltic Division; Dutch- and German-speaking Division; East Central and South-East Europe Division; Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division; Norden Division; Portuguese-speaking Division; United States-Canada Division ... and likely others.

Some interesting cooperative projects are being undertaken through Divisions ... for example, gazetteers, indexes and dictionaries; comparison of generic terminology; committees addressing particular standardization topics; development of specific language exonyms; training on the web, etc. ... and are in various stages of progress. The publication *Geographical names as a part of the cultural heritage* was published by the Dutch- and German-speaking Division in 2009, as a result of presentations at their symposium in 2008.

I urge Chairs of all Divisions to make or maintain contact with those countries that are unable to participate in their meetings and likely have less well developed names infrastructures. Certainly I encourage continuing the practice of inviting neighbouring Divisions to meetings. For those Divisions that are inactive, I hope the occasion of the 25th UNGEGN may be an opportunity for re-vitalization and new leadership.

Work with the UNGEGN Secretariat

I have been pleased to work closely with the team in the Statistics Division on projects of importance to UNGEGN. I anticipate that Mr. Yacob Zewoldi will elaborate further on these in the report from the Secretariat. I take this opportunity to thank Mr. Paul Cheung, Director of the Statistics Division, and the team that has helped us, including Mr. Stefan Schweinfest, Mr. Yacob Zewoldi, Mr. Amor Laaribi, Ms. Sibylle Marxgut, Mr. Jaspreet Doung, Mr. Paul Narain, Ms. Li Wang, Ms. Anna Huttman and others.

- The Statistics Division has continued to provide some financial support for UNGEGN training courses – Burkina Faso, Romania, and now Kenya before this session - as well as for the 25th UNGEGN Session itself.
- As you know, since before the 22nd Session of UNGEGN, the UNGEGN World Geographical Names web-accessed database has been in development in the UN Statistics Division. To serve UN and public needs, this multilingual multi-scriptual database will include names of countries, capitals and major cities, geo-referenced to a world map base. With the help of the UN, we have now progressed past the design phase towards testing and launching the site. I particularly thank the Working Groups on Country Names and on Romanization Systems for their contributions of data and to the Convenors of these two Working Groups for their input on data for capital city names. For those countries that have provided the names of their major cities, I thank you; for others I urge you to supply the names and coordinates (and romanized forms, if necessary) of your cities and towns with a population over 100,000. We have the opportunity to provide pronunciation (.wav files) for endonyms and to link variants (e.g. exonyms) to the appropriate endonyms. Again your help is requested for these files.
- The UNGEGN website (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/>), housed within the Statistics Division, is becoming increasingly robust and useful. We have been very pleased with the provision of rapid updating by in-house staff and have benefitted by several additions to the website, for instance, the new calendar of upcoming division and working group

meetings (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/events.htm>) that also scroll past on the home page; a new world map-based interface that we can now populate by country to link to names authorities and names databases (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/Country_links/map.htm); further loading of back UNGEGN/UN documents, including some scanned by the UN Map Library – an aspect of work that will be followed up again in 2010; some re-organization of the website and creation of a closer relationship with the Regional Cartographic Conferences web pages through <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/events.htm>.

- We have been pleased to see that the *UNGEGN Information Bulletin* has continued, as far as possible on a semi-annual basis, in keeping with resolution V/24. Divisions and Working Groups regularly report here. In addition, all experts are encouraged to see that reports on names standardization progress in their countries are submitted, as well as suggesting other materials they would like to see presented in the *Bulletin*.
- The Secretariat and graphic designers at UNHQ have helped us to publish the Nairobi postcard to be made available for the 25th UNGEGN Session and following the Ninth Conference in 2007, published the Addendum to the UNGEGN *Glossary*.

Miscellaneous

Liaison with other groups:

I see the liaison of UNGEGN with other technical and scientific groups as an important opening for us to promote our work on geographical names standardization. The need for UNGEGN to liaise with other groups increases, as geographical names influence the work in different areas of endeavour. In addition to our assigned liaison officers, our links with ISO, and our ongoing connections through the Working Group on Data Files and Gazetteers, I would like to mention the following:

- EuroGeoNames the major project in Europe to network national geographical names databases. During phase 1 of this project, we have been pleased to have been kept in touch with this project through the organizers in Germany ... first Mr. Joern Sievers and more recently Mr. Pier-Giorgio Zaccheddu.
- Still in Europe, we have links through UNGEGN experts to groups dealing with European data standards (e.g. Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe, INSPIRE, and European Spatial Data Infrastructure, ESDIN).
- Recently we have been contacted by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the not-for-profit organization that coordinates the Internet addressing system. They are interested in the cooperation of UNGEGN as they open up further, for commercial use, the generic Top Level Domain names to include the use of geographical names (both in romanized and non-romanized forms). Another part of ICANN is involved with country codes in non-Roman form, largely for the use of government

backed websites. We should be keyed into ICANN projects as they unfold, as the correct representation of geographical names in Internet addressing should be significant to us.

- Various enquiries are received either by the UNGEGN Secretariat or by myself during the year. One enquiry from a technical editor in Mexico expressed the difficulties of those in the private sector handling endonyms/exonyms for text in international journals – their search for a structural framework of rules may be a practical incentive for initiatives of the Working Group on Exonyms. Another example, of a more unusual nature, was an application to name the point where 0 degrees latitude crosses 0 degrees longitude – seemingly falling outside the mandate of any organization.

Use of UNGEGN publications:

We are pleased to note that recent UNGEGN publications have been distributed at training courses. Also we note that the UNGEGN pamphlet *Consistent use of geographical names* has been translated and published in Polish as *Standaryzacja nazw geograficznych*. The UNGEGN *Glossary of Terms* has been translated into Turkish and many entries into Portuguese (by experts in Brazil).

Work at the 25th Session and looking to the future

As at recent UNGEGN Sessions, we plan to have some special presentations of general interest to experts, particularly focussing on the use of standardized geographical names in a variety of database situations. Also we shall be including some items of particular pertinence to Africa, for instance the database/gazetteer application being developed through the Economic Commission for Africa. As before, where possible these presentations will be put onto the UNGEGN website.

Although national reports are not an item for the UNGEGN agenda, we are, of course, pleased to hear of progress in different countries through the *UNGEGN Information Bulletin* and through Division reports. It is particularly encouraging to hear of progress in establishing or re-establishing national names authorities. For example, Afghanistan is now rebuilding its names administration; Botswana is working on legislation to recreate its names authority; the Russian Federation has recently reorganized its names programme; New Zealand now has in place a new Act for its Board; and Brunei Darussalam now promotes its names administration through a new website. I am sure we will hear of progress worldwide in the reports submitted to this Session.

Thinking ahead for UNGEGN, we must encourage the work and creativity of all Working Groups, as they have been established to fulfill the role of UNGEGN in following up the Conference resolutions. Now is the time for these groups to plan carefully, so that they can make definite progress before the Tenth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2012. As far as individual countries and Divisions are concerned, I ask you all to extend a hand to our colleagues from Africa so that they can build their own national programmes and re-establish effective Divisions to communicate within Africa.

I have expressed my commitment to continue with the leadership of UNGEGN, but realize, too, that we must be looking to the future and to those who will take over the direction in the fairly near future.

I wish everyone an interesting and productive meeting and my full support to help make it successful.

Helen Kerfoot, (Ottawa, Canada)

hkerfoot@nrcan.gc.ca

March 2009