

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Reports of the divisions

Some comments and questions about the work of UNGEGN Divisions *

* Submitted by UNGEGN Chair

**United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
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Submitted to UNGEGN by Helen Kerfoot, UNGEGN Chair

Introduction

The work of Divisions – based on geographical and/or linguistic links – is very important to UNGEGN, and has been part of the structure for realizing the work of geographical names standardization since the early days of UNGEGN's formation.

In 1972, at the time of the Second UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (resolution 4), 14 Divisions¹ were established to facilitate operations. Today UNGEGN has 23 Divisions – the numbers having increased as groups of countries indicated the advantages of new formal groupings to facilitate interactions between UNGEGN Sessions and between UN Conferences. A more detailed account of the formation of the Divisions is included as Annex 1 in GEGN/26/10.

The role of Divisions

Divisions can play a very significant role in encouraging individual countries to progress in the standardization of geographical names. They provide a framework for discussion and exchange of information pertinent to particular regional or language concerns. Sharing suitable processes, good practices, problematic issues at the Division level is a very important part of UNGEGN's structure and operation.

As we have seen from the documents submitted to Item 4, and as summarized for us by Ms. Caroline Burgess, there is very much progress, good work and interaction taking place at the Division level. However, we can also see that not all Divisions are functioning to the optimum to assist countries within the Division.

¹ Initial reference was made to this at the First UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967.

Division reports

We have already discussed previously the structure of Division reports and I am happy to say that Divisions are now reporting on common projects, results of their meetings, issues of interest to multiple countries and so on. The important work undertaken by individual countries is now provided for information as annexes to the Division reports. A more detailed template has also been discussed in the past, but owing to the difference in size, coherence, and even existence of some Divisions, it is clear that one format does not and cannot easily fit every Division.

- More developed Divisions can report by UN resolutions and by common projects
- Others may report on items most important to the countries of their Divisions and on topics included on meeting agendas
- Yet others are trying to network across countries in a Division to have a basis for discussion of common difficulties
- And a few – simply are not functioning at all

How do we help those Divisions that need assistance?

Several questions emerge for discussion, which might help us improve the work of Divisions and the countries within them. Our reflection on these topics will be encouraged in Vienna:

- (1) What ideas can we put forward and how can we help to establish a framework for the Divisions that currently are not functioning adequately?
- (2) How can the Division structures best be used to help countries that do not yet have a national programme of geographical names standardization?
- (3) What are the most useful/relevant common tasks/projects for Divisions to undertake?

I appreciate your consideration of these questions for discussion under agenda item #4, at the 26th UNGEGN Session.

Today we face many challenges with geographical names standardization – some economic, some based on communication problems, some related to competing unauthorized names data. Whatever we can do to improve the work in the Divisions can be of general benefit.