

**Twenty-sixth session
Vienna, 2-6 May 2011**

Item 2 of the Provisional Agenda

Report of the Chair

REPORT OF THE CHAIRPERSON *

*** Submitted by Helen Kerfoot (Canada), Chair UNGEGN**

REPORT OF THE UNGEGN CHAIRPERSON 2009-2011

Summary

This report indicates the ever-changing challenges for UNGEGN at this time, in the light of rapidly advancing technology, instance communications, the need for data integration, and the proliferation of user-generated names. The work of UNGEGN between 2009 and 2011 – with the Secretariat, through its Divisions and Working Groups – are summarized. Reference is made to the creation of a UNCGGIM and a proposal for a UNSDI Gazetteer. Annexes are included about the formation of UNGEGN’s Divisions and participation of African countries in the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

UNGEGN – past, present, and future

With over 50 years passing since the first meeting of the small group of geographical names specialists in 1960, we can look back at the efforts and achievements of those who pioneered this work of standardization under the auspices of the United Nations. Today we still address many similar issues – how best to collect, record and authorize geographical names at the national level, how to develop single scientific systems of romanization of toponyms, and how to disseminate this information for general use.

But as times change, so too have the pressures on those responsible for the administration of geographical names records. To use the Olympic motto ... we are pushed to go “swifter, higher, stronger”, making the best use of the latest technology and adapting to cultural, political and social trends. Today, unlike in the days of our former colleagues at UNGEGN we are faced with ever increasing differences in capabilities between countries, with a greater need for multinational data to address international crises, with an increasing need to work with related disciplines to integrate data, and added pressures from the use of unauthorized toponyms derived from crowd-sourced information. These external factors make it even more essential that we should, as a base, be able to take for granted well established and ongoing national processes for geographical names standardization in every country.

As in years past, the time since the 25th Session of UNGEGN, held in Nairobi in May 2009, has again brought advances in technology and communication media. For instance, further commercial tools are now freely available to us on the Internet to view from our computers locations as they appear on the ground, and social networking has burgeoned throughout the world providing almost constant connectivity between people, their activities and ideas. Geographical names are significant elements in the use of these technologies and the impact on those involved with the administration of toponymy is considerable. It is an ongoing challenge to maintain authoritative names data, to have this information widely distributed and generally used, in preference to data of dubious provenance and lacking in recognition from the standpoint of national standards. Crowd sourcing and wiki approaches to names use pose problems to toponymic administrators almost unforeseen even a decade ago.

UNGEGN has faced challenges before and over more than 50 years since its inception has made progress in establishing national standards for geographical names and promoting the nationally approved names for international use. Again during the past two years we have taken steps forward ... although it is certainly difficult to imagine that the standardization of geographical names, their dissemination and use around the world will ever be a task that we can say is completed.

Working with the UNGEGN Secretariat

In highlighting some of the activities since the last UNGEGN Session, I would first like to thank Mr. Yacob Zewoldi and Mr. Jaspreet Dong for their support of UNGEGN over the years. Both have moved on to other positions within the UN Statistics Division. We now welcome Ms. Sabine Warschburger and Ms. Vilma Frani who took over UNGEGN support in mid-2010.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express the thanks of UNGEGN to Mr. Paul Cheung, Director of the Statistics Division, and other members of the team who continue to help us, including Mr. Stefan Schweinfest, Ms. Sibylle Marxgut, Ms. Li Wang, and Mr. Paul Narain, as well as Mr. Amor Laaribi and Mr. Yacob Zewoldi, from whom we can continue to seek specialized advice.

Further details will be provided by the UNGEGN Secretariat, but I would like to indicate that we have continued to work cooperatively on a number of items:

- The Statistics Division has continued to provide some financial support for UNGEGN – for the training course in Yaoundé, Cameroon in 2010, for this 26th Session of UNGEGN, and for the development of web-based training units.
- The UNGEGN World Geographical Names web-based database is up and running, and although fed by data from UNGEGN is maintained by the Statistics Division (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/geonames/>). This concept started back before the 22nd session, and now we have in place a multilingual, multi-scriptural database that includes the names of countries, capitals and major cities, geo-referenced to a world map base, and with the capacity to include pronunciation of city endonyms as audio (.wav) files. I appreciate the input of contributing countries as well as the expert advice of members of the Working Groups on Country Names and on Romanization Systems. For the still empty spaces on the world map, I encourage countries to provide their data on cities/towns with a population greater than 100,000.
- The UNGEGN website (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/>) has recently been updated and streamlined to fit in with a new look for access to geospatial information. Some pages may temporarily be unavailable and some URLs may have been modified in the process, so please check your links back to the UNGEGN pages. Loading of further archival documents is expected to continue. If you have further suggestions for topics to be included on the UNGEGN website, or you have updates or corrections, you are encouraged to send these to the Secretariat, so that we may keep the information current.

- The *UNGEGN Information Bulletin* continues to be compiled from your contributions and circulated twice-annually, for the benefit of all experts, in keeping with resolution V/24. In addition to the various Division and Working Group reports included, you are invited to contribute information on names standardization questions and issues in your country.
- At the time I write, the Secretariat and graphic designers at UNHQ are preparing to publish a Vienna postcard, similar to the one developed for Nairobi in 2009. They have published a folder for a media kit, and are now looking at the format and layout for the information sheets, prepared by the Working Group on Publicity and Funding, to be included in the folder. Over the next few months, a poster based on the cover of the media kit will be prepared for UNGEGN use in Seoul in October 2011 (see section on UNCGGIM) and modified to provide a poster for the 10th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2012.
- We tried in 2010 to apply for a UN stamp to celebrate the 10th Conference in 2012 and to underline the technical, economic, social and cultural significance of geographical names. An interesting write up was created by the Convenor of the Working Group on Publicity and Funding and submitted by the Secretariat. Unfortunately the odds were against us – and this time we were not successful!

UNGEGN geographical/linguistic Divisions

We are aware that at least ten divisions¹ have met since the 25th UNGEGN Session held in Nairobi in 2009. We were pleased to see that countries of the Africa Central Division were able to meet to make plans to revitalize geographical names standardization in that part of Africa. As recommended in resolution VIII/5, several Division meetings have taken place in association with other events, such as conferences, training courses, national names authority meetings, or UNGEGN working group meetings. Meetings at the Division level give the opportunity for fuller participation of countries than perhaps at the UNGEGN level, and provide a longer meeting time frame and a less formal atmosphere to discuss issues of common interest to the countries involved.

I still encourage each Division Chair to provide leadership in a number of ways: to collect contact information in each country, to document the information on names authorities, publications, etc. within the Division, to provide feedback to countries less actively involved in UNGEGN sessions, to follow up on the implementation of UN resolutions in the Division, and to promote joint projects between the countries of the Division.

There are various cooperative projects taking place through the Divisions ... for instance, gazetteers, indexes and dictionaries; comparing generic terminology in different languages and cultural situations; committees addressing training and various standardization issues; creating useful comprehensive division websites; development of regional databases, or language-specific databases, for example for exonyms.

¹ Africa Central; Arabic; Asia South-East and Pacific South-West; Asia South-West (other than Arabic); Baltic: Dutch- and German-speaking; East Central and South-East Europe; Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia; Norden; USA/Canada.

For Divisions that host their own websites links are made to them from the UNGEGN website at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/divisions.html> . For Divisions that are not able to host their own website, the Secretariat would be pleased to make arrangements to put up some material for them on the UNGEGN website.

Recently I had reason to look at the establishment of the 23 divisions of UNGEGN, and am pleased to attach this (Annex 1) for your reference. Some divisions have been looking at the history of endeavour in their divisions, and noting the earlier participants who contributed so much to advancing the work since the formative days of UNGEGN.

At this 26th Session of UNGEGN I hope those Divisions that have been less active in recent years will take this opportunity for re-vitalization and new directions.

UNGEGN Working Groups

Among the Working Groups, the Task Team for Africa and the Coordination of Toponymic Guidelines, we have seen some² that have been able to meet in person during the last two years. I remind you that Working Groups are open to your participation – simply contact the Convenor if you are interested in advancing the work on particular issues. Progress has been made on a variety of fronts and often by the combined efforts of several working groups. Each group will report separately, but in overview, here are a few examples:

- The Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy, convened by Mr. Ferjan Ormeling, has cooperated on the organization of toponymic training in Cameroon (2010) and the convenor has been furthering the development of the web-training units (in English) in cooperation with the International Cartographic Association.
- The Working Group on Exonyms, co-convened by Mr. Peter Jordan and Mr. Milan Orožen Adamič, met in 2010; discussion on possible guidelines for the use of endonyms vs. exonyms was on the agenda. A publication based on papers presented at this meeting is now at press.
- The Working Group on Terminology, convened by Mr. Staffan Nyström, is cooperating with the terminology committee of the International Council of Onomastics (ICOS) and also proposing a process for creating a database from the existing records of the UNGEGN *Glossary* and its Addendum.
- The Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, convened by Mr. Pier-Giorgio Zaccheddu, has met and provided a forum for discussion and collaboration on various database/gazetteer projects, has re-activated liaison with ISO/TC211, UNICODE and other groups, and has provided a focal point for UNGEGN links with EuroGeoNames and INSPIRE.
- The Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation, convened by Mr. Ki-Suk Lee, evaluated the feedback from the 25th UNGEGN Session and prepared a new evaluation sheet for our use. The database of conference resolutions (in English) is up

² Evaluation and Implementation; Exonyms; Publicity and Funding; Task Team for Africa; Terminology; Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers; Toponymic Training.

and running; through the web, users can query by topic or by word to find, and print, particular resolutions.

- The Working Group on Publicity and Funding, convened by Mr. David Munro, has been preparing information sheets for the media kit for all experts to publicize their own work and that of UNGEGN. The Working Group has also focussed on an UNGEGN postcard for Vienna, posters for 2011/2012, and trying to promote UNGEGN's work through a UN stamp.
- The Working Group on Romanization Systems, convened by Mr. Peeter Päll, has been active in collaborating with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the not-for-profit organization that coordinates the Internet addressing system, with regard to use of non-Roman forms in Internet addressing. Monitoring the use of existing romanization systems and new or modified systems is a key part of the work of the Group.
- The Working Group on Country Names, convened by Mr. Leo Dillon, has been following modifications to names that affect UNGEGN's overall list of country names. This Working Group and the Working Group on Romanization Systems have both been very constructive in resolving data content questions for the UNGEGN World Geographical Names Database.
- In my report to UNGEGN in 2009, I paid particular attention to our efforts in Africa and the challenges that lay ahead. The Task Team for Africa, convened by Mr. Brahim Atoui, has been active in the organization of training in Cameroon and is looking to similar training in other African venues. The team members have continued to investigate the reasons for difficulty in promoting the benefits of standardization of geographical names in Africa. They are collaborating with other organizations, including the UN Economic Commission for Africa to promote geographical names standardization in Africa and the further development of the Africa GeoNyms gazetteer/database project of UNECA. In Annex II, I am providing what I now hope is the correct and final version of the table of participation of African countries in the nine UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

UN Committee on Global Geospatial Information Management (UNCGGIM)

During 2010, the UN Statistics Division has been very involved with a new initiative concerning geospatial data, namely the development of a UN Committee on Global Geospatial Information Management (UNCGGIM). This is now to be presented for the approval of ECOSOC in July. Also a Forum on GGIM is being organized in Seoul, October 24-26, 2011. UNGEGN has been an active participant in the formation of UNCGGIM, and the value of geographical names as a part of the geospatial data is understood by participants, who at the same time appreciate that UNGEGN has its own geographical names standardization issues of romanization, cultural heritage, and so on. We are very pleased that UNGEGN colleagues from the Republic of Korea are playing prominent roles in the organization of the Forum in Seoul in October. This is an important development for UNGEGN, we shall hear more about the UNCGGIM during the 26th Session, and we must find our best fit into this new umbrella organization.

Miscellaneous

Liaison with other groups

In the effort to integrate various areas of knowledge and to have compatible data from different sources, our liaison with technical and scientific groups is of high importance, and provides us with a channel to promote the work of geographical names standardization. We have ongoing liaison with the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS), the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), the International Cartographic Association (ICA) and other similar bodies. At present we are seeking interest of UNGEGN experts for the possibility of proposing a Toponymy Commission under the umbrella of the International Geographical Union (IGU).

Liaison with groups of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is maintained through our Working Groups – Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, as well as through Romanization Systems and Country Names. As mentioned earlier in this report, our Working Groups also provide us with significant contacts with such projects as EuroGeoNames, and with groups involved with European data standards, and with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

We hope that association with cultural groups, for instance, UNESCO and the newly created International Council on Indigenous Place Names (ICIPN) can be strengthened in future.

Other groups addressing gazetteers and crowd-sourcing

In 2010 and 2011, the Association of American Geographers, in its very well attended annual conferences has held some interesting sessions on gazetteers, particularly considering the requirements to temporally enable historical gazetteers and to plan for interoperability of such systems online. They have considered the ramifications of user-generated geographic information and the need for gazetteer services to geo-reference this content.

Recently, a UN Spatial Data Infrastructure (UNSDI) Gazetteer project has been proposed for more effective and timely sharing of information to improve UN response times in disaster situations. The various UN gazetteer systems supporting different user requirements need a “Rosetta Stone” service to link the different data, to allow for re-use of information, and to provide a structure for the inclusion of on-the-spot crowd-sourced data. UNGEGN will cooperate with the UN in furthering this initiative.

Clearly these ventures are just two of many dealing with geo-referenced data using geographical names from various sources. UNGEGN must look ahead at its provision of authoritative data, within the context of the rising tide of ad hoc data that often becomes incorporated into spatial data infrastructures.

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Annex 1

Creation of UNGEGN Divisions

At the Second UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in London in 1972, with resolution II/3, UNGEGN was formally created under its current name, rather than continuing as an ad hoc group.

At that time (II/4), 14 geographical/linguistic divisions were formed. Several of the original names have since been changed and one division (Africa south of the Sahara) was disbanded in favour of smaller regional groupings. Since 1975, ten other divisions have been constituted.

Chronological list:

1972	2 nd Conference	II/4	Africa south of the Sahara Arabic Asia, east Asia, south-east Asia, south-west, other than Arabic Dutch-speaking and German-speaking Europe, east central and south-east Indian group Latin America Norden Romance languages, other than Latin America United Kingdom group Union of Soviet Socialist Republics United States of America – Canada
1975	6 th UNGEGN		China
1978	3 rd Conference	III/26	Africa south of the Sahara be subdivided into three Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, West
1987	5 th Conference	V/3	Celtic East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic)
1992	6 th Conference	VI/1	Africa South Baltic Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia (the Division referred to as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ceased to exist)
1998	7 th Conference	VII/1	French-speaking
2007	9 th Conference	IX/3	Portuguese-speaking

Alphabetic list by name, as currently used

Africa Central 1978 (from 1972 part of Africa south of the Sahara)

Africa East	1978	(from 1972 part of Africa south of the Sahara)
Africa South	1992	(from 1972-1978, part of Africa south of the Sahara)
Africa West	1978	(from 1972 part of Africa south of the Sahara)
Arabic	1972	
Asia East (other than China)	1972	(originally Asia, east)
Asia South-East and Pacific South-West	1972	(originally Asia, south-east)
Asia South-West (other than Arabic)	1972	
Baltic	1992	
Celtic	1987	
China	1975	
Dutch- and German-speaking	1972	
East Central and South-East Europe	1972	
Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia	(from 1972, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics 1992	Division existed)
East Mediterranean (other than Arabic)	1987	
French-speaking	1998	
India	1972	
Latin America	1972	
Norden	1972	
Portuguese-speaking	2007	
Romano-Hellenic	1972	(originally Romance languages, other than Latin America)
United Kingdom	1972	
United States of America / Canada	1972	

Annex II

Participation of African countries in the nine UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names

<i>No. of countries</i>	<i>No. of Conferences attended</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
11	1	Benin, Cape Verde, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe, United Republic of Tanzania, Zimbabwe
16	0	Burundi, Chad, Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Mauritius, Niger, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Swaziland
