

**Twenty-eight session
28 April – 2 May 2014**

Item 7 of the Provisional Agenda

**Implementation of resolutions and activities relating to the
Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation**

Plain language and geographical names *

Submitted by Finland

* Prepared by Sirkka Paikkala (The Institute for the Languages of Finland)

Plain Language and geographical names

Summary

In January 2013, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland set up a working group to draw up an action plan with proposals on ways to make sure administrative language is clear, appropriate and comprehensible. The action plan of the Working Group for Clear Administrative Language was published in January 2014, and it is available

in Finnish: http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Julkaisut/2014/hyva_virkakieli.html and

in Swedish: http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Julkaisut/2014/hyva_virkakieli.html?lang=sv

The action plan proposes targeted measures for the Parliament and the Government of Finland, for all of public administration, for the government agencies and for educational institutions. The measures proposed for the Parliament and the Government include, a proposal to introduce an act on place names for clarifying the use of traditional place names and the planning of new names.

In 2011, a new Government was formed in Finland. In its programme the Government promised to promote plain language in legislation, administration and in its communication with citizens. The year before the elections the Institute for the Languages of Finland coordinated a campaign in order to have the plain language initiative included in the Government Programme. Experience had shown that getting a project included in the Government Programme will improve a project's likelihood of implementation.

The Ministry of Education and Culture set up a working group in January 2013 to draw up an action plan with proposals on ways to make sure administrative language is clear, appropriate and comprehensible. The group was chaired by the director of the Institute for the Languages of Finland, and the Institute also provided one member, plain language and name experts, and secretaries for the group. The other members were representatives from ministries, different universities, the Metropolia university of applied sciences, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the Finnish Immigration Services, and The Finnish Centre for Easy to Read.

The action plan of the **Working Group for Clear Administrative Language** was published in January 2014. The basic idea in the working group's proposal is that clear administrative language is an essential element of any democratic society. Clear language saves time and effort, improves efficiency and safeguards the legal protection of citizens. The names of the administrative areas, organisations and services should also be both clear and comprehensible. Transparency in such names is important in enabling citizens to understand the issues at stake and to place it within the correct administrative area. Further, traditional place names should be spelled and used correctly.

Names in plain language

The action plan proposes targeted measures for Parliament and Government, for all of public administration, for the government agencies and for educational institutions. The measures proposed for Parliament and Government include proposal to introduce an act on place names, on which the Institute for the Languages of Finland and the National Land Survey of Finland have made a joint suggestion through their respective Ministries (the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) on 19 December 2011.

Proposal number 4 for measures for the Parliament and the Government of Finland says the following (here, translated into the English), referring to resolution UNCSGN I/4: A. National Standardization (1967):

“The Finnish Government should take action for the preparation of an Act on Place Names for clarifying the use of traditional place names and the planning of new names.

Administrative officials need traditional geographical names in their work when speaking about places and planning names for administrative areas, national parks, nature reserves, traffic operating points, planned areas and sparsely-populated areas. It is not only for the sake of their cultural importance that it is essential that the traditional nomenclature is reliable, appropriate, and linguistically checked, and that the planning of new names is appropriate, and that the names are used in a precise manner. This is also of considerable practical importance for the society at large, e.g., for rescue and emergency services.

In order to guarantee that traditional place names are used correctly, and that new names are planned in an appropriate manner and according to existing linguistic rules, an official name body should be set up in accordance with the resolution of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967, and necessary legislation needs to be passed.

The act should specify what kind of names the legislation covers, who has the right to approve the names, what facts should be taken into account in the approval process, what type of specialist assistance would be necessary, how the approved names should be registered, who is in charge of the registration, and what names should be used in official contexts. Finland is the only Nordic country, and among the very few in Europe where body of this kind does not exist.”

See also *Initiative for the preparation of an Act on Place Names*, submitted by Finland, E/CONF.101/81*,

http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/10th-uncsgn-docs/econf/E_CONF.101_81_Initiative%20for%20the%20preparation%20of%20an%20Act%20on%20Place%20Names.pdf

The action plan of the Working Group for Clear Administrative Language is available in Finnish: http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Julkaisut/2014/hyva_virkakieli.html and in Swedish: http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Julkaisut/2014/hyva_virkakieli.html?lang=sv

More about Plain language work at the Institute for the Languages of Finland can be found at <http://www.kotus.fi/index.phtml?l=en&s=4305>