

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

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**Item 18 of the Provisional Agenda**

**Other Toponymic issues**

## **The Present and Prospective Status of Geographical Name Research \***

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## **The situation of onomastics (place name research)**

### Summary

The importance of geographical names (place names) has been repeatedly emphasized, not only by UNGEGN experts, but by organizations, authorities and individuals all over the world. Geographical names are vital for communication, for identifying geographical features, for reading the landscape and for shaping a collective understanding of our environments. They are indispensable elements of maps, road signs etc. Geographical names also make out an important source material in the study of the cultural landscape, historically and linguistically. In many countries there has been vital onomastic research going on for a long time.

However, in international research, arts and humanities seem to be losing ground compared to technological fields, and onomastics (name research) is one subject which is getting less attention. In some countries, even among the richer ones, onomastics is a declining academic discipline. This is an unfortunate situation when thinking in terms of standardization of geographical names. This is a pity, as there is a wide interest for names among people in general, and to some extent among students as well.

The Group of Experts should be aware of this situation. If the basic knowledge of geographical names (and other names) makes itself scarce, the standardization and processing of geographical names will suffer. Hopefully a resolution on this matter can be drafted and adopted at the next Conference to promote the importance of sound onomastic research in geographical names.

## UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Twenty-eighth Session

New York, 28 April - 2 May 2014

Item 18 of the provisional agenda

The present and prospective status of geographical name research -

### I. General comments

The importance of geographical names (place names) has been repeatedly emphasized, not only by UNGEGN experts, but by organizations, authorities and individuals all over the world. Geographical names are vital for communication, for identifying geographical features, for reading the landscape and for shaping a collective understanding of our environments. They are indispensable elements of maps, road signs etc. Geographical names also make out an important source material in the study of the cultural landscape, historically and linguistically.

Since its start, the Group of Experts has been a forum for specialists in linguistics, geography, cartography and related sciences. During its almost 50 years of existence, the Group has contributed significantly to developing and promoting national and international geographical names standardization, thanks to the high professional level of its members. There is a wide understanding that international use of geographical names must be based on national standardization, which in its turn depends on local expertise. Even if some countries are looking for more resources, new technological methods in processing and disseminating names have brought about considerable progress.

However, in some countries the linguistic part of the work is about to fall behind. In international research, arts and humanities seem to be losing ground compared to technological fields, and onomastics (name research) is one subject which is getting less attention. In some countries, even among the richer ones, onomastics is a declining academic discipline. This is an unfortunate situation when thinking in terms of standardization of names. This is a pity, as there is a wide interest for names among people in general, and to some extent among students as well.

### II. The situation in the Nordic Countries

A poll of the situation in the countries within the Norden Division reveals a considerable degree of pessimism among name researchers. Compared to 15-20 years ago the present number of academic positions has been reduced considerably, and there are signs that the decline will continue in the years to come. When a name scholar retires, the position in question is often not renewed. It even happens that such positions are redefined and given other duties, for instance socio-linguistics or even administrative responsibilities.

## II,1 Finland

At the University of Helsinki a professorship in name research was not renewed after the last professor's retirement. There has been a certain decline in the number of scholars who research in names. However, at the universities of Helsinki, Turku and Tampere there are scholars within linguistics and other sciences who partly devote themselves to name studies and name teaching, in particular in the field of socio-onomastics.

## II,2 Iceland

Iceland reports that the number of name scholar positions at Örnefnastofnun Íslands (Place Name Archives of Iceland) was reduced from three to one from 2006 to 2009. At present only a couple of part time assistants are working at the Archives. The recruitment is very weak, also because so few courses in onomastics are given at the University. New positions are not expected in the near future.

## II,3 Denmark

Denmark is in a quite different situation compared to the rest of Scandinavia. The Name Research Section which is part of the Department of Scandinavian Research at University of Copenhagen has one professor and five associate professors as part of its full-time tenured staff – all working with geographical names as part of their work. In addition, there are three PhD-Students, two of which work with geographical names. In addition, there are two non-scientific staff members (in total 1½ position) and two students for 8 hours each pr. week. The Danish situation was looking very much less favorable 5–6 years ago but owing to participation in external projects by the Section and the Institute it has been possible to expand and even attract doctoral students. On the teaching side, the Name Research Section has recently seen an increase in students.

## II,4 Norway

In Norway the situation is alarming. When the former Norwegian Place Names Archives in 1978 was reorganized as an institute at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, there were five positions for name scholars and one administrative position. At the end of the century the status of the Institute was reduced to a research group in onomastics, and through retirements the staff has been reduced to two scholars. There have been no renewals to compensate any of these positions; on the contrary the faculty has decided that onomastics shall no longer be included in its research and teaching program. At the universities of Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø several scholars in linguistics with onomastics as main subject had been teaching and researching since the 1970s. Today, most of them are retired and research and teaching in onomastics has been seriously reduced.

## II,5

In Sweden the situation is complex, but also worrying in a future perspective. At the University of Uppsala the professorship in onomastics was renewed some years ago, but it is unclear what will happen to it after 2019. At the time of writing, the recruitment is satisfactory as there are 6 PhD-Students, most of them in socioonomastics. At the Institute for Language and Folklore, Department of Onomastics in Uppsala, some 5-6 name scholars are

working full time. There is an uncertainty what will happen to the positions when in a few years two of the scholars will retire. Up to now there have been four regional onomastics centres within the Institute for Language and Folklore, but the ones in Umeå and Lund are about to be shut down and the scholars have to look for work elsewhere.

### III. Concluding remarks

Changes in research policies do occur, depending on the interests of the decision makers. We probably see an international trend where focus is moved from the linguistic/etymological aspects of onomastics to socioonomastics where people's use and understanding of names are in question. This shift of focus has resulted in interesting approaches to names usage on the one hand. On the other hand it has led to a loss of scholarly competence and a decline of ground research in names as linguistic terms.

The Group of Experts should be aware of this situation. If the basic knowledge of geographical names (and other names) makes itself scarce, the standardization and processing of geographical names will suffer. Hopefully a resolution on this matter can be drafted and adopted at the next Conference to promote the importance of sound onomastic research in geographical names.