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Item 16 of the Provisional Agenda

**Activities relating to the Working Group on
Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage**

The conflict of official and private spelling of place names *

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Summary

Place names are an important part of the cultural heritage both on a local, national, and international level. Most names have appeared so to speak by themselves, at various times in the area's history, and they are a reflection of man's activity in the area over the ages. The standardization regulations normally reflect this understanding. However, in private use the spelling of place names may differ from the officially standardized forms, and sometimes there are, for various reasons, requirements for accepting such spellings for official use. Although one should take into account that the spelling of some names may change over the years the standardization authorities should, as far as possible, authorize and apply spellings which reflect the historical and linguistic form of the place names.

1. The ownership of place names

There is a common perception that personal names (first name / surname) – in opposition to place names – are taken on an individual basis, and that the person carrying the name has a kind of sovereignty over the name and the spelling of it. Also names of things, like boats, rooms, cabins etc. mostly belong to the private sphere of names. Place names are also often used in varying spellings in a private context. However, the place names belong to the whole society where they exist, and in public use they should be standardized in accordance with the officially adopted regulations. In the border area between the private and the public name usage problems may occur as people more often than not make claims on a spelling which is contrary to the provisions of names standardization. This applies not least to Norway.

2. The Norwegian Place Names Act of 1990

Place names (geographical names) are an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of a country and must be administered and safeguarded by the responsible authorities. In order to get a legal basis for this activity the Norwegian national assembly (Stortinget) in 1990 passed an act on the standardization of place names in official use. Amendments to the Act were passed in 2005, taking effect from 1 August 2006 (<http://www.lovdato.no/all/hl-19900518-011.html>).

The main provisions of the Place Names Act are:

- the written standardized form should be based on the traditional, local pronunciation, while at the same time keeping to current spelling rules;

- the public body which uses a place name should authorize the spelling (in most cases the Norwegian Mapping Authority);
- geographical names which have been determined by law should be used by other public bodies.

The purpose of the Act is to safeguard place names as cultural monuments, to determine a spelling which is practical and useable and to promote knowledge and active use of the names. The Act shall secure the consideration of Sámi and Kven geographical names in accordance with national law and international treaties and conventions. The Act applies where any state, county or municipal body shall determine geographical names or the spelling thereof, or use them in the performance of its duties.

The Act also applies to the use of place names in companies that are fully publicly owned and in textbooks that are to be used in the schools. This Act does not apply to Svalbard, Jan Mayen and the Norwegian dependent territories, the Norwegian Continental Shelf and Norway's Economic Zone.

3. A Norwegian problem: Place names as surnames

A typical feature of Norwegian surnames is that as many as two thirds of them are derived from settlement names or other place names. About half of the Norwegians carry such a surname. This is probably unique in a European context, and figuratively speaking the Norwegians are bearers of Norwegian topography and settlement history through their surnames. However, a large part of the thousands of such surnames are used in spellings which have been written down by Danish officials in documents during the centuries before Norway gained its political and linguistic independence. Thus a settlement name *Vik* 'bay' may be written *Wik*, *Wig*, *Wiig* et al. The use of place names and surnames are regulated by two separate laws which function satisfactorily from a theoretical point of view: The farm name *Vik* is in accordance with the place names regulations, and the surname *Wiig* is written according to its tradition as surname. But some of those who carry the surname *Wiig* want that the name of their farm to be written in the same way as their surname.

This view has got political support and was followed up through a recommendation by the national assembly some years ago. According to the proposal the owners will be given the right to decide on the spelling of names of their single holdings. This recommendation has been more accentuated in an ongoing law amendment work at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. The expected amendment, as a result of a political initiative, will probably result in a great extent of inconsistencies between the spelling of the names of single holdings and the same name used for other entities. We will see a double onomastic system, or divide, where most of the place names will be consistent with the spelling rules, but where many names of single holdings will be written in an inconsistent and casual way.

4. Names: objects of personal feelings and economic values

The existing regulations of the Norwegian Place Names Act already implies that the view of the owner of single holding to some degree should be emphasized because of the close ties between the name of the property and the property itself, but also with respect to the emotional ties a certain spelling creates. This is also the concern of the politicians. However, in private the owner may use whatever name or spelling he wishes, but in an official context the spelling shall follow the standardization rules. Normally the correct spelling is decided by the Mapping Authority on the advice of the place names consultancies.

In many cases, names of single holdings are used for businesses, and often in a distorted spelling. Gradually, as a "private" spelling takes over, even among local people, there are reinforced requirements to get this spelling accepted as official. So, economic interests may pave the way for a spelling which is not in conformity with the standardization principles.

5. Arguments for managing the place names treasure

The place names are an important part of the cultural heritage both locally and nationally as well as for the international community. Most names have appeared so to speak by itself, at various times in the area's history, and they are a reflection of man's activity in the area over the ages. They show how the name givers have described nature and various stages of settlement. In many countries place names are traces of earlier language communities. And they represent a broad spectrum of historical linguistic forms. Therefore, the treasure that the place names constitute should be managed like other national heritage. This implies that place names should be standardized according to national standards and used consistently on all public levels.