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Item 8 of the Provisional Agenda

Activities relating to the Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy

**UNGEGN – moving forward with capacity building in
administration of geographical names**

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UNGEGN – moving forward with capacity building in administration of geographical names

Summary

The mandate of UNGEGN focuses on the ability of every country to successfully standardize its geographical names. However, not all countries have the capabilities necessary to establish a responsible authority and to carry out the processes of recording, processing, storing and disseminating their toponyms. Since the inception of UNGEGN (1972), training and capacity building has been viewed as a significant element of its mandate. This has occurred primarily through short courses offered in different UNGEGN divisions, through workshops associated with UNGEGN sessions/Conferences, by training materials developed for the Internet, and (largely in theory rather than in practice) by experts visiting individual countries to help establish toponymic programmes. The effectiveness of approaches to date is not easy to evaluate, but still a number of countries remain without robust organizations to handle the standardization of their toponymy – to the detriment of their national spatial data infrastructure and more generally their economic development and cultural preservation. Are there better approaches that UNGEGN can follow, taking into account the financial and human resources required to produce tangible benefits?

Part 1: Introduction, rationale for, and overview of UNGEGN training/capacity building

The fundamental cornerstone of national standardization of geographical names

The standardization of geographical names has been discussed in the context of UN activities since the first meeting of a group of experts on the subject in 1960, called in response to ECOSOC resolution 715A (XXVII). The First UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in 1967 made a number of recommendations, one of the most significant and long enduring being resolution I/4 on National standardization. This recognized that national standardization of geographical names “provides economic and practical benefits to individual nations” and “is an essential preliminary to international standardization”.

Resolution I/4 detailed extensive recommendations on:

- (a) The establishment of national names authorities
- (b) The field and office collection of geographical names to be standardized
- (c) The formulation and adoption by the national names authority of guiding principles and practices for treatment of names in preparation for consideration by the names authority
- (d) The development of principles of standardization of geographical names in multilingual areas

- (e) The production of national gazetteers by national names authorities to disseminate the authorized names and associated information

Recognition of the problems of lack of standardization

In *Vol. 1 Report of the Conference*¹, a working group background paper accepted by the Conference notes some difficulties resulting from the absence of national geographical names standardization:

“The writing of geographical names on maps and other documents has long been a source of difficulty and confusion and an obstacle to smooth progress and understanding in many economic, social and scientific activities, both national and international.”

And furthermore ... “The lack of standardized names has caused difficulty in the work of map makers, statisticians, census takers and others, leading to undue and harmful delay and mistakes. Confusion is caused in the interpretation of legal and administrative documents dealing with such matters as boundaries or areas of jurisdiction.”

In more recent times, UNGEGN has published pamphlets² detailing the value of standardized geographical names in effective emergency services and humanitarian aid, environmental management, delivery services, cultural heritage promotion and tourism, infrastructure planning, and so on. As part of geospatial data, names are an essential element – and if ambiguous or confused are detrimental to the use of national and international data sets.

UNGEKN's mandate in relation to training

In 1967, recommendations were set forth³ for the formation of what is today the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEKN). In the Statute of UNGEKN one of the current Aims I (d) is “To play an active role, by facilitating the supply of scientific and technical help, in particular to developing countries, in creating the mechanisms for the national and international standardization of geographical names”.⁴ Although over the intervening years collecting, storing and disseminating authorized names has evolved, with developments in computer technology, media and communication, the basic goals of UNGEKN still point in the same direction – aiming towards each country having a national authority responsible for their geographical names and for disseminating them for worldwide use.

¹ *United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Geneva, 4-22 September 1967, Vol. 1 Report of the Conference*, pp. 6-7, United Nations, New York 1968, E/CONF.53/3.

² *Consistent use of place names*, UNGEKN 2001; *Geographical names as vital keys for accessing information in our globalized and digital world*, UNGEKN, 2007; *Media kit*, UNGEKN, ongoing.

³ The creation of UNGEKN was formalized by resolution II/3 at the Second UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1972.

⁴ The Aims are included in the Statute of UNGEKN, as updated in 1993 (see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungekn/general.html>).

The question often arises as to whether we have completed our work! I think it is clear to most that we have not! Still today there are a number of countries where clear principles involving the writing and approval of geographical names do not exist and so impede the economic development of the country, as well as leaving a trail of ambiguity, causing communication barriers between countries.

UNGEGN training supported through resolutions and its initiation discussed and implemented

In addition to various resolutions reinforcing the need for national standardization, and the development of scientific systems for Romanization of geographical names for international use, there have been recommendations, resolutions⁵ and concrete steps taken to promote the training of personnel and the building of capacity in countries where this has been a difficulty.

It was already indicated at the First Conference that the work of experts should include “Scientific and technical aid and advice to developing countries in organizing and operating national names authorities.”⁶ At the Second Conference, the representative of the Netherlands indicated that a training course in toponymy could be offered in English for 20-25 students from developing countries at the International Institute in Enschede/Twente University. At the Sixth Session of UNGEGN (1975) a Working Group on Training Courses detailed a proposed training course (WP 8). Since then the topic of training and education has become a regular part of the Conference and UNGEGN session agendas. Within the Third Conference, thoughts about training covered a range of topics from UN financial support for fellowships for students, to instructing senior officials so that they could train junior personnel in their own countries, offering courses focussed for members of UNGEGN divisions, inviting outside experts to help in short term training, and developing training course syllabuses that could be used in various countries. Some participants, however, thought that training was best accomplished inside each country, possibly with geography, geodesy and cartography courses being expanded to cover toponymy, or with the input of outside experts.

Since these early days, the Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy and the Task Team for Africa created in 2004, have facilitated UNGEGN’s assistance in training and capacity building.

Training and the forms it has taken

(1) Short courses

⁵ Various resolutions have been adopted on education and training in treatment of geographical names, for example, see II/18, III/15, IV/5, IV/6, V/21, VI/13, VII/9, VII/11, VII/12, VIII/15, IX/10, X/11, supporting the provision of courses, financing through the United Nations, use of internet-based training, and the availability of training materials.

⁶ *United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Geneva, 4-22 September 1967, Vol. 1 Report of the Conference*, p. 7, United Nations, New York 1968, E/CONF.53/3.

The first UNGEGN training course was held as a pilot project in 1982 in Indonesia under the direction of F.J. Ormeling, Snr. Since that time, UN training courses have been offered in English or French, which together with courses in Spanish offered through the Pan-American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), have been held during the past 30+ years on all continents. Details of these courses will be provided in Part 2 of this report.

(2) Internet courses

During the past ten years attention has turned to means of reaching a larger audience, namely through Internet courses in aspects of toponymy relevant to those involved with the administration of toponymy. The course developed by UNGEGN in conjunction with the International Cartographic Association (ICA) and with financial support from UN Statistics is available through the UNGEGN website and will be described in Part 2.

(3) Workshops

In conjunction with the past several UNGEGN sessions and Conferences, training workshops have been held during lunch breaks, including such issues as establishing names authorities, names laws, undertaking field collection of names, managing geographical names in times of political change, standardization challenges, crowd-sourcing possibilities, demonstrating new gazetteers and Africa GeoNyms.

(4) Documentation

Documents and Powerpoint presentations from various training courses have been made generally available, some published following courses/workshops⁷, others provided on the website of the Working Group. Examples of reference documents to assist national names authorities: procedures, legislation, acts and policies are included on the UNGEGN website (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/naa.html>). In addition, organizing a national geographical names standardization programme, has been published in *World Cartography*, Vol. XXI (1990) and updated as UNGEGN's *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names* (2007) (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/publications.html>), published in the six languages of the UN.

In addition, in connection with the basic internet courses described under (2) an advanced toponymy manual is currently being prepared, consisting of some 40 chapters, produced by an international team of authors which will be downloadable from the UNGEGN website in 2017. It will be described in Part 2.

(5) On-site assistance

Another approach to capacity building has been studied, and proposals made, but its implementation has so far been limited in extent. It was suggested that experts should be sent as “mobile training teams” to individual countries to assist on location with training dovetailed to the particular situations of a country. This approach could also be used to work with senior managers to develop suitable programmes and to set up a structure of continuing support. E/CONF.85/L.57 (1992) supports such an approach, but finding the

⁷ For example, following training in South Africa, Netherlands and Germany, New Zealand, Canada, Indonesia

financial backing and experts available for these assignments have so far limited such work with single countries.

(6) Home-developed and intern training

Although not organized directly by UNGEGN, countries have reported on in-country geographical names training for those involved with national administration (e.g. China, Brazil). And in the past documents have addressed training provided to individuals from developing countries brought to another country for short-term training (e.g. U.S.A.).

Part 2: Current situation regarding training types

The main problem is one of numbers: the provision of training courses for the limited numbers of people engaged in toponymic standardization in most countries. These numbers usually are too small to warrant the establishment of perennial teaching programmes as, per country, only a handful of staff would be engaged in toponymic standardization. On the other hand, because of professional mobility, there would be a constant need for those small numbers to be trained. While realizing that the training programmes (short courses) undertaken by UNGEGN could only reach a restricted number of people, with a limited regional coverage, internet courses have been developed as well as manuals for self-study.

Internet courses

UNGEKN has sponsored the development of an Internet course, the UNGEGN-ICA webcourse on Toponymy, which consists of 20 modules, each divided into a number of chapters. The course is intended for self-study, and to that end each module has separate exercise and documentation pages. Course objectives are to provide the basic knowledge necessary to deal with geographical names at the BSc level. The course can be accessed through the UNGEGN website (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/_data_ICAcourses/index.html).

The course sequence follows the national names 'production' process: collection, processing, standardizing, visualization and communication of geographical names, but also deals with the international framework (different languages, scripts, conversion) and the institutional aspects. Changes in focus are reflected: from the original focus on the production of national gazetteers there now is a trend to focus on names data bases and cultural aspects of one's toponymic heritage

The course is intended for topographers who collect geographical names in the field, staff of geographical names branches, cartographers who have to select names for their maps, and for map and atlas editors.

The modules are: Introduction, The naming Process, Functions of geographical names, National Agencies, Field collection systems, Reference systems, Office processing, Standardization, Multilingual areas, Minority names, Languages, Writing systems, Conversion systems, UN Role,

Exonyms, Toponymic Guidelines, Toponymic data files, Names placement, Legal status of names, Editorial issues (atlases), Toponymic Planning, Names as cultural heritage.

Similar courses in French and Spanish are being developed. The Spanish toponymy course is developed by the Pan American Institute of Geography and History, the French language toponymy internet course is being developed by the Université in Québec, Canada.

Contact Training courses

The advantage of the Internet courses would be that people joining a contact training course would have more or less the same level of knowledge/expertise, so the course participants would have a common starting point. The courses that were (co)organized by UNGEGN have always been international courses, aimed at participants from specific regions or UNGEGN divisions. The following types can be discerned:

(a) Teaching the operators.

The provision of training courses for the staff actually engaged in names collecting and standardization was started by UNGEGN in 1982. The programme would take 5-7 days, include at least one day of fieldwork, during which the participants would be confronted with the issues linked to dealing with knowledgeable informants. After an introduction in general naming concepts and the institutional environment dealing with toponyms, the geographical and linguistic aspects of the fieldwork region would be discussed. The names collected during the fieldwork would be discussed and processed, and entered into a database programme. This database would then serve as the basis for the production of gazetteers and of maps showing the names collected in their proper location.

(b) Teaching the teachers.

The contact training course held in Antananarivo, Madagascar in 2013 was the model of a course aimed at training the teachers who would be expected to teach toponymy courses themselves, either at the national topographic and cadastral agency or at universities. The course provided teaching material and the expertise needed to organize ad-hoc local toponymy courses when the need for such courses would become manifest. The course had a strong fieldwork component, showing how local councillors could be engaged in the names collecting process.

(c) Teaching the names standardization commission.

The contact training course held in Tunis, Tunisia in 2015 stands model for a course aimed at the members of a national geographical names commission and bureau. With the help of local experts, members of national names bureaus from Algeria, Botswana, Burkina and Tunisia and members of the national toponymy commission of Tunisia, a 5-day programme was developed that focused more on institutional aspects, and also included street naming.

(d) Workshops.

Taking advantage of the fact that many people engaged in names standardization would convene at a given location to attend UNGEGN sessions, 3-day workshops have been organized in the past in order to update people's expertise in dealing with new techniques

like crowd-sourcing, data base creation or web-based standardized names diffusion. Those workshops would not have a fieldwork component. An example is the one held in Nairobi in 2012.

Manuals

(a) UNGEGN's *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names* (2007)

This manual, published in all six UN languages, holds as its main component Donald Orth's updated text "Organization of a national programme for geographical names standardization". In addition to that, some selected readings on geographical names standardization are provided, such as on the role and support provided by UN, examples of relevant national legislation on geographical names, their cultural heritage aspect, fieldwork instructions to topographers and toponymic guidelines.

(b) UNGEGN's *Technical reference manual for the standardization of geographical names* (2007)

This manual is more aimed at international standardization and its corresponding problems. It provides support on the issues of names conversion and on toponymic data transfer standards and formats. Documentation on Romanization systems for geographical names, as adopted by UNGEGN, is included. A master list of Roman characters is added, as well as a list of countries with their official languages and writing systems. It concludes with a list of names of countries of the world.

(c) Advanced manual

Currently the WG on training courses in toponymy is halfway with the production of an advanced toponymy manual. Originally, some 45 chapters were planned, 20 of which have been received (as of February 2016), dealing with the following aspects: General issues, Examples of applications of the national names database, management of national names programmes, urban street naming, urban and global initiatives, matching statistical and toponymic databases, technical issues of database management, internet and web surfaces infrastructure and their evaluation. In addition to that there are sections on cultural heritage aspects, and on toponymic research and documentation, cartographic aspects and interview techniques (for fieldwork). It is expected that the advanced manual will be incorporated into the UNGEGN website by August 2017, by the time of the 11th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

Organization, execution and financing of toponymic training.

For the contact training courses, the model, since 1982, has been that lecturers were flown in, on a volunteer basis, to provide training during a 5-7 day programme for international groups. The Working Group would devise a programme, based on its experience and on the special wishes of the host country. The host country would be responsible for advertising the course in the region or the UNGEGN division (to ensure its international character), to provide the facilities for teaching (including computer classrooms) and fieldwork, for feeding and housing participants and lecturers and for local transportation.

The Working Group and host country were jointly responsible for providing the proceedings of the courses. Depending on the national circumstances, UNGEGN would support the courses financially by paying for the air fares of some participants and lecturers and a per diem for the latter (not a salary). The host country – usually its national topographic and cadastral agency – would be able to find additional support from companies in the field of geo-information.

Part 3: Future developments

Part one and two of this paper have provided an overview of UNGEGN, its capacity building mandate, the forms and types of training delivered and the pros and cons of each mode of delivery. This section of the paper, part three, will identify different approaches, new solutions and possible actions for the future. These recommendations will be done taking into consideration an examination of the challenges that prevail with the delivery of toponymic training across Member States by the UNGEGN working group.

Challenges

- (1) It is generally thought that the benefits and importance of geographic names is not widely known, and therefore the need for toponymy programs is not readily understood and accepted. This dovetails into inertia to establish such programs at the tertiary level. In training and education institutions where programs exist, they are small, lacking human and other supporting resources that may be used to extend support externally.
- (2) Toponymy is a unique field spanning the disciplines of, linguistics, cartography and geography among others, with few specialists managing national names authorities or working as academics in universities. UNGEGN records show that 91 or 47% of UN Member States have national names authorities. These facts reveal a small market that impacts the demand for training spaces which in turn negatively influences the expansion of this professional group.
- (3) The perennial challenge of sustainable funding at all levels (national, regional and global) to support training, education and public education and awareness.
- (4) There is a mix of toponymic training requirements at the national, regional and global levels, for which a single model or approach, will not be able to satisfy. UNGEGN courses are generally organised based on requests and are delivered in person, reaching a limited number of individuals.

Recommendations for Improved Training and Education

For the challenges identified a number of solutions are possible and the recommendations now follow.

The approach used to identify solutions is multifaceted, with a look at the various education elements – the students, resources, lecturers, the classrooms and the use of technology. Further also considered are the various aspects of training which are program design, development, utilization, evaluation and management. The recommendations will be listed in no order of importance or logical sequence.

- (1) In order to address the challenge highlighted in number one, a continuous public relations and awareness program is needed. This could be actioned by Bureau and Working group convenors, by using speaking opportunities to increase awareness of the existence of UNGEGN, the benefits and use of geographical names. The current literature and resource documents (Media guides) can be improved by preparing videos, power point presentations, posters and flyers that are easily replicated and used for promotional purposes. Included in the strategy should be the use of social media platforms. To effect this proposal a public awareness strategy and plan could be prepared by the Working group on publicity and funding.
- (2) The preparation of the UNGEGN on-line course in toponymy is a commendable initiative to increase knowledge and learning anytime, anywhere, at any pace. However, access to the link was hidden under the UNGEGN working group's training webpage. As a flagship product and service offered by the expert group, access to the course has now been reduced to two key strokes rather than four strokes. This is just one way of improving visibility of the UNGEGN toponymy training offering.
 - a. Additionally, a targeted market plan is needed to increase awareness of its existence. It is suggested that all English speaking divisions should have the training link linked to their webpage and the online course should be showcased and mentioned at all UNGEGN and related place names meetings and presentations.
 - b. A counter and feedback mechanism for evaluation needs to be added to monitor access and use of the course as currently this is not being done. The feedback over time should be used to improve the course and the service.
 - c. Consideration may be given to making the on-line course available in other languages.
 - d. Technical assistance/support needs to be identified to make possible the improvements and maintenance of the web course, especially given that some of the modules need to be updated.
- (3) E-learning can be delivered in different modes. The current UN-GEGN on-line offering is not instructor led and the benefit to be gained is dependent on the dedication and persistence of the student. Innovative technologies such as videoconference can be used to connect separated teachers, learners and the teaching scene into one whole class. The option of creating a **virtual classroom** allows for online instructor led program delivery. In this offering courses can be scheduled and there is the benefit of a live interactive instructor via web conferencing without the hassle of travel. There is also the option of **blended learning** which combines the advantages of self-paced, online training with the virtual classroom. Participants complete the assigned units of self-paced, online training prior to each of the three, two-hour sessions of instructor-led, virtual classroom sessions utilizing web conferencing software and an audio conference bridge allowing participants to interact with the instructor. These options should be considered as an alternate option, further extending the concept of learning anytime, anywhere. Further given the infrastructure and resources required, consideration may be given to partnering with a University or other training institution to design, develop and deliver this mode of training.
- (4) Technologies such as digital video conferencing, audio conferencing, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, simulation, multimedia and satellite radio can all be employed to change training delivery methods. For example internet and satellite can help to promote inter-school or inter-organization cooperation of educational resource.

- (5) Training can also be executed informally using social media platforms such as hosting training videos on an UNGEGN YouTube channel. An example of a successful training program delivered via YouTube is the Khan Academy⁸, where algebra is taught. Other social media outreach options include planning and scheduling regular e-blasts:-LinkedIn and Facebook posts and sending out tweets and e-mails. UNGEGN now has a twitter account:- @UNSD_GEGN. These options require the preparation of material in different formats and a greater level of effort and monitoring however it has the benefit of allowing for increased interaction and exchange of technical information. Tweets may be used to give tips, helpful hints and other advice on the standardization of geographic names.
- (6) A most innovative form of training delivery for consideration is the use of mobile learning” m-learning”. This would take the form of delivering toponymic course in small “chunks” via mobile platforms –tablets and cell phones using video, text, SMS and e-mail.
- (7) It is strongly believed that continuous improvement in training can be achieved through assessment of all levels of the spectrum from programme design to management. An important recommendation in moving forward is the need to prepare and implement formal cyclical training needs assessments to identify the requirements of Member States and also an evaluation of student/learner performance based on the training courses and workshops pursued. This activity may be supplemented with the posting to the UNGEGN training website of profiles of trainers and testimonials of students and organisations that have benefited from UNGEGN training offerings.
- (8) An important and current approach being adopted across all spectrums of service delivery is the use of partnership arrangements with your liaison community. Consideration should be made of forging partnership arrangements via memorandum of understandings, joint projects and technical exchanges etc. between and among UNGEGN and academic institutions and international non-profit organisations. Relations already exist with ICA and PAIGH, however new institutions should be pursued such as the UN University and the University of Twente, the Netherlands (formerly ITC) to have the study of toponymy integrated into existing program and course content where possible. A UN-GGIM Academic Network is to be created⁹; this is a favourable development and an avenue through which advocacy can be made and partnerships created to have toponymy integrated into geospatial courses and programs.
- (9) The use of mentoring and coaching virtually and face to face are other methods recommended for increasing and strengthening UNGEGN’s delivery of toponymic training and education across and within divisions, working groups and regions. UNGEGN Division Chairs may be encouraged to distribute materials and reach out to assist/mentor countries in their Divisions. This can be further facilitated through bilateral, multi-lateral arrangements and technical exchanges between and among countries, as has been the case with France and French speaking African states. The mentoring approaches should be structured with guidelines and goals for trainers and the participants, based on actual job progression. An evaluation system is also needed and these are the added features which would make this approach innovative.
- (10) Short pre or post toponymic training seminar/workshop should be considered being added as a staple activity to UNGEGN session/ conference agenda as have been done for

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpCJyQ2usJ4>

⁹ The first meeting of the UN-GGIM Academic Network is to be held during the 4th High level Forum in Addis Ababa in April 2016.

meetings in Berlin, Vienna and Nairobi. These would be specific and targeted on special topics deemed necessary by delegates/stakeholders. The added benefits of this recommendation are the ready availability of trainers and facilities which allow seminar/workshop to be videotaped and thereafter made accessible via YouTube channels and the UNGEGN website, to constituents across the world.

- (11) Approaches to innovative financing are needed to support the multiplicity of measures recommended for improving UNGEGN training offerings. There is however no easy solution given shrinking budget of national authorities and governments, regional and international bodies such as the United Nations. This means that existing resources have to be used more efficiently to achieve even greater benefits. Concomitant with this is the need for greater collaboration coordination among all stakeholders. Possible avenues for financing training is soliciting grant funds specific for toponymic capacity building. Such ventures would need to be supported by strong and clear messages in support of the use and benefits of geographic names. This fund could be generated through contributions from national governments, NGOs, the private sector and educational institutions. Continuous research and scoping to identify opportunities at the national and regional levels, to piggy back on existing and related capacity development initiatives in the areas such as emergency management, planning and development, mapping among others, is another option for consideration.
- (12) Lastly but most important is the need to continuously improve and increase the store of training and education resources and sample documents, for example for the legal status of names authorities, laws re names use, guiding principles used in different countries, working with the media, fieldwork methodology, etc. made available and readily accessible on the UNGEGN website and training webpage, particularly for Member States who are in the process of creating names authorities.

Regardless of the technology and innovation brought to the delivery of training, and the cost savings that it provides, there will always be the need for face to face teaching and learning especially for leadership development, which is needed to promote the benefits of the collection, management and dissemination of geographic names.