

Ad hoc Group of Experts on
the Standardization of
Geographical Names

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STATEMENT ON ROMANIZATION

submitted by the

United States of America and the United Kingdom

1. International cooperation in standardizing geographic names has been achieved in the last twenty years or so largely by agreeing on limited immediate goals. For instance, after it was agreed that pronunciation of names cannot be made uniform, it could then be agreed readily that any name can be written uniformly within a given writing system. In order to make the progress that is possible at a given stage, it will be necessary from time to time to agree that a situation considered to be ideal cannot be achieved fully at that moment. There should be a continuing attempt to state and restate ideals, to see how those ideals might be eventually achieved, to identify what is practical at the moment, and to establish a series of attainable goals.

2. It must be kept in mind that what is sought, fundamentally, is authoritative written forms of authoritative names of individual geographic entities. The term standardization, or normalization, can cause trouble if taken to mean that all authoritative names must be derived by exactly the same process. Orderliness and consistency can greatly facilitate mass handling of names, but pursuit of consistency too far, too fast, and for its own sake can lead to serious complications.

3. Each system of inter-writing transfer should be considered on its own merits. The congruity of speech and writing is never perfect, and varies from language to language. The nature and extent of the differences between donor and receiver writing systems (i.e. those from and into which the transfer is taking place) will vary in each instance. As was agreed at the 1967 Geneva conference, transfer from language X to language Y may present different problems than transfer from Y to X. Another general principle which appeared to find acceptance at Geneva was that, while consultation between donor and receiver countries was desirable at all stages, the decision as to the acceptability of a system for the transfer of names was a matter for the receiver, since the end product would be expressed in the latter's writing system.

4. In general, desiderata readily agreed upon in theory may in practice turn out to be mutually incompatible. For example, the desirability of preserving certain donor language distinctions not paralleled in the receiver writing may conflict with the desirability of keeping diacritical marks to a minimum, or may involve inordinate cost. It is also in point that what is desirable for some purposes may be superfluous and burdensome for others. For instance, some distinctions useful in documentation are not needed in geographic names. The advantage of overall uniformity may be outweighed by the practical need for relative simplicity in maps,

5. Choices must be made, and since no solution will accomplish everything that could be desired, it is necessary to seek at a given stage what is both best on balance and achievable. What is now possible depends on the extent to which the unfamiliar will be accepted and upon willingness to sacrifice lesser desiderata for greater ones.

6. People will accept the new if it appears reasonable and practicable, or if they are not conscious of the change. Written forms often persist after spoken forms change (and vice versa), and proposed changes in written forms require some justifying. Moreover, these forms involve an economic commitment, and wholesale revision of vast numbers of names in or by a given country may involve costs out of all proportion to the expected benefits.

7. There seems to be wide agreement that the basic form for international exchange is that in roman letters, since by far the greatest amount of communication is in that writing system. This being the case, it is necessary to select, from among the sound values for which given roman letters are used in different languages, the values for which those letters are to be used in the romanization. There are several reasons why it seems practical to adopt a convention based on the practice of the English-speaking countries:

(i) English is both an official and a working language of the United Nations.

(ii) It is the mother-tongue of 300 million people and a principal auxiliary language in countries whose total population exceeds 1000 million.

(iii) Many more books and articles are published in English than in any other roman-alphabet language.

(iv) By far more mapping throughout the world, particularly at medium and large scales, has been done in terms of English than of any other single language.

8. The problems of the romanization of geographic names have for the past quarter of a century been the subject of close consultation between the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and the U.K. Permanent Committee on Geographical Names in the light of linguistic, cartographic and other considerations, both theoretical and practical. While solutions are sometimes difficult of attainment for the reasons already mentioned, the two national authorities have achieved a substantial measure of agreement, taking into account the views and policies of national names authorities in other countries, with whom extensive consultation has also taken place. These achievements have resulted in a vast reservoir of geographic names, the importance and utility of which will be enhanced

by the increasing use of electronic equipment for the storage, maintenance and retrieval of data in the geographic field.

9. The BGN and PCGN are prepared to share with any interested governments, either directly or through the U.N., their experience in this field. They are prepared at any time to participate in the reassessment of relevant problems on an international basis.

10. The importance of the specific problem of standardization of geographical names was recognized by the Economic and Social Council of the U.N. in its decisions regarding the holding of the 1967 conference at Geneva and the continued work of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names set up at that conference for the co-ordination of national activities in this field. (Resolution No. E/RES/1314(XLIV) 31 May 1968). The BGN and PCGN consider that further multilateral consultation on all aspects of the standardization of geographic names, both internal and external, should take place by means of regional discussions and through the Group of Experts, due regard being paid to the views of bodies such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) which are concerned with the problem of romanization in allied fields such as general documentation.

Criteria of the Usefulness of
Geographical Names and Spellings

A body of nomenclature in the roman alphabet should ideally:

(1) make possible the unambiguous identification of definite geographical entities;

(2) be intelligible for local use, i.e. understood in spoken and/or written form by people on the ground;

(3) be acceptable in terms of the official language or languages of the country or other area or, where appropriate, of a recognized minority language;

("Acceptable in terms of" a language means "appearing to educated users of that language to be consonant with its orthoepic, phonetic and/or grammatical norms".)

(4) be acceptable to the supreme administering authority of the area in question and its national names board if any, and used by that authority in maps, directories etc.;

(5) conform as closely as possible to the norms of the principal world languages using the roman alphabet;

(6) not be subject to frequent or arbitrary change;

(7) not vary too widely from already established usage;

(8) be suitable for all map-scales and uses (including documentation, telecommunication etc.)

(9) be, if transferred from another writing system, derived by a method that is linguistically rational, reversible, and uniform as between countries with a common language, e.g. Arabic.

(10) contain a minimum of conventional forms, translated names and variants.

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It is recognized that the above criteria cannot always be met and may in particular instances be incompatible with one another. The weight attached respectively to them will in any case vary and cannot be assessed independently of specific situations.