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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Social and economic benefits of the standardization
of geographical names**

Paper presented by the Dutch and German-speaking Division of the
United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

1. Any study looking into the significance of the standardization of geographical names must distinguish carefully between national and international standardization. National standardization constitutes the primary stage of name standardization in so far as it provides the basis for the secondary stage - international standardization. Any mistake made on the level of national standardization is automatically transferred to the international level. Yet, international name standardization is more than the sum total of the results achieved in national standardization; this is true above all where names fixed in a non-Roman script have to be transcribed into Roman script and where features beyond the sovereignty of nations have to be named.
2. National standardization aims at fixing the geographical names of a country in a linguistically correct form, which is possible only through the application of exact linguistic methods. The result is a cultural achievement of the first order,

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since the names fixed in maps, cadastral plans and gazetteers represent an important source for any research into historical patterns of settlement or into economic and ethnic history and in turn furnish valuable information for the linguist and dialetologist. In many cases it has been the necessity of recording names from unwritten languages that first stimulated the development of alphabets for such languages. Fixing geographical names in multilingual areas is a cultural and political task of major importance for the coexistence of language groups in a State. The correct recording of names is especially important in languages which are subdivided into dialects. The name the investigator hears in the field will practically always be a dialectal sound formation. In which form should it be written down? Here possibilities range from a strictly dialectal form, of course as a rule within the scope of the alphabet of the respective standard language, to the conversion of the dialectal name into the standard language. In this conversion process the name is either made to conform with formal standard spelling or - in extreme cases - even translated. The way dialectal names are treated depends on a variety of social, political and cultural factors such as regionalism/centralism, social prestige, the existence of a written dialectal tradition, the classification of the generic name element as part of the general vocabulary of the language and the like.

3. In any case, a large-scale topographical map of a country is a highly important source for scientific research and thus a significant part of a country's cultural heritage. Its value as a source will depend on how carefully and painstakingly the names have been collected and recorded. Rough-and-ready field procedures may muddy, faulty methods may even stop the source. True, the scope allowed in the collection and office treatment of names is not unlimited: in many States the majority of inhabited place names are officially laid down by law.

4. A few examples will serve to show what information the map offers: we learn which languages, sometimes even which dialects are spoken in the area represented; we find traces of languages formerly spoken there or indications of changing sovereignty. Field names often show the advance of civilization as new lands were being brought under cultivation; they point to economic conditions of times long past. The generic name parts illustrate vocabulary development and word geography. The botanist and zoologist will find clues pointing to the plant and animal life of former times.

5. The economic significance of national name standardization lies in the fact that in our day and age each topographical feature of a country must necessarily have an acknowledged and unequivocal name, along with variant names in regions that are legally multi-lingual. This necessity is particularly obvious where inhabited place names are concerned which, after all, play a major role in transport and communications. But standardization is no less essential for all other categories of geographical names. In connection with torrent control or the construction of hydroelectric plants, the cadastre or the register of landed property, for instance, it is imperative that field names should be clear and unequivocal.

6. As has been said before, international standardization is based on the results of national standardization. Since, however, the official languages of many countries are written in a non-Roman script and international cartography uses the Roman script, non-Roman scripts must be transcribed. This romanization is by no

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means the domain of those concerned with the standardization of geographical names, though it received a decisive impetus from cartographers who saw the pressing need for it in their daily work; a number of typical "cartographic romanizations" have resulted.

7. The conversion of foreign alphabets and scripts plays an important role in the cultural exchange between nations. Its outstanding practical value is beyond doubt. It is the object of the international standardization of names that for each topographical feature in a non-Roman script area an internationally acknowledged name form in Roman script should exist in addition to the standardized name in non-Roman script. Whoever is familiar with the confusion that still reigns in many parts of the world and constitutes a real obstacle to communications will genuinely appreciate the benefits of an international standardization. Thus it should no longer be possible for a variety of strongly divergent conversion forms to exist side by side for the name of the Greek island $\Upsilon\delta\rho\alpha$: Udra, Hydra, Idra, Idhra etc. In this context mention must be made of the fact that international cartography dispenses with the use of exonyms. Accordingly an international road map will forgo use of the exonyms Venice, Venedig, Velence, Benátky, Mletci etc. in favour of the endonym (locally official name) of Venezia. Since, however, national publications are likely to continue using exonyms for important topographical features, it will be the task of the national bodies responsible for the standardization of geographical names to concern themselves with those "conventional names".

8. A special field of international standardization activities is the naming of features beyond a single sovereignty: names have to be fixed for maritime and many undersea features as well as for topographical features in the Antarctic where, in accordance with the Antarctic Treaty, signed at Washington, D.C. on 1 December 1959, 1/ all territorial claims were waived for 30 years.

9. In all these cases international name standardization enters at the primary stage assuming tasks otherwise reserved to the individual nations for their respective territories. The cultural significance of these activities lies in the fact that, in comparison with national name standardization, the normative element receives more emphasis. Notably where names for undersea features are concerned, systematic naming prevails, with the generic name element describing the feature strictly in keeping with oceanographic terminology. The practical economic value of such international names for features beyond a single sovereignty cannot be disputed. Navigation, the meteorological services, telecommunications and international sea law all depend on a clear and uniform nomenclature.

10. By way of conclusion it should be pointed out that the United Nations in co-operation with the International Astronomical Union, has embarked upon the task of fixing topographical names on the extra-terrestrial bodies of the solar system. This is above all an important cultural undertaking.

1/ United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 402, No. 5778, p. 71.

11. On the one hand the nature of the feature to be named must be precisely identified and, on the other, the possible transfer of terrestrial names must be subjected to close and thorough study. The general practice in giving names to previously unnamed features is to commemorate great personalities in human history with each nation called upon to submit proposals. The practical and economic impact of this cannot yet be ascertained, but will no doubt be considerable as man advances further into space.

Summary

In assessing the social and economic benefits of the standardization of geographical names, a distinction must be drawn between national and international name standardization. National standardization serves as a basis for international standardization and mistakes made in the field investigation and office treatment of names will be taken up in all small-scale national and international maps. National name standardization is very important from the cultural point of view as correctly recorded geographical names represent an invaluable source for a variety of sciences from dialectology to research into settlement patterns, ethnic history, botany and so on. Moreover, the correct and systematic collection and treatment of geographical names has its practical use, notably in the fields of transport and communications. The international standardization of names is more than just the sum total of the results achieved on the national level. It must initiate or even elaborate internationally acceptable romanization systems for the non-Roman scripts and alphabets that are officially recognized in large parts of the world, as the confusion reigning in this field at the moment is becoming ever more intolerable. Furthermore, in areas beyond a single international sovereignty the standardization of names acquires special significance as names have to be collected and/or fixed on an international level. This concerns names of maritime features, names of undersea features and antarctic names. Here international organizations have as a rule taken over those tasks in the primary stage of name standardization which are otherwise carried out by individual States within the scope of national name standardization. There is the difference, however, that naming features in these uninhabited areas assumes a largely normative character, whereas in national name standardization the stress is on fixing the names in accordance with local usage. Naming maritime and undersea as well as antarctic features is economically as important as naming features on the inhabited mainland. The generic name elements of the names of undersea features will be strictly in keeping with oceanographic terminology; the antarctic names, on the other hand, should reflect and commemorate the history of the discovery and exploration of the Antarctic in a fair and equitable manner.

More recently the United Nations has decided that features on extraterrestrial bodies of the solar system should also be named in accordance with the criteria governing the international standardization of geographical names. The commemorative aspect is particularly pronounced here and it will be one of the tasks of the respective international bodies to make a fair appraisal of the various nations' share in human culture and history when terrestrial names are transferred to features in space.
