



Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CONF.79/4/Add.1
28 August 1987
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: FRENCH

FIFTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE
ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
Montreal, 18-31 August 1987
Agenda item 15

Draft report of the Conference

Chapter II: Summary of the work of the Conference

Report of Committee I

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National standardization (item 5)

In submitting their reports on activities to the Conference, under item 4, most countries described the progress achieved during the past five (5) years in the field of national standardization.

More specifically, Canada drew attention to the publication Principes et Directives pour la Dénomination des Lieux/Principles and Procedures for Geographic Naming, which has been prepared on the occasion of the Conference.

The United States submitted the document E/CONF.79/L.20, Principles, Policies and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names published by the United States Board on Geographic Names.

China carried out a nation-wide investigation of geographical names on the basis of which many place names were standardized.

National standardization in Cuba has also involved the establishment of lists of standardized names for coastal features, populated places and major geographical entities.

Field collection of names (item 5 (a))

Canada's paper E/CONF.79/L.43 mentioned a number of rules relating to various aspects of standardization, more specifically under item 1.4 concerning the Méthodologie des inventaires toponymiques, a work translated into English also and intended in particular for training courses in toponymy. The Spanish version will be submitted to the Spanish-speaking countries.

In its paper E/CONF.79/L.3, Australia mentioned that research on aboriginal names was undertaken in the 1960s and the upsurge in activities in this field that has occurred in recent years.

Office treatment of names (item 5 (b))

China adopted a set of rules for the treatment of its geographical names (E/CONF.79/L.75) on 23 January 1986.

Canada published an annual list of current toponymic research projects in CANOMA and suggests that all countries should make their projects known by similar means. On the subject of the treatment of names of communication routes, the Canadian Province of Québec submitted its Guide Odonymique.

Treatment of names in multilingual areas (item 5 (c))

Malaysia pointed out that geographical names appear in Malay on its maps. In the frontier area, the names are written in Malay and Thai. The legends on the maps are in Malay and English.

In Finland (E/CONF.79/L.68), the forty-one (41) bilingual municipalities use both Finnish and Swedish. On large-scale topographical maps, toponyms are written in both languages, those of the ethnic majority appearing first. On smaller-scale maps, toponyms are also written in both languages but in different characters. The same principle applies to names on road and street signs.

Although Lappish does not have official language status, an effort is made to use a large number of Lappish names on maps for national use.

The United Kingdom has published a world atlas in Welsh for use in schools.

The twenty-seven (27) resolutions adopted by the Symposium on Native Geographical Names and presented for consideration to the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names relate, among other things, to the compilation of a handbook for the collection and treatment of names. Canada is prepared to work together with the United States and Mexico in this field.

Administrative structure of national names authorities (item 5 (d))

The official structures entrusted by their Governments with the task of standardizing geographical names are clearly the source of the success achieved in this work and the key to progress in international standardization.

Considerable development might be noted in that area.

China outlined the structure of its geographical names committees at various administrative levels, highlighting the national guidelines which regulate the management of place names.

For two years, Portugal had been carrying out preliminary studies. One of the difficulties remaining to be resolved was that of deciding upon the competent administrative department.

In that connection, Israel stated that its Committee comes under the Prime Minister's office.

In France, the establishment in July 1985 of a National Council for Geographical Information (CNIG) had made it possible to establish as one of the standing committees of the Council, a national committee on toponymy comprising all concerned parties. One of its first objectives was a study of the files of toponyms established by the cadastral survey and the National Geographical Institute.

In Japan, no specific governmental authority is entrusted with toponymic decisions, but several authorities are concerned. Consistent standardization has been made by their activities.

In Sweden, a Place Names Advisory Board was established in 1985 as an advisory body to the National Land Survey, which is the Swedish Place Names Authority.

Canada intended to recommend that a list of these national authorities should be established.

Additionally, the United States reported on the structure of the United States Board on Geographic Names comprised of 24 members from nine Federal agencies appointed to carry out the work of the various committees created by the Board.

Toponymic guidelines for mapping and other editors
for international use (item 5 (e))

Twenty-five (25) member States have produced Toponymic guidelines. The Co-ordinator asked countries that had not already compiled them to begin as soon as possible. Such guidelines are useful both domestically and internationally. Guidelines ought to distinguish between descriptive terms and geographical names. In order to avoid delays in publication, the Secretariat would circulate the guidelines as part of World Cartography as soon as possible.

Exonyms (item 9)

Turkey's interest in traditional names (exonyms) is explained by history, these names being scattered over the territories of the former Ottoman Empire. The short list of exonyms in document E/CONF.79/L.29 should be viewed as a modest contribution to geographical history. The delegate of Turkey would be grateful for any corrections suggested by other delegates.

Greece questioned the validity of principles adopted in compiling this list and asked whether the circulation of such lists truly served the aims for international standardization and the reduction of exonyms.

The United Kingdom felt that the definition of the word "exonym" given in Glossary No. 330 (Rev.1) was unsatisfactory. A distinction must be drawn among exonyms, between foreign names and traditional names, i.e., those that have been adopted into another language with different pronunciations and spellings.

Austria stated that the definition as given in the United Nations Glossary No. 330 (Rev.2) is adequate and should not be altered. Austria stated further that a great amount of work had been done based on the definition of the Glossary mentioned.

Cuba shared that opinion and explained that "Madrid" is not an exonym because the toponym was spelled identically in Spain and in Cuba. The Cuban delegate added that local forms were given with their exonyms in parentheses if they were not well known.

Morocco has prepared a list of exonyms and endonyms. The delegate said that a flexible approach should be taken to reducing the number of exonyms; it was not necessary to change everything. Morocco encountered no difficulty in retaining the toponym Volubilis, for example; however, he announced that the name Casablanca is being replaced by its original Arabic name Dâr el Beida.

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Italy has prepared a paper "Gli esonimi italiani - Impostazione metodologica e primo contributo a una rassegna sistematica: gli esonimi delle città europee", unfortunately available only in Italian, on its own classification of exonyms.

The following classification is considered:

- (a) valid exonyms;
- (b) obsolete exonyms;
- (c) exonyms completely out of use;
- (d) exonyms used only in some literary works;
- (e) exonyms used only in historical works with reference to geographical entities which in the past had other names.

Document E/CONF.79/L.27 submitted by France dealt with the question of place names "adapted" as a result of factors other than the nature of the French language itself: historical factors, geographical factors or simply random factors stemming from alterations, corruptions or approximate translations fostered by essentially oral transmission.

China pointed out that Peking was an inexact transcription for Beijing and that this has been corrected.

In Finland the following types of exonyms are rejected:

- 1. Those that are not well known;
- 2. Those not sanctioned by usage;
- 3. Those lacking a cultural or historical aspect;
- 4. Those whose forms, as officially standardized by the country in question, are not the source of undue difficulty for Finns. The creation of new exonyms for national use would be regarded unfavourably in Finland.

Canada recalled that the goal was to reduce the use of exonyms. Moreover, one might wonder whether the publication of lists of exonyms truly serve the desired purpose. Perhaps, on the contrary, they add to the knowledge and dissemination of these names. Agreement had to be reached on what action was to be taken, and the Austrian paper (E/CONF.79/L.6) contained good suggestions. The use or omission of exonyms in cartography depends greatly on the categories of exonyms and their dissemination. There are three possibilities for the names of cities in national cartography: (a) the exonym alone; (b) the exonym with the local name in parentheses; (c) the local name with the exonym in parentheses. Type (b) is generally gaining ground. In international cartography, as the Austrian delegate noted, the goal was to exclude all exonyms.

In order to reduce the use of exonyms, very concrete operational resolutions are required with respect to (1) international atlases and (2) airline schedules.

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Research and experiments in assisting in
name pronunciation (item 11 (d))

In Canada, several toponymic authorities tape the local pronunciation of native geographical names. Three to five different speakers are questioned about each name, since the pronunciation of geographical names may differ from one to the other. The tapes are then given to a group of native interpreters who transcribe the names into the Roman alphabet.

The United States of America, France, Canada and Morocco took into account certain characteristics of native informants, such as age, place of origin, etc., when transcribing the pronunciation of names.

In the United Kingdom the status of informants was taken into account as well as the use of the name beyond its immediate locality.

Morocco explained that it records names on the spot when surveying but that speakers' pronunciation vary from one region to another. The names were transcribed into Arabic, but it is more difficult to respect their pronunciation when they were transcribed into the Roman alphabet.

Austria noted that the pronunciation of names is not, strictly speaking, of concern when mapping. Maps give only the written form of geographical names. But the pronunciation should be indicated in gazetteers by means of the international phonetic alphabet (IPA) for the benefit of those non-Roman-writing countries that need to know the pronunciation of toponyms for their script conversion procedures.

The delegate from the Netherlands mentioned that agenda item 11 (d) should be studied in the light of resolution 7 of the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (Athina, 1977): aids to pronunciation prior to the transfer of names from one writing system to another. As the development of any conversion system is the task of specialists who may be expected to be acquainted with IPA, this alphabet is suitable for this purpose.

The Chairman observed that pronunciation was the key to transcription systems.
