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REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE
SITUATION IN THEIR REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON
THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE FIFTH CONFERENCE

Toponymic Databases: Report by the Convenor

(Submitted by United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names)**

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TOPONYMIC DATABASES

Report by the Convenor

Throughout the whole of the period since the Fifth Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, the Convenor of the Working Group has been deeply involved in the application of advanced technology to mapping in general and, in the context of mapping, to geographical names with particular emphasis on the processing of names.

Apart from those activities, the Convenor attended, at rather short notice, the Toponymy Training Course in Cipanas, Indonesia. That course revealed a number of the issues which arise in dealing with the toponymy of a linguistically complex area, even when there is a unifying language. Among those issues are the lack of agreement between even the greatest experts on some aspects of the national toponymy; the various problems encountered in multi-lingual areas; the relationship of old toponymy to new; problems which arise in transmigration; the range of knowledge at local administrative headquarters and its limitations; the difficulty of classifying names by administrative status and population; the special case of names for natural features; linguistic issues; toponymy in a GIS. Whilst none of those questions were considered in depth, they all were present for those who cared to identify them and to some degree all were touched upon. The close association between settlement and land-use was apparent throughout the course, but urban issues were to some extent encountered. Because there necessarily was a limited amount of time for the course, none of the items mentioned could be pursued to any depth. Nonetheless, the interest expressed

by the students was rewarding and the enthusiasm and sense of dedication exhibited by some of the students was particularly gratifying.

In the first five months following the Conference in Montreal the Convenor completed work on a national bi-lingual and bi-scriptual toponymic data-base and gazetteer based on a national 1/50,000 map series. All the names were field-collected and subsequently processed in the office and some were further field-verified.

Almost the whole of the ensuing period has been devoted to the use of modern technology in geodesy, photogrammetry, digital cartography and inevitably the whole range of activities connected with geographical names, but on this occasion the national territory was very much larger. It would not be appropriate to discuss more than general principles in relation to this task. Of course, many lessons were learned in those four years. Of them, the most important lesson was that the old lessons have, it appears, to be re-learned time and again in the whole process of dealing with geographical names.

Put simply, no matter how experienced in other respects people may be, they, almost without exception, fail utterly to understand that geographical names can present a serious problem. The real complexity of field collection in another language and another script is not appreciated. There is a naive belief that any literate person can collect geographical names and that when collected the names can be immediately incorporated in the digital mapping with little consideration beyond their approximate location.

It is only later that the inadequacies of field collection are revealed as, without doubt, they will be. Office processing calls for people with a special flair and suitable knowledge who have received appropriate instruction and training.

In some respects, working in a wholly digital environment adds another layer of complexity to the handling of geographical names. There is, thus, a need for special attention to be paid in training programmes to this most important aspect in the utilization of toponymy in digital mapping where modern work-stations are employed. It would be beyond the scope of this brief report to go into the matter at greater length. Let it simply be said that it is yet another difficulty which is encountered when unfamiliar names are being handled.

Introduction of so-called high technology is not a serious problem. Modern hardware and software is user-friendly and is becoming increasingly so. There is no technology which will produce geographical names of the desired quality. Acquisition and development of suitable personnel is immeasurably more difficult than the acquisition of computer-based equipment or even the staff to operate it.