

New York, 26 February - 9 March 1979  
Agenda item No. 9

Thoughts on the Future of Standardization of Geographical  
Names within the Framework of the United Nations.

(Submitted by J. Breu, Austria)

I. Three United Nations conferences on the standardization of geographical names (1967, 1972, 1977) and seven meetings of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNEGN) have resulted in a large number of developments and recommendations. It, therefore, would be appropriate to pause for a short time in order to evaluate critically the work accomplished and to assess the future goals and requirements. In short: What have we achieved, what remains to be done and how can it be done?

II. The following observations are based on the extensive catalogue of work presented at the 1977 Conference. These are grouped under the following headings: 1. General subjects; 2. National standardization; 3. International standardization; 4. Means of reaching our aims.

1. GENERAL SUBJECTS

a. *Technical terminology*

The Glossary of Technical Terminology was published first in the London Conference Report, vol. II, pp. 48-54, and was subsequently amended. It is now being finished and will be available in English, French and Spanish. In spite of theoretical reservations against its conception the glossary is of great practical value for national as well as for international standardization, which may be seen from the fact that it has been translated into additional languages.

b. *Automated data processing (ADP)*

ADP is being investigated by a new working group. It is expected the group will submit the results of a thorough study of the subject at the next conference. In assessing this study it should be understood that, for our purposes, specific questions of names standardization such as a standardized coding system are more important than technical details undergoing a rapid change.

c. *Exonyms*

The subject of exonyms is common to both national and international standardization. On the one side it is the competence of the individual nations to decide which exonyms are to be retained and which to be dropped, and on the other side it is of international interest to reduce exonyms, which certainly do not facilitate international communication. The treatment of this subject in detail is far from being uniform, and the points of view vary in many respects as the historical and linguistic structural conditions differ from country to country and from language to language.

As this question has great practical importance and as the man in the street understands first of all by names standardization the abolishing of exonyms, and furthermore, as educational boards, international textbook committees etc. are dealing with this subject, it is recommended that the UNGEGN work out the fundamental problems and solutions for submission to the next United Nations conference.

2. NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION

In the field of national standardization all essential statements and recommendations were made, especially in the excellent resolution 4 of the Geneva Conference of 1967. The recommendations contained in it have fallen on fertile soil in a great number of countries.

Resolution 4, on the one hand, demonstrated new approaches, and on the other hand, enabled national experts to receive the assistance, financially and administratively, of their governments. Thus, names authorities were constituted in many countries; these or the existing national surveys have issued new instructions concerning the field collection and office treatment of names, the treatment of names in multilingual areas and the writing of names from unwritten languages; furthermore, they have published glossaries and national gazetteers.

It would be of great importance to put into practice the plan to organize training courses for the personnel of surveying bureaus. Strong appeals for the necessary funding of training courses must be made at the United Nations.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATION

#### a. *Names of features beyond a single sovereignty*

The recommendation of resolution 20 of 1977 treats this subject comprehensively. The earlier resolution passed at the 1972 conference resulted in a number of bilateral and multilateral agreements.

#### b. *Maritime and undersea features*

In this subject further intensive co-operation is necessary with the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) in order to achieve mutually acceptable results. The discussions held till now have already led to agreements on two fundamental questions: (1) on the *Guidelines for the Standardization of Undersea and Maritime Feature Names* and (2) on many terms and definitions. The procedure to be followed in the naming process itself is still to be established. The convenor of the working group has approved the suggestion made by the IHO to drop any concern with "maritime features" from the working group. The UNGEGN itself will not entirely disregard the geographical names of maritime features, although the Working Group on Maritime and Undersea Features will not deal with them at the present time.

#### c. *Extraterrestrial features*

Extraterrestrial feature names are, of course, not geographical names. But as they certainly are topographical names experts on geographical names should be consulted. Their disadvantage is that, as a rule, they do not have the professional knowledge necessary for the evaluation of the nature of the objects to be named. Competency in this belongs in the first place to the International Astronomical Union (IAU), with which the UNGEGN, in accordance with a special agreement, is collaborating. The co-operation between the special working groups of the UNGEGN and IAU must be continued. The UNGEGN will endeavour to contribute its experiences and expertise to achieve the goals desired by both the IAU and the UN.

#### d. *Conversion of names from one writing system into another*

For the general public international names standardization consists, apart from the reduction of exonyms, in the working out of generally accepted conversion systems. Indeed, the chaotic state at the present time is a cumbersome obstacle for international communication. It was agreed that international cartography had to deal with conversion into Roman script only. In spite of many differences of opinion the subsequent systems were developed in the resolutions of the three UN conferences. What resulted was a wider interpretation of the principle that international standardization means, among other things, acceptance of name forms romanized by national authorities of the donor country. Following this principle the conferences recommended for a number of non-roman writing systems conversion keys officially intro-

duced by donor countries. Thus, national standards of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Israel, Iran, Thailand, Kampuchea, China and Ethiopia have been accepted by the conferences.

In 1971 a group of Arabic countries worked out in Beirut a system for the romanization of the Arabic alphabet. It was recommended for international use by the conferences of 1972 and 1977 and has been officially introduced in a number of Arabic countries (Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan). It is understood that the Beirut system will be introduced in Morocco in a slightly modified form only.

The Indian expert has worked out romanization systems for a number of scripts and alphabets of his division. It is understood that these conversion keys will be implemented in Indian mapmaking. As regards Urdu and Bengali, negotiations are planned between India and Pakistan, and India and Bangladesh. In Afghanistan, the Republic of Korea, and the People's Democratic Republic of Korea there exist officially introduced romanization systems, which will be examined by the UNGEGN for international implementation.

Unsettled is the question of romanization in the USRR, where endeavours are being made to work out a new romanization system for the Russian alphabet which would be applicable for all purposes.

It is one of the tasks of the UNGEGN to observe the development in the whole non-roman script area, to advise donor countries and to motivate those countries which have not yet made any decision to undertake the necessary efforts. Furthermore, the UNGEGN will point out that it is not enough to introduce officially a romanization system but that it is also necessary to put it into practice on maps and in gazetteers, timetables etc.

#### d. *International gazetteers*

Till now two countries have published national gazetteers for international use, i.e. gazetteers complying to a great extent with the United Nations recommendations. Strictly "International Gazetteers of Countries" produced in a standard format with a standard title page identifying them as United Nations gazetteers have not yet been published. The UNGEGN should appeal to the countries to publish international gazetteers. To this purpose a set of practical suggestions would be necessary. Furthermore, the Working Group on Gazetteers should assume the character of an editorial committee, work out uniform editing rules and review manuscripts for publication. It would be most suitable to publish the "International Gazetteers of Countries" as an official series of the United Nations, although printing costs would be paid partly or entirely by the countries concerned. Special care should be given to the composition of the introduction which should contain all information important for international cartography; official language(s), minority languages, legal status of languages, writing systems, spelling rules for geographical names, glossaries of geogra-

phical terminology, names authorities, source material etc. As editing of such gazetteers is a laborious and costly work it would seem advisable not to await their completion before starting the preparation of the planned Concise World Gazetteer. It would be advantageous to establish an editing committee for this World Gazetteer, the task of which would be to determine the numbers of names - divided into categories - which each country would have to provide and to issue a binding format for the entries in the gazetteer. If we can come forward with a substantial plan we may be rather certain of the cooperation of the countries without gazetteers of their own.

e. *Toponymic guidelines for international cartography*

As we certainly will have to wait for sometime for the completion of international gazetteers with their detailed introductory information it would be advisable to publish a short series of toponymic guidelines for international cartography to supplement the Concise World Gazetteer. These guidelines should contain all information that international cartography requires from individual countries. I gave a detailed outline of this project in my Circular No. 2 of 12 December 1977.

f. *List of Country Names*

The United Nations List of Country Names is now in its final stage. It differs from the similar trilingual Terminology Bulletin of the United Nations insofar as the names of countries are entered not only in English, French and Spanish but also in Russian and Chinese, and, in addition, in the official language(s) of the country concerned. Our list can be of lasting value only if it is kept up to date by means of addenda and corrigenda.

4. MEANS OF ACHIEVING OUR AIMS

The main responsibility for success or failure rests with the members of the UNGEGN.

The diplomatic missions of our countries will pursue the subject of the standardization of geographical names with ECOSOC only if instructed by the governments. The instructions of the governments, on the other hand, will depend on the contents of the reports on conferences and UNGEGN meetings conceived by us as the national experts.

But it is also important that we make every effort to assure that the recommendations of the United Nations, especially, those on national standardization, are observed within our countries.

The UNGEGN has to do its principal work between its meetings, mostly by correspondence, with the main burden resting with the convenors of working groups. They must also establish practical co-

operation with the appropriate international organizations.

A further possibility of activity which we experts should fully promote is encouragement within the divisions. A number of countries have never sent delegates to the UN conferences or to meetings of the UNGEGN. The division chairmen should invite all countries to participate where they may have geographical or linguistical criteria in common with their divisions or at least forward to them appropriate background material.

Finally UNGEGN should recommend to ECOSOC that the Cartography Section be put in the position to act as a clearinghouse for names standardization to a greater extent than it is possible at the present time.

The pursuit of International co-operation is always a burdensome task; we must have patience till the fruits of our efforts ripen.