

18 June 2002

English only

---

**Eighth United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names**

Berlin, 27 August-5 September 2002

Item 4 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports by Governments on the situation in their  
countries and on the progress made in the standardization  
of geographical names since the Seventh Conference**

**Place-name care and place-name standardization in Norway**

**Submitted by Norway\*\***

---

\* E/CONF.94/1.

\*\* Prepared by Botolv Helleland, Senior Lecturer, University of Oslo, Name Research Section.

When the Norwegian Storting, against the votes of one party on the right, passed a statute on place-names on 18 May 1990, this was coming as close to Constitution Day (17 May) as one could get (the Act came into force on 1.7.1991). Even though the date was a matter of chance, the committed name researcher and the cultural heritage community could not fail to see the symbolism in the timing. In the travaux préparatoires it says that the purpose of the Act is “that place-names in the realm shall together constitute a consistent body of names and that place-names shall be cared for as part of our cultural heritage”. However, the Act only applies to the *written forms* of place-names in public use, and provides rules for how these forms shall be determined and by whom, and who is required to use the written forms so adopted. In the decade that has passed since the statute came into operation, wishes have been expressed in several quarters that the Act ought also to cover the protection of inherited place-names. For a couple of years a committee has been working on an evaluation of the Act, and it has in accordance with wishes expressed by different parties proposed the insertion of a new section relating to the protection of place-names, inter alia with a view to abrogating the present right to change the names of old properties. It is uncertain when any such amendment may come into effect.

The Place Name Act is the final step in a discussion on the standardisation of place-names that lasted for more than 150 years. When the statute was finally passed, the most important reason was of a legal and not linguistic kind. The problem lay in the fact that the public authorities had for a long time adopted written forms of the names of cadastral units and single holdings without the owners’ having been consulted or having expressed their agreement. This was contrary to the Division of Property Act, which had given the owner certain rights when it came to choosing names and their written forms. The outcome of a court case in 1960 was that the state did not have statutory authority to lay down against the owner’s will the way in which the name of a cadastral unit of property should be written. Thereby a process was set in motion involving analyses and consultations, which 30 years later were to result in an Act concerning the way in which place-names were to be written.

The actual history of standardisation has another starting point, namely the chaotic written situation that prevailed in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Norway. One may say that the work of place-name standardisation in all the Nordic countries and elsewhere in Europe had its source in the need for bringing some sort of order into the many different and at times deviant written forms of place-names. The situation in Norway was nevertheless special in that written Danish had been introduced into the Civil Service through the 400-year union with Denmark and created a particularly great divergence between written and oral forms, with many misunderstood ways of spelling. At the same time the work on resurrecting the Norwegian written language began, and the coming changes in the spellings of place-names all sought to take a more or less Norwegian form of spelling as a basis. In 1912-1913 a rule was introduced that the way in which names were written on maps should be based on their dialectal pronunciation and otherwise follow *Nynorsk* spelling. This principle applied subsequently as a guide for all place-name standardisation up to 1990, when the Place Name Act put the two forms of Norwegian, *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk*, on an equal footing as a norm. Now the requirement became that one should use the written form that was closest to the pronunciation. Since 1913 it has been the practice that one of the two name consultants has had a Bokmål background and the other a Nynorsk background. This principle has been retained in the extended consultancy service under the Place Name Act. (See more about the Place Name Act in German in Helleland 2000 and in French in Helleland 2002).

The first major correction of place-names happened in connection with a cadastral revision in 1838, and subsequently there followed a number of such revisions with updated spellings. The National Land Survey of Norway, today the State Mapping Authority, got its first name consultant in 1870. In the period 1879–99 the name consultant was Oluf Rygh, the man behind the great work *Norske Gaardnavne* (NG) which gives a linguistic explanation of the names of Norwegian cadastral units. Since 1913 there have, as mentioned, been two name consultants for the public authorities. They have checked names on new maps from the State Mapping Authority and otherwise expressed views on names at the instigation of different public bodies. They have been employed by or had close contact with the Section for Name Research (created in 1921) and have been able to use the material there. But the collections have been and are incomplete, so that one must often make direct contact with local people to get information about the pronunciation. Earlier all names on maps with a scale of 1:50,000 (N50, previously M711) were checked by the name consultants, but today this task is limited to names that the local authorities report, or that the Mapping Authority feels must be considered under the Place Names Act.

The most important rules in the Place Name Act may be divided into two groups. The first concerns rules for the way in which place-names are written. Here the principle applies that one takes one's point of departure in the inherited local pronunciation but otherwise follows the spelling principles of Bokmål and Nynorsk. Certain dialectal features may be reproduced, and to a certain degree one shall take account of time-honoured written forms. Saami names shall be written in accordance with the spelling rules of the three Saami languages (North, South and Lule Saami), while Kvenish (Finnish) names in Northern Norway shall be written in accordance with Finnish orthographic principles. Decisions on the spelling are made by the body that is responsible for the name-bearer. For most inherited place-names, including the names of single-holdings, the State Mapping Authority has the power of decision. When it comes to the names of single holdings, consideration shall be given, with certain limitations, to the views of the landowner. Names that are laid down under the Act shall be entered in a central register of names (SSR), which is administered by the State Mapping Authority. The register contains 850,000 names, but of these until now fewer than 100,000 have been laid down under the Act. The rest are what are called approved names, i.e. names that were to be found on maps or were in other public use before the Act started to apply in 1991. In the longer term the plan is to go through all the "approved" names of which, in accordance with the standardisation rules in the Act, it is appropriate to change the spelling.

The second group of rules in the Place Name Act concern the organising of the consultancy apparatus and the procedure for the handling of business. Norway is divided into five consultancy areas, one for each of the four universities (Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Tromsø), and in addition one for Saami and one for Kvenish (Finnish) names. Each area has two name consultants and a secretary in a half-time or full-time post. When a name case is to be dealt with, the body with the power of decision, e.g. the State Mapping Authority, shall send the matter to the regional name consultancy service for a provisional recommendation on the spelling. After this the local authority and other parties consulted will receive the matter for comment, and then the matter will be sent back to the name consultancy service for final recommendation and forwarding to the decision-making body. This procedure ensures good academic and at the same time democratic treatment of name cases, but is lengthy and resource-intensive. The Evaluation Committee has recommended some simplification here.

As is apparent from what has been said, Norway has allocated major resources for dealing with business under the Place Name Act. Nevertheless there are many public bodies, not least the local authorities, which do not make very much use of the consultancy apparatus. Many decisions have been made around this country in local communities that are not in accordance with the statute. The cause of this is lack of knowledge about the statute, a lack of resources with which to comply with it, and in addition a certain dislike of the standardisation rules. All the roughly 430 municipal authorities have their own committees for name cases, and as a rule a great deal of weight is placed on cultural aspects in the choice of names, but not seldom one sees that the spelling breaks with the provisions of the Act. One can also see that English influence has spread over the last few decades, especially when it comes to the names of private establishments, e.g. the shopping centres *Oslo City* in Oslo and *City Syd* in Trondheim. Generally speaking one can say that two tendencies make themselves felt in municipal naming, one with the urbane and international as its ideal, and one with the rural and homely as its ideal. Name care seen as name protection concurs primarily with the latter out of consideration for the notion that it is important to take care of the local naming tradition.

## Bibliography

- Helander, Kaisa Rautio. 1994. Stedsnavn i flerspråklige områder i Norge. Hvordan norske, samiske og finske stedsnavn brukes i offisiell og uoffisiell sammenheng i Norge. [Place-names in multilingual areas in Norway. How Norwegian, Saami, and Finnish place-names are used in official and unofficial contexts in Norway.] In: *Ortnamn värda att värda*, 123–134.
- Helander, Kaisa Rautio. 1999. Samiske navn som eksonymer og endonymer. [Exonyms and endonyms in relation to Saami place-names.] In: NORNA-rapporter 68, 137–148.
- Helleland, Botolv, 2000. Das norwegische Ortsnamengesetz – Entstehung, Ziel und Handhabung. *ONOMA* 35, 259–277.

Helleland, Botolv, 2002. La loi norvégienne sur la normalisation des noms de lieu. *Actes du XXe Congrès International des Sciences Onomastiques 20–25 Septembre 1999, Santiago de Compostela*. (En cours de publication.)

Helleland, Botolv & Nilsson, Leif (ed.). *Utanlandske namn i Norden. Rapport frå NORNA's tjuesjette symposium i Oslo 28.–30. mai 1997*. Utgjeven i samarbeid med Nordisk språkråd. [Foreign names in Norden. Proceedings of NORNA's 26<sup>th</sup> symposium in Oslo 28.–30. May 1997. Published in cooperation with the Norwegian Language Council. Abstracts in English.] (NORNA-rapporter 68.): Uppsala 1999: NORNA-förlaget.

NG = *Norske Gaardnavne. Oplysninger samlede til Brug ved Matrikelens Revision*. 1–18. [Norwegian farm names. Information collected for the use of the revision of the cadastre. 1–18.] Publ. by Oluf Rygh et al. Kristiania 1897–1928: Fabritius & Sønner. *Fællesregister*. Publ. by A. Kjær. Oslo 1936: Fabritius & Sønner. ([http://www.dokpro.uio.no/rygh\\_ng/rygh\\_felt.html](http://www.dokpro.uio.no/rygh_ng/rygh_felt.html))

Svanevik, Anne, 1999: The opposition between Norwegian farm names and their corresponding family names. In: *Onomastik. Akten des 18. Internationalen Kongresses für Namenforschung. Trier, 12.–17. April 1993. Band IV. Personennamen und Ortsnamen*, 169–173. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

The Norwegian Place-Name Act. Paper presented by Norway. [Prepared by Botolv Helleland.] Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Vol. II. Technical Papers. New York, 25 August–3 September 1992. 218–219.

Web addresses:

Mapping Authority of Norway:

<http://www.statkart.no/>

Toponymic guidelines (Norway):

<http://www.statkart.no/virksomh/forvaltning/navnlov/guidelines.html>

Central Place-Name Register:

<http://www.statkart.no/ngis/norgesglasset.html>

Section for Name Research, University of Oslo, Norway: <http://www.hf.uio.no/inl/sna/namn.html>