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The Place-Name Responsibility of a Nation

(Submitted by Norway)**

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

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Summary

This paper brings forward some fundamental questions concerning place-name treatment and place-name care in a wider perspective and argues that governments as well as the public in general more effectively must be made aware of the historic, cultural, and linguistic values of this material, and that every responsible body acts accordingly.

Every nation has its own place-name stock which should be considered as a national treasure. Hopefully every government is aware of this treasure and makes its best to pursue a constructive place-name policy. However, it may be questioned if the governments give enough priority to this task. In a world with so many primary needs to be satisfied, so many problems to be solved it is obviously not easy to get hold of the resources which are needed for carrying out an efficient place-name policy at all levels. The task of this body (the UNCSGN/UNGEGN) and the persons involved is to do the job as well as possible within the available means, especially in an international context. But we must bear in mind that we have to compete with many parties, and that information and publication are part of our job, towards the governments towards as well as the public, even more so in the age of globalization and free markets. A changing world requires new attitudes. The aim of this paper is to bring forward some fundamental questions concerning place-name treatment and place-name care in a wider perspective.

Place-names have a double function: Firstly they are an indispensable part of a nation's language(s) as a mean of identifying places, i.e. they are labels or addresses which are used in writing or in a spoken form. This aspect is the primary one for the work in a UN context, namely the practical usage of place-names as a mean of orientation, and especially, which standardized form place-names should have in order to function as well as possible nationally and internationally.

Secondly, place-names are an important part of a nation's cultural heritage, as they document a variety of aspects in a nation's history from the time when they were coined. This aspect has of course been touched upon in a UN context many times, but it must be correct to maintain that the technical aspect has drawn the greatest attention.

It is thus a linguistic-normative as well as a cultural responsibility which rest upon the administering of place-names. In my opinion there is a good reason to look upon both of these aspects of place-names in a wider perspective. As to place-names as part of our cultural heritage it must be taken into consideration that every single name, generally known, known just by a few, or even obsolete, makes part of the history of the nation in question. The names may reveal details in many ways, such as natural circumstances, ethnicity, settlement history, cultivation, cattle breeding, hunting, fishing, commerce, and contact between different groups of people. Normally the attention is drawn to well known place-names when it is question of historically interesting names, but a single field name may have as much to tell. Therefore, it is a standing task to collect place-names in the local communities. In many places a large part of the place-names has been systematically collected, but I don't know of any country which has completed such an undertaking. In Norway, less than half of the place-name material

which was known in the second half of the 20th century has been collected (and now many names are disappearing every year because the people who knew them are passing away). It is an impossible task to get hold of all existing names, but every government should have collecting and preserving of place-names on its agenda. Unfortunately many countries, especially developing countries, lack the infrastructure and funding which are required for carrying out such a task, and substantial assistance is needed. The Working Group on Toponymy Courses has made considerable efforts to improve the situation, but as we know, the need is enormous. A simplified program for collecting place-names was presented by this speaker at the 6th Conference.

There are good reasons for influencing governments to live up to these challenges as the situation for taking care of oral tradition is getting more difficult every year. Electronic medias such as tv and internet give people less time and less interest to talk to each other. The consequence is that the younger generations do not get familiar with the local place-name material and other traditions which used to be handed over from generation to generation. It is our duty towards future generations to make this clear and do our best to reduce the loss.

During the last century we have also witnessed that existing name usage has been suppressed as a result of regime shift, for instance by renaming towns, areas and other places. No doubt such things still happen, but this forum should stress the right of living of inherited place-names.

When it comes to the standardization of place-names there are also considerable problems to deal with, but the situation is somewhat easier to oversee, as it turns on settling a written form according to certain orthographic rules and to use this form in a public context. Yet we know that the task is immense, and that the national as well as the international work in the field of place-name standardization never reaches its completion. According to the reports at this and previous conferences progress has been made in many divisions and areas, but also that the standardization efforts are met with substantial problems, for instance in the use of minority names. It is also noticed that national and multinational companies exercise an increasing influence on the naming and the standardization process which in some cases constitutes a threat to inherited names.

Every era and every generation have the right and duty to formulate their own rules according to prevailing concepts, also to give new names, but we should always remind each other – and those in power – of the responsibility of taking care of mankind's history as it is reflected in the place-names of the world. Our work is of a practical nature, but our perspective implicates fundamental immaterial values.

The future goal of establishing comprehensive collections of place-names and carrying through standardized name forms on all levels of society according to inherited name usage is still far away.