

Agenda item No. 7

Random Thoughts on the Functions and Aims of the  
UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names

Submitted by Alan Rayburn

The UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names should take the initiative to determine when or whether it should complete its assigned responsibilities: if the experts believe that they have a continuing function to convene on a regular basis in order to promote the work of national and international standardization of geographical names and terminology, then a clear statement should be enunciated and circulated among the member countries of the UN; if the experts believe that the main aims of the Group have either been attained or have almost been completed then the Group should identify its own schedule for the fulfillment of its remaining goals. Unless the Group itself clarifies its functions and aims, focuses on its most significant goals and identifies a practical schedule for its work it might find (a) its program and the future of name standardization being dictated from outside, or (b) withdrawal from active participation by some of its more energetic experts, or (c) discouragement by some of the principal member countries at the UN of providing further support for UN activities in the name standardization field or (d) rejection of some of the positive and progressive resolutions and standards already achieved.

The work of the UN Group of Experts is hindered by a confusing and unorganized array of background papers and discussions of the experts at UN sessions and of the national delegates at UN conferences. Even those experts who have participated in all meetings in the past 20 years must often have difficulty finding particular references; for new delegates or for those who have not participated during the whole period of UN names standardization meetings it must be almost impossible to comprehend fully the arguments, discussions and resolutions on certain subjects. I would propose that all relevant papers and documents be made available on microfiche and then adequately indexed to assure access to

information. The two projects could be undertaken under contract, possibly by the UN, although we would want to be sure that the person undertaking the indexing has an appreciation for the aims, methods and significance of names standardization. I would be prepared to have the microfilming and indexing undertaken in Canada, but we would expect to do so on a cost recovery basis, i.e., a price would be set for the sale of the microfiche to allow us to get back over a period of time the costs of both filming and indexing. If it were decided to accept this proposal in Canada no work could likely be put out to contract before mid-1982, and, even then, the project would be in competition for finite resources and might have to be delayed even longer. There might be difficulty as well in determining if we had all relevant documents, or if some of the documents we have have been withdrawn from the official record. As a final thought on this proposal I know that I would find my involvement in the UN Group of Experts would be made much more efficient and effective if I had immediate access to all significant statements and resolutions relating to the international standardization of geographical names.

Another difficulty with our work is opaquely noted in the first paragraph: "... a clear statement should be enunciated and circulated among the member countries of the UN." There does not seem to be an adequate procedure to assure circulation and adoption of resolutions and decisions by public bodies in each of the member countries of the UN. Some experts may have the authority to implement decisions and resolutions in their own jurisdiction, but most of them probably do not and are uncertain how the decisions and resolutions should be put into effect in their countries and divisions. Some experts may believe their participation as an expert at the UN is only to guide the UN itself in the handling of names, and has nothing to do with setting and changing standards in the countries and divisions they represent. The actual process of having standards adopted by the UN itself is no doubt quite a mystery to most experts. Dr. Breu addressed some of these questions in his Working Paper No. 2 at the Eighth Session in 1979, and I believe his remarks should be repeated:

"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 cooperation 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 linguist-

tical 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 cooperation is always a burdensome task; we must have patience till the fruits of our efforts ripen".<sup>1</sup>

At the Sixth Session in 1975 and the Eighth Session in 1979 the Group of Experts recommended the assignment of a toponymic specialist to the staff of the UN Cartography Section in order to promote the work of international standardization more effectively. At the Eighth Session it was reported that a toponymic specialist had been engaged in the Interpretation and Meeting Services Division. These remarks were noted in the draft report of the Eighth Session, but were eliminated in the final report dated March 30, 1979. It is recommended that we examine the Group's proposal again and determine whether the assignment of a specialist in another UN division has aided the work of the Cartography Section.

Much has been accomplished in international name standardization and Canada, as it has done since the First UN Conference in Geneva in 1967, remains committed to the promotion of further improvements in the treatment of names and terminology at the international level, and to the provision of advice on establishing national names authorities in other countries.

---

1 J. Breu, Thoughts on the Future of Standardization of Geographical Names within the Framework of the United Nations, Working Paper no. 2, Eighth Session of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names, New York, February 26 - March 9, 1979, pp. 5,6.