



United Nations Group of  
Experts on Geographical Names



# Geographical Names Activities in Africa

## *“The Gaborone Action Plan”*

**6<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Committee**

**of Director -Generals of National Statistics Offices**

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**Yamoussoukro - Côte d'Ivoire**

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# Geographical names issues



- A geographical name is the name applied to a feature on earth. This includes natural topographical features as well as those made or adapted by human activity, populated and unpopulated entities, and also hydrographic and maritime features.
- The geographical names play a big role in several development and economic areas: mapping, geographic information systems and databases, real estate registration, urban planning, tourism, census taking, dissemination of statistical products, security sectors and in crises and natural disasters, etc...

## GN Fields of interest

- National planning strategies
- Environmental management
- Emergency services coordination
- Utility infrastructures
- Peacekeeping operations
- On-board navigation systems
- Population census
- Global media
- Tourism
- Map and atlas production
- Trade and commerce
- Property rights and cadastre
- Security strategy
- Communication systems
- Cultural heritage promotion
- Etc...

## Geographical names issues

- Geographical names are complex, they are derived from all unwritten and written languages spoken on Earth, from current languages as well as from those spoken in the past. Different scripts and writing systems are used to represent those names.
- Geographical names are subject of changes and are often winded by the events (social, political , religious, ethnic , colonization, etc...).

## Geographical names issues

- The toponymic landscape is then heterogeneous and distorted in the absence of:
  - ✓ National toponymic authorities,
  - ✓ Standardization tools,
  - ✓ Scrutiny research in the field of GN
  - ✓ Awareness about the importance of the standardized geographical names.

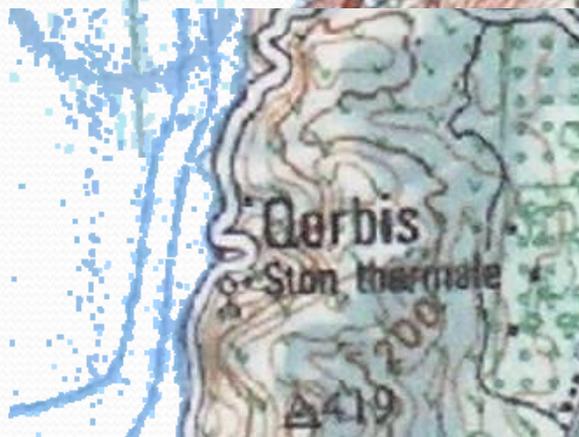
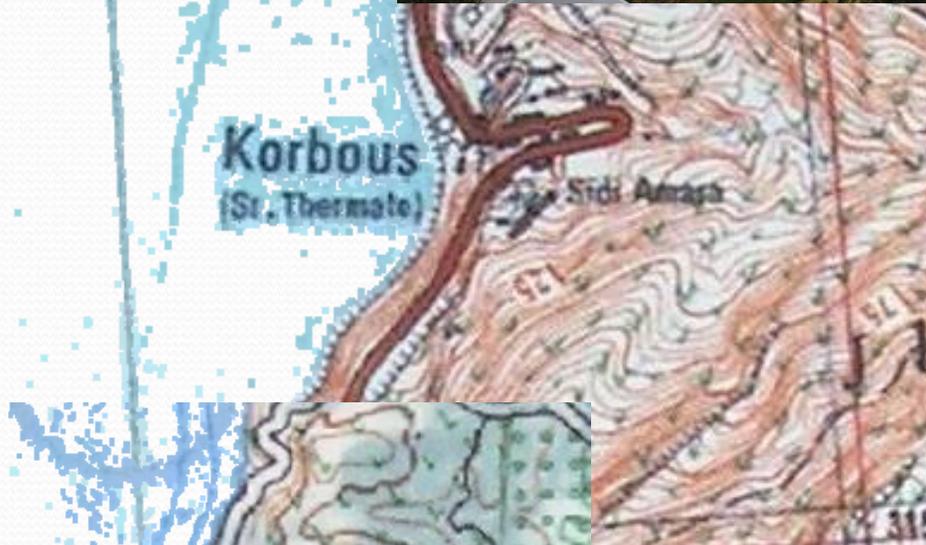
# Examples of geographical names' use



Poorly recorded names



Continuous use of exonyms



Different transcription forms

# United Nations Group of Experts of Geographical Names (UNGEEN)

- Because:
  - ✓ Of the problematic and complex nature of geographical names,
  - ✓ The geographical names are part of our cultural patrimony that has to be preserved,
  - ✓ The Standardization is essential for the cross-referencing and sharing of location-specific data and information.

# United Nations Group of Experts of Geographical Names (UNGEGN)

- The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) found it necessary to establish in 1959 the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSSGN) and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) to meet and provide technical recommendations on standardizing geographical names at the national and international levels.

## United Nations Group of Experts of Geographical Names (UNGEEN)

- Today, UNGEEN is one of the seven standing expert bodies of ECOSOC, with over 400 members from over 100 countries.
- The UNCSGN is held every five years,
- The UNGEEN meets between the Conferences to follow up the implementation of resolutions adopted by the Conferences (More than 150 resolutions since the first conference in 1967) and to ensure continuity of activities between Conferences.

# United Nations Group of Experts of Geographical Names (UNGEEN)

- UNGEEN functions through 23 geographical/linguistic divisions and through working groups (10 WG + the task team for Africa)
- UNGEEN WG are addressing issues of training courses, digital data files and gazetteers, romanization systems, country names, terminology, publicity and funding, and toponymic guidelines.

# United Nations Group of Experts of Geographical Names (UNGEEN)

UNGEEN Glossary:

standardization of geographical names is :

*“The prescription by a names authority of one or more particular names, together with their precise written form, for application to a specific geographical feature, as well as the conditions for their use.”*



## UNEGN Resolution I/4: National standardization (1967)

This resolution contains recommendations for five main areas, namely: a) National Name Authorities, b) Collection of Geographical Names, c) Principles of Office Treatment of Geographical Names, d) Multilingual Areas, e) National Gazetteers. All other resolutions may be seen as amendments to this resolution.

*“It is recommended that, as a first step in international standardization of geographical names, each country should have a national geographical names authority.”*

# Geographical Names Problems in Africa

- **Lack of statutory naming authorities in many** countries, that would provide the institutional framework needed to support the standardization effort.
- **Weak names authorities:** some countries have names authorities, but they do not function well.

# Geographical Names Problems and Challenges in Africa

- **Lack of awareness** on the value of geographical names standardization at higher levels of government.
- **Low participation in international forums** to learn from global best practices and ensure that Africa's needs are understood and reflected in guidelines and standards.

# UNGE GN and Geographical Names in Africa

## StatCom-Africa II Recommendation (A-d):

*“ECA to prepare a work programme, in collaboration with United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGE GN), that will lead to authoritative national databases, which will be consolidated into a continental database and feed into the global geographical names database.”*

## UNGEGN and Geographical Names in Africa

- Following StatCom-Africa II, ECA and UNGEGN's Task Team for Africa organized a roundtable during 26th UNGEGN Session in Vienna, 2-6 May 2011.
- Supported StatCom-Africa's call and proposed more discussion in the form of a meeting of experts.
- Government of Botswana agreed to host the Consultative Workshop in Gaborone.

# The Gaborone Action Plan (GAP)

*Recalling* Resolution 2011/24 of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, which recognized importance of integrating cartographic and statistical information as well as spatial data, and the need to promote international cooperation on cartography, geographical names and geospatial information; and

# The Gaborone Action Plan (GAP)

*Recognizing* that geographical names are important mechanisms for linking location-specific statistical data to meaningful identifiers and that standardization of such geographical names are essential for the cross-referencing and data and information sharing.

# The Gaborone Action Plan (GAP)

- *Affirming* the important role of geographical names in economic, social and cultural development, particularly in the developing countries; and
- *Noting* the little progress made by most African countries in the field of geographical names standardization;

# The Gaborone Action Plan (GAP)

*Having* deliberated on the urgent and increasingly critical demand for reliable and easily accessible geographical names data necessary for formulating and managing national and international development policies and programs,

## The Gaborone Action Plan (GAP)

- A declaration called “Gaborone Action Plan (GAP)’ has been adopted during the joint meeting with the Government of Botswana, ECA / UN and the UNGEEN that took place in Gaborone in November 2011.
- After a diagnosis on the situation of the standardization of geographical names in Africa, the GAP was grouped under four themes, for consideration by the Statistical Commission for Africa.

## FINDINGS OF THE GABORONE MEETING

- 16 out of 54 countries have a geographical names authority.
- 18 have an institution serving as contact on geographical names without the proper legal mandate from Government.
- No information on remaining 20 countries.

# GAP' KEY ACTIONS RECOMMENDED

## 1. Improve National Institutional Arrangements

- Increase awareness among politicians, mapping organizations, statistical offices, other government departments on how geographical names impact on their work.
- Sensitize the public and media on using standardized geographical names.
- Encourage governments of African countries to establish or re-vitalize national names authorities.
- Establish and communicate contacts between African countries; and within countries between government departments, universities, etc...

## 2. Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing Activities

- Continued Courses and workshops on geographical names standardization, concepts, skills, etc...
- Encourage partners to sponsor participation in regional workshops and global conferences and events, such as UNEGGN sessions and UNCSGN.
- Organize meetings of national experts to coordinate activities and share knowledge.
- Include the GN in side events of StatCom, CODIST and similar intergovernmental bodies.

### 3. Cooperation and Coordination at all Levels

National: incorporate GN into learning programmes at all levels; media campaign...

Regional:

- Consider African Day on geographical names
- Include in agenda of StatCom and other relevant meetings of appropriate organizations
- Encourage countries to establish or revamp names authorities (Botswana)

Global: Sponsor active participation in relevant international events

## 4. Advances in Technology and Communication

- UNECA to finalize and disseminate Africa GeoNyms gazetteer software (undertake pilot projects first).
- Ensure GeoNyms adopts international standards for interoperability.
- Assist countries to use appropriate ICT to ensure easy access to geographical names by all users.

## Initiatives and activities towards the promotion of GN in Africa

- Several steps have been initiated with ECA / UN in order to boost the toponymic activities in Africa.
- It was decided that ECA / UN should be more involved in raising awareness about the benefits of standardization of geographical names in different sectors: Economic, Cultural, social, security, emergency in case of natural disasters, etc.
- Thus, it was decided, by mutual agreement, that the subject of geographical names be included in the agenda of various meetings organized by ECA / UN notably that of CODIST.

# Initiatives and activities towards the promotion of GN in Africa

StatCom-Africa III, recommendation P 76-77-78 on GN

The Statistical Commission for Africa:

76. *Endorses the Gaborone Action Plan*

77. *Calls upon NSOs to ensure that coding systems are provided in the assignment and standardization of geographical names and advocate the use of such codes whenever data systems are being developed.*

78. *Calls upon ECA, AUC, AfDB and other partners to support the work of the Task Team for Africa in particular and geographical names activities in general.*

## Initiatives and activities towards the promotion of GN in Africa

- Training sessions and workshops organized by Task Team for Africa and other UNGEEN Task Teams.
- Participation of UNGEEN, ECA/AU and African experts participated to the workshop on the Standardization of Geographical Names held by the South African Department of Arts and Cultures in April 2012 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

## Initiatives and activities towards the promotion of GN in Africa

- Sending letters to the different African continental structures, such as the AfDB and ECA /UN, to solicit their aid and support in implementing the provisions of the 'Gaborone Action Plan.
- The development of the Africa GeoNyms software.

## Initiatives and activities towards the promotion of GN in Africa

- The initiative on Global Geographic information Management (GGIM) spearheaded by the United Nations Statistical division (UNSD),
- (UNSD) is also the secretariat of UNGEEN.

## Recommendations/ Proposals

- Endorse the Gaborone Action Plan.
- Call on National Statistical Offices to participate actively in the work of their national committees, commissions or appropriate geographical names coordinating bodies.
- Call on ECA, AUC, AfDB and other partners to support the work of the Task Team for Africa in particular and geographical names activities in general.

## Recommendations/ Proposals

- Include the geographical names' item in the agenda of various meetings organized by ECA / UN notably that of CODIST:
  - ✓ Increase awareness among our policy makers,
  - ✓ Improve funding situation for geospatial information projects in Africa.
  
- Support ECA's GeoNyms development:



**Thank you for your attention**

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