

Report on the workshop on geographical names held in Tunis, January 12-16, 2015, organised by CNCT and UNGEGN

The Centre National de la Cartographie et de la Télédétection (CNCT) in Tunisia and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names organised a workshop on geographical names, January 12-16 in Tunis, with a double agenda: the toponymic training of the newly appointed members of the National Committee of Toponymy of Tunisia (NCTT) and the elaboration of a road map for the creation and functioning of African national names bureaux. With those objectives in mind, the lecturing team (consisting of Helen Kerfoot, Elisabeth Calvarin and Ferjan Ormeling) had been strengthened by Brahim Atoui, chair of the UNGEGN Task Force for Africa, while Lucy Phalaagae (Botswana), Chair of the UNGEGN Africa South Division, and Oumar Sanon (Burkina Faso), standing chair of the UNGEGN Africa West Division joined the workshop as well.

The 18 Tunisian participants represented the various Tunisian ministries composing the National Committee of Toponymy in Tunisia. They took part in an ambitious lecturing programme of some 30 presentations, fieldwork and a number of strenuous sessions to work out the road map.

The workshop was officially opened by the Tunisian Minister of National Defense, his excellency Mr Ghazi Jeribi and Mr Abdel Jehane, director general of CNCT. It started with sessions on Introduction to geographical names, the African toponymic experience, geographical names as cultural heritage, the application of the standardization experience to Africa, and fieldwork. The local organisation had been put in place by UNGEGN vice-chair Col. Mme Naima Friha and her team from CNCT.

Midway in the programme the fieldwork was held, in order to give all participants an idea of name collection procedures, as usually names commission members do not go out into the field themselves in order to collect names, but process the names collected by topographers during their fieldwork. This fieldwork, directed by Mme Elisabeth Calvarin, was held in the Bizerte area on the north coast around the village of Ghar el Melh, where the party was received by the mayor and went through the village area with local guides, knowledgeable regarding the local nomenclature and history. Names were collected, with their variant orthographies, while it was tried as well to assess the existence of allonyms, the meaning of the names, and their explanation and histories. As Ghar el Melh played an important role in Tunisian history, also under the name of Porto Farina, the main Ottoman naval port in Africa, and the village also was a centre of the current wetlands conservation project there was ample opportunity to go into the cultural heritage of the names.

After the processing of the fieldwork results into a names data base by Mme Elisabeth Calvarin and its presentation Thursday morning, Ms Phalaagae and Mr Sanon presented the situation of their country's respective national commissions on toponymy, and together with Mr Atoui then extended this subject and commented on the toponymic cooperation in Africa and the role the Task Team for Africa was playing. There is a lack of toponymic activities in most African

countries, because of weak engagement of most governments (not realizing toponymic standardization is a precondition for economic development) and insufficient means available to the responsible staff. This also led to poor participation from Africa in UNGEGN events.



The workshop participants with the mayor of Ghar el Melh in front of one of the Ottoman forts in his municipality.

The task team has developed a number of actions. Together with the now defunct African Organisation for Cartography and Remote Sensing (OACRS/OACT) and with the help of UNECA, toponymy courses were organised (together with the UNGEGN WG on training courses in toponymy) in all African divisions and ECA developed an open source database application GeoNyms that is made freely available. With UNGEGN, ECA organised a major workshop in Gaborone in 2011 where the Gaborone Plan of Action (GAP), consisting of the actions needed and timeline to follow for African countries were defined. It was presented to African institutions and to the 10th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

After having discussed the components of an ideal toponymic situation, the possible routes to get there were elaborated.

- (a) At the general level, it is anticipated that the Task Team for Africa will take up this draft framework and develop it further into a possible road map for African countries, starting at “point zero” to initiate a national names authority and to include the signposts for it to tackle the tasks of

standardization and of making the toponyms widely available and accessible.

(b) As in Tunisia a national committee on geographical names (NCTT) has now been created by Décret, workshop time was devoted to planning its path ahead. After general discussion of potential problems, three groups were formed to draft plans to navigate routes in the following areas:

- The mandate and functioning of the Committee
- Principles and directives for naming
- Communication and awareness

After presentations by the groups, their notes were amalgamated and will be formulated into an action plan.

The workshop was closed by the cabinet chief of the Ministry of National Defense, Mr. Sami Mhamdi. The proceedings of the workshop will be distributed to the participants, and results of the road map will be presented, in an abbreviated form, in the UNGEGN Bulletin.

Ferjan Ormeling and Helen Kerfoot