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**Report of the UNGEGN Chairperson\***

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\* Submitted by UNGEGN Chairperson

# REPORT OF THE UNGEGN CHAIRPERSON

2012-2014

## Summary

This report summarises the challenges for UNGEGN as a result of rapidly advancing technology, demand for instance up to date information, the increase in the general use of spatial data which then increases the need for data integration, and the proliferation of user-generated names. The work of UNGEGN between 2012 and 2014 – with the Secretariat, through its Divisions and Working Groups and Task Force – is summarized. Reference is made to the relationship with UNGGIM. An annexe is included about the formation of UNGEGN's Divisions.

## UNGE GN – building on the past for the future

I wonder what that first small group of geographical names specialists in who met in 1960 would have thought of the current situation with UNGEGN. Over 50 years of work has resulted in an organisation that is mature and robust. As we look back at the efforts and achievements of those who pioneered this work of standardization under the auspices of the United Nations, we should recognise and be thankful for the foundation they laid. Many of the fundamental issues faced then are the same today, being how best to collect, record and authorize geographical names at the national level, how to develop single scientific systems of romanization of toponyms, and how to disseminate this information for general use.

Add to these issues, the work undertaken to develop and provide training courses, the structure of modern toponymic data bases, development of appropriate terminology with solid definitions and the relevance of place names associated with culture and heritage and we can see a fast body of accomplishments, usually undertaken by people who voluntarily give of their time and experience to these ends.

As has been identified by Ms Helen Kerfoot, the previous UNGEGN chair, times are changing rapidly. We are entering into a period when the use of spatial data will become increasingly more and more common. Think of all the devices, web sites and applications we use, often on a daily basis, that rely on spatial data. Think of how quickly we have come to rely on such information and how quickly it have developed, then consider what the situation could be in 2, 5 or 10 years' time. Think of the opportunities provide by other data suppliers for the general public to have input into the data bank.

In Australia we have been identifying what is referred to as the Foundation Spatial Themes so that we can gain a better understanding where we are with them and where we need to be in the near future. These themes are:

Geocoded Addresses  
Positioning  
Place Names  
Cadastre  
Imagery

Administrative Boundaries  
Transport  
Water  
Land Cover  
Elevation and Depth

During the initial discussions involving a number of spatial data experts, thoughts were expressed to the effect that perhaps place names were not really a spatial data theme. As the development of this project continued it was quickly realised that place names play a significant role in all themes with the exception perhaps of imagery. We must continue to stress that place names are, and will continue to be, the most fundamental and commonly used spatial identifier, particularly given that addressing relies on place names to function. It may be that some of us need to become better at selling this message.

Place names are also a valuable indexing and linking tool between the various spatial layers them self and with other no spatial data. The more effective the standardisation of place names within a jurisdictions, then the more effective this linking and indexing will be.

As the use of this data increased, then so too will the demand for accuracy and currency. If we, as the custodians of the official information, are unable or unwilling to provide this as widely and cost effectively as possible, then we run the risk of becoming redundant as the public supply of place names information will be done through other, perhaps less authoritative, sources.

We are also working in a time of increased resource pressure, not only in developing countries as all nations have felt the results of recent global financial problems. This is difficult in the developed nations, but they have the benefit of established practice and process to rely on. It brings increasing challenges to those countries who are trying to develop effective standardisation platforms.

How do we address this, when the demands are increasing and the resources diminishing? How can UNGEGN place itself to assist in this? I do not have all the answers but is something that we must collectively address in the near future. To start this, prompted by a suggestion from one of the Working Group convenors, we have scheduled a workshop during this Session when we can gather together and discuss the ways that we can build the future methodology to better meet the expected needs. All will be welcome to attend and put your thoughts and ideas on the table as to how can we improve the way we function and how can we better use the Divisions and Working Groups.

To quote from the Report of the Chair at the 2011 Session:

*“UNGEEN has faced challenges before and over more than 50 years since its inception has made progress in establishing national standards for geographical names and promoting the nationally approved names for international use. Again during the past two years we have taken steps forward although it is certainly difficult to imagine that the standardization of geographical names, their dissemination and use around the world will ever be a task that we can say is completed.”*

We have met challenges before and I have every confidence in this group that we have the skills and vision to meet the ones we face today and into the future.

**Working with the UNGEGN Secretariat**

We cannot underestimate the support we gain from the UNGEGN Secretariat, and thank Ms. Sabine Warschburger and Ms. Vilma Frani who have supported us now and in the past and who have been joined by Ms Cecille Blake for their sessions. They continue to work very hard on our behalf and it is fair to state that we could not function without this support.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express the thanks of UNGEGN to Mr. Paul Cheung, former Director of the Statistics Division, and Mr. Stefan Schweinfest, acting Director of the Statistics Division for the support they have given us.

The secretariat has also devised a new session report format that will enable us to provide a shorter report that will be issue and action oriented rather than a simply an expanded Order of Work document that lists each title and country of origin without being able to focus on the issues and outcomes.

Further details will be provided by the UNGEGN Secretariat, but I would like to indicate that we have continued to work cooperatively on a number of items:

The Statistics Division has continued to provide some financial support for UNGEGN – for the training courses in Yogyakarta in 2012 and Antananarivo in 2013, for this 28th Session of UNGEGN, and for the development of web-based training units.

The UNGEGN World Geographical Names web-based database is up and running, and although includes data from UNGEGN, it is maintained by the Statistics Division (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/geonames/>). This concept has been in place since 2001 and now exists as a multilingual, multi-scriptual database that includes the geo-referenced names of countries, capitals and major cities and with the capability to include pronunciation of city endonyms as audio files. The framework is there and many countries have contributed the requested data. However, there are still some that have not forwarded the relevant information and I would like to encourage countries to provide their data on cities/towns with a population greater than 100,000, including WAV field for the pronunciation.

The UNGEGN website (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/>) continues to be maintained and improved. However, it still relies on the delegates providing the up to date information required to keep it current, and I would like to invite all to take this opportunity.

The *UNEGN Information Bulletin* continues to be compiled from your contributions and circulated twice-annually, for the benefit of all experts, in keeping with resolution V/24. In addition to the various Division and Working Group reports included, all are invited to contribute information on names standardization questions and issues in your country. We are also considering to option of introducing a thematic section to better cover some of the emerging issues.

### **UNEGN geographical/linguistic Divisions**

We are aware that at least nine divisions have met either during or since the 27th UNGEGN Session held in New York in 2012. As mentioned previously, the Division and Working groups are one of the great strengths of UNGEGN if they are functioning and it is good to see the progress that is being made in many of the Divisions. Please feel free to instigate any alternative methods of communication in

relation to the work of the Divisions if face to face meetings are not possible and report to us on the success or otherwise of the methods. This can only help other Divisions.

I still encourage each Division Chair to provide leadership in a number of ways: to collect contact information in each country, to document the information on names authorities, publications, etc. within the Division, to provide feedback to countries less actively involved in UNGEGN sessions, to follow up on the implementation of UN resolutions in the Division, and to promote joint projects between the countries of the Division.

It is recognised that in the past there have been various cooperative projects undertaken through the Divisions, such as maps, gazetteers, indexes and dictionaries; comparing generic terminology in different languages and cultural situations; committees addressing training and various standardization issues and so forth. I believe we need to increase this type of cross divisional interaction and mentoring to assist in achieving the goals of UNGEGN in line with the resource issues mentioned above. However, I must state that in relation to both the Divisions and Working Groups, their success is directly proportional to the willingness of the delegates to become involved in the work. At times, there is too much left to too few to be really effective. Again, I invite you to become involved.

There is a link to all the Division web sites on the UNGEGN website at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/divisions.html>. For Divisions that are not able to host their own website, the Secretariat would be pleased to make arrangements to put up some material for them on the UNGEGN website.

A list of the 24 divisions of UNGEGN, is attached as Annex 1 to this report, and summarised the creation date of each of the divisions.

### **UNGEGN Working Groups**

The Working groups of UNGEGN, together with the Task Team for Africa and the group working on Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors contribute significantly to the work of UNGEGN and I must thank all who are actively involved.

There are some of these groups that, during this session, will look need to consider future conveners and due to retirement and other positions the current conveners are no longer able to fulfil this role. If you are interested in being involved in the Working Groups on Pronunciation of Place Names as Cultural Heritage, and in the Toponymic Guidelines Group, please attend the side event for these and put your name forward.

Progress has been made on a variety of fronts and often by the combined efforts of several working groups. Each group will report separately later in the meeting, but I would like to take this opportunity to thank the conveners and all other involved for the work they do.

Such significant undertakings like the training courses, publications and definitions would not have been achieved without this input and effort.

The Task Team for Africa, convened by Mr. Brahim Atoui, has been active promoting the benefits of geographical names standardisation in Africa and providing training for where possible. There are lessons we can use from these efforts that can be applied in other parts of the world where the general activity is lower than preferred. It may be worth us considering the feasibility of the more advanced nations undertaking a mentoring role of those who are struggling if this can be arranged.

### **UN Committee on Global Geospatial Information Management (UNGGIM)**

UNGGIM was established in 2010 to provide a forum to promote best practice geospatial information management. UNGEEN has been involved in the formation of UNGGIM and has attended most of the meetings held to date. It is important that this relationship can continue to strengthen as we all recognise the importance of geographical names to effective geospatial data usage and integration.

Many of the issues that UNGGIM will face are the same as we have been involved with for a number of years, such as romanization, cultural heritage aspects, conflicting names usage and so on. We will continue to work with UNGGIM to promote this relationship.

### **Miscellaneous**

#### *Liaison with other groups*

The benefits of effective liaison with other organisations has been evident for a number of years, providing a means by which the work of UNGEEN can be promoted. We have ongoing liaison with the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS), the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), the International Cartographic Association (ICA) and other similar bodies.

Liaison with groups of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is maintained through some of the Working Groups – Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, as well as through Romanization Systems and Country Names. The Working Groups also provide us with significant contacts with such projects as EuroGeoNames, and with groups involved with European data standards, and with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

If I can summarise my thoughts, it will be in the manner of ensuring that we are aware of the pressures that will be on place name authorities to provide current and comprehensive data to a rapidly growing number of spatial data clients to ensure that we are always regarded as relevant in an environment where spatial data is being provided by many others in an ad hoc data manner that is often incorporated into spatial data infrastructures due to the lack of authoritative data.

Bill Watt,  
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## Annex 1

### Creation of UNGEGN Divisions

At the Second UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in London in 1972, with resolution II/3, UNGEGN was formally created under its current name, rather than continuing as an ad hoc group.

At that time (II/4), 14 geographical/linguistic divisions were formed. Several of the original names have since been changed and one division (Africa south of the Sahara) was disbanded in favour of smaller regional groupings. Since 1975, ten other divisions have been constituted.

#### ***Chronological list:***

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1972 2nd Conference II/4   | Africa south of the Sahara<br>Arabic<br>Asia, east<br>Asia, south-east<br>Asia, south-west, other than Arabic<br>Dutch-speaking and German-speaking<br>Europe, east central and south-east<br>Indian group<br>Latin America<br>Norden<br>Romance languages, other than Latin America<br>United Kingdom group<br>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics<br>United States of America – Canada |
| 1975 6th UNGEGN            | China  |
| 1978 3rd Conference III/26 | Africa south of the Sahara be subdivided into three:<br>Africa, Central<br>Africa, East<br>Africa, West  |
| 1987 5th Conference V/3    | Celtic<br>East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic)  |
| 1992 6th Conference VI/1   | Africa South<br>Baltic<br>Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia<br><br>The Division referred to as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ceased to exist   |
| 1998 7th Conference VII/1  | French-speaking  |
| 2007 9th Conference IX/3   | Portuguese-speaking  |
| 2012 10th Conference X/5   | Asia South-East Pacific South West Division<br>split into<br>Asia South-East<br>Pacific South West   |

#### ***Alphabetic list by name, as currently used***

Africa Central 1978 (from 1972 part of Africa south of the Sahara)  
Africa East 1978 (from 1972 part of Africa south of the Sahara)  
Africa South 1992 (from 1972-1978, part of Africa south of the Sahara)  
Africa West 1978 (from 1972 part of Africa south of the Sahara)  
Arabic 1972  
Asia East (other than China) 1972 (originally Asia, east)

Asia South-East 2012 (originally Asia, south-east, then portion of Asia South East  
pacific South West)  
Asia South-West (other than Arabic) 1972  
Baltic 1992  
Celtic 1987  
China 1975  
Dutch- and German-speaking 1972  
East Central and South-East Europe 1972  
Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia (from 1972, the Union of Soviet Socialist  
Republics 1992 Division existed)  
East Mediterranean (other than Arabic) 1987  
French-speaking 1998  
India 1972  
Latin America 1972  
Norden 1972  
Pacific South-West 2012 (formerly portion of the Asia South East Pacific South  
West)  
Portuguese-speaking 2007  
Romano-Hellenic 1972 (originally Romance languages, other than Latin America)  
United Kingdom 1972  
United States of America / Canada 1972