



Economic and Social Council

Distr.  
LIMITED

E/CONF.74/L.99  
27 August 1982

ENGLISH ONLY

---

Fourth United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names  
Geneva, 24 August to 14 September 1982  
Item 14(e) of the agenda\*

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION:  
CO-OPERATION WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Work of the United States in the Working Group on Gazetteers  
and Geographical Names of the Pan American Institute of  
Geography and History\*\*

Paper presented by the United States

SUMMARY

The United States of America continues to cooperate with the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), an organization established some 55 years ago to work on programmes in geography, history, cartography, and geophysics that reflect the interests and requirements of the approximately 18 nations of the Western Hemisphere that comprise the body. From 1973 to 1978 the United States worked with the PAIGH Committee on Geographical Terminology, which was involved in several projects concerning nomenclature associated with names and with a directory of names agencies. Organizational changes in PAIGH resulted in the disestablishment of the committee in 1978, so, except for the publication of a directory shortly thereafter, no further work was carried out. In 1980, however, PAIGH authorities approved a proposal submitted by the United States and Mexico to create a Working Group on Gazetteers. The purpose of this group was to develop common specifications for a series of national gazetteers, a program that was officially approved as a PAIGH activity at a PAIGH meeting in Chile in March and April of 1982.

---

\* E/CONF.74/1

\*\* Prepared by Richard R. Randall, Executive Secretary, U.S. Board on Geographic Names, and Principal Project Coordinator, PAIGH Working Group on Gazetteers and Geographical Names.

The United States of America continued to be active in the affairs of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), a cultural and scientific body created about 55 years ago as an international vehicle for promoting studies and exchanges of information about geographical and historical topics. Later, PAIGH added cartography and geophysics to its concerns, and now can point with pride to a wide range of activities and reports that bring benefits to the concerned nations. Because PAIGH is a unit of the Organization of American States, it has a tie to the United Nations as well.

Since the Third UN Conference, the United States has played a role in PAIGH programmes related to geographical names. As reported in Athens (E/CONF. 69.L.35) the United States exercised leadership in a Committee on Geographical Terminology. A restructuring of the Geography Commission of PAIGH, under which the committee worked, resulted in the disestablishment of the committee, and a cessation of its programmes. Despite this event, however, which was effective as of January 1, 1978, efforts continued to publish a directory of agencies involved with geographical names in the Americas. This useful document, for the first time, provided essential information about names agencies in a single reference. It is now subject for revision, and is attached as an annex to this paper.

In March of 1980, PAIGH authorities meeting in Costa Rica approved the establishment of another body, a Working Group on Gazetteers. This resulted from a proposal by the United States and Mexico to start a gazetteer program based on another PAIGH activity to produce a series of topographical maps at 1:250,000. This activity, properly called the PAIGH 1:250,000 Unified Hemispheric Map Series and initiated a few years earlier, provided an excellent basis for national gazetteers.

The project was assigned to the Cartography Commission, one of four in PAIGH (the others are Geography, History, and Geophysics). Richard R. Randall, Executive Secretary of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names accepted the task as Principal Project Coordinator.

Late in 1980, a letter was circulated by the Cartography Commission to all national sections to inform them that plans were being made for a gazetteer program. That letter and another letter early in 1981 called for the formation of a working group and for a meeting of this planning body in July in Panama. Subsequently, from 27-30 July 1981, representatives from Panama, Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, and the United States met at the facilities of the Cartography School of the Inter American Geodetic Survey in Panama to discuss the program and to establish specifications. Discussions centered on the PAIGH map program, the rationale of a PAIGH gazetteer program, the format and content of existing national gazetteers, the activities of various countries to standardize names, the role of names agencies in local cartographic processes, and the requirement to develop common specifications for gazetteers. Examples of national work on names show that much effort was being directed toward field and office methods and toward the application of standardized names to official cartographic products and other items. Colombia, for example, had completed a two-volume dictionary of geographical features in that country. The work includes description of features, maps and photographs. The work of countries to produce the PAIGH maps series was at various stages. Mexico plans to publish some 92 sheets in 1982 from a total of some 197 sheets. Regardless of work status, all participants agreed that a program of gazetteers was a valid activity. With the understanding that the national sections of each country would have to endorse any agreements made in Panama, and with the view that some further changes in specifications might be desirable, the participants agreed to the following major points:

1. Geographical Name. All names on the PAIGH Maps would be carried. Additional names from official sources also would be shown.

2. Designation. A single word or abbreviation would be used to categorize feature types. This "designation" would permit quick identification of the kind of feature, regardless of whether it was called a river, brook, stream, canal, tributary, or similar term.

3. Coordinates. It was agreed that coordinates located to the nearest minute would be satisfactory. The method to locate linear features, especially rivers that flowed into another country, occupied much discussion. A final technique would be worked out through correspondence.

4. Altitude. It was generally accepted that except for certain prominent features it would not be necessary to show elevation.

5. Administrative Units. The group agreed that each name should be accompanied by the name of the administrative unit in which it is located.

6. Alphabetization. Names normally are to be listed by the first word of the specific element, followed by the generic element. (Thus, Mount Storm would be listed Storm, Mount.)

Other items agreed upon included matters of content. An introduction to describe methodology and other topics would be required. There should be a glossary to define generic terms. Any abbreviated terms used in association with names should be listed and defined. Where needed, disclaimers concerning boundaries or areas under dispute should be provided. As to design, there was agreement that there should be maximum similarity among national gazetteers. The Principal Project Coordinator asked that each participant circulate the specifications to his own country and to others to determine whether they could be accepted or whether modifications were required. As of November 1981, two statements concerning changes had been received. The recommended changes will be circulated among members of the Working Group for comment.

Meantime, three persons agreed to act as Regional Coordinators to expedite the function of the group and to assure better local progress. Engineer Jorge Varela of Costa Rica will work with countries of Central America, Engineer Hugo Alejandro Sanchez V. of Colombia will work with Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, and Engineer Julio Ronchetti of Argentina will coordinate activities with Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina. It was agreed that when Brazil joins the PAIGH mapping program, a separate coordinator would be required. The Principal Project Coordinator will work with Mexico and Canada as well as the United States and will approach other PAIGH countries not specified above.

While agreeing to general specifications, each member of the Working Group understood that nations could depart from specifications to meet local requirements for place-name information. For example, a nation already producing detailed gazetteers of medium- or large-scale maps and associated names sources would not be asked to develop a new gazetteer series. Taking into consideration comments received later from two members of the Working Group, the Principal Project Coordinator prepared a final set of gazetteer specifications.

The next step was to hold a meeting of the Working Group immediately prior to the 12th PAIGH General Assembly (scheduled to take place in Chile 21 March to 3 April 1982) to endorse the specifications and then to present them to the General Assembly for approval. Accordingly, a group of people from various countries met to elaborate the specifications, with the result that they were accepted as presented with the addition of a statement that countries not involved with the PAIGH map program could use other map series. The specifications were presented to the General Assembly and were approved as official PAIGH standards. The specifications basically follow the items cited above. With respect to the method of determining coordinates, it was proposed (and later accepted) that the following principles would be employed.

1. Features wholly within the country. For linear features, inhabited places, administrative subdivisions, and aerial features (lakes, bays, forests, deserts, and other features of large extent), the midpoint shall be used. For flowing bodies of water (rivers, streams), the coordinates shall be at the lower end or mouth of the feature.

2. Features partially within the country. For linear features, inhabited places, and aerial features, the midpoint of the feature mapped within the country should be used. For flowing bodies of water, the point where they depart from the country should be used. For mountains and hills, the highest point at the national border shall be used.

In this way, the PAIGH Gazetteer Program was born. The next part of the program is for the Regional Project Coordinators to work with their countries to help establish gazetteer activities in support of the PAIGH program.

Another significant milestone was accomplished at the General Assembly. Those at meetings to discuss the gazetteers also agreed that standards for the processing of geographic names at the national level would be beneficial. While some countries already had names standardization bodies, others did not, and it was concluded that the task of the Working Group should be expanded to include names standardization. Accordingly, a further proposal was made to add this responsibility to the body, with the result that its name was changed to the PAIGH Working Group on Gazetteers and Geographical Names.

Since the names standardization element is new, there has been too little time to develop any specific program. As with the gazetteer project (the specifications of which say they conform generally to UN gazetteer standards) the work in geographic names will be built on and will continue work already carried out under UN auspices. In neither case, will there be any conflict with UN programs, but to the contrary, the PAIGH work will complement and augment work being promoted by the UN.

---