

Commemorative naming – possibilities and problems

Commemorative naming is a very common phenomenon throughout the world. By commemorative naming I here mean the practice whereby any official name-giving body through a formal decision attributes a person's name to a geographical feature in order to honour or commemorate him or her.

Examples from Stockholm

In my paper at the last ICOS Congress in Uppsala 2002, I attempted to describe the work of the Name Drafting Committee in Stockholm, of which I am secretary. The Name Drafting Committee makes suggestions and proposals, but the local politicians in Stockholm make the decisions. I mentioned in my paper that the famous writer of children's books, Astrid Lindgren, had died on the 28th of January that year. She was not a Nobel Prize winner but probably is the most well known, most translated and most beloved of all Swedish writers, at least in modern times. The day after she passed away, different ideas of honouring her by attributing her name to some place or feature in the city were already being proposed in the newspapers, addressed to the politicians or to the Name Drafting Committee from the public, or addressed to the Name Drafting Committee from the politicians.

This was the start of a name-giving process that lasted for several years (and in fact it is not quite over yet). It caused a very animated debate, numerous meetings and petitions, lots of newspaper articles and much more. An idea from one of the political parties was to change the name of the street where Astrid Lindgren lived for (almost) the last 50 years of her life. But the Name Drafting Committee strongly opposed all suggestions that involved replacing an older street name or park name. Our arguments were numerous, but one important factor was the new consideration clause on a 'code of good place-name practice,' recently inserted into the Swedish Ancient Monuments and Finds Act, which clearly states that older and well-

established names shall not be changed without good reason. Instead we suggested and argued for the naming of an anonymous section of a park close to where the author lived, but this site was considered too petty and modest by our opponents. There are undoubtedly strong reasons to attribute Astrid Lindgren's name to some place – and there are reasons in this case to see commemorative naming as a possibility – but this does not mean that there are strong reasons to remove or distort any of the old street-names which came under discussion. The fact that there was disagreement on this matter caused problems, and the fact that too many people wanted 'action', also caused problems, as I see it. By this I mean they wanted a quick decision, the quicker the better. The questions still remain – where will Astrid Lindgren's name be used? Exactly what will the name be?

We faced a similar situation in September 2003 when Anna Lindh, the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, was murdered in Stockholm. A few weeks after her death we had been presented with proposals for twelve sites, all in Stockholm, which could bear her name and we felt under strong pressure to make a quick decision. But that was exactly what we did *not* want to do – we wanted to wait, to think this tragic and unexpected situation over, very, very carefully. Again – here we have a good opportunity to honour and commemorate Anna Lindh by attributing her name to something – but the fact that many people wanted this naming to take place instantly was a bit annoying, and caused as I see it – an unnecessary problem.

Now to one more example from Stockholm, where a different kind of problem concerning commemorative naming has arisen just recently. Three years ago the Name Drafting Committee was urged by the City Council to find a place to commemorate the late Albert Aronsson, who was a left wing politician late in life, but mostly – especially during the 1950s – had been an architect, deeply involved in the planning of the new residential areas in the expanding western parts of the city. At first we just could not find a suitable place that lacked a name, so we postponed our proposal. But about a year ago it happened that one of Aronsson's residential areas was being extensively rebuilt and we found a perfect square to which to

attribute his name. Our suggestion, *Albert Aronssons Torg* (Eng. *Albert Aronsson Square*), was submitted to the politicians and the proposal went all the way through the hierarchical process to the City Council for a final decision. But there it was halted. The right wing conservative party then refused to support the suggested name unless one of their own, a former minister and leader of the conservative party in Sweden, was commemorated with a place-name in the city at the same time. We do not have any suitable place for him at the moment, so now both candidates have to wait, how long I do not know. In this case a good opportunity to commemorate a person of great merit cannot be used because of problems caused by the sudden demand to find a second site to honour a second person.

The UN Resolution VIII/2 from Berlin

The above examples are all from Stockholm, Sweden, but the situation there is in no way unique. Commemorative naming has also been discussed by the United Nations through UNGEGN, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. In 2002 the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (Berlin) adopted a resolution (VIII/2) on 'Commemorative naming practices for geographical features'. The complete text reads as follows:

UN Resolution VIII/2 Commemorative naming practices for geographical features

The Conference,

- *Noting* that the use of names of persons or events to designate features for commemorative purposes or as geographical reminders constitutes an active practice,
- *Recognizing* that the attribution of a personal name to a geographical feature during the lifetime or shortly after the death of a person is a widespread practice,
- *Recalling* that, during a meeting of 1960, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names acknowledged that naming or renaming of a geographical feature to include the name of a living person could be a source of problems,
- *Recognizing* that this practice is generally disadvantageous, as this type of designation is subject to subsequent changes not recommended by the Conference,

- *Noting* that little guidance exists on the practice of adopting a personal name during the lifetime or shortly after the death of a person,
 - 1) *Recommends* that the appropriate national authorities discourage the use of personal names to designate a geographical feature during the lifetime of the person in question;
 - 2) *Also recommends* that the appropriate national authorities include in their guidelines clear statements on the length of the waiting period they wish to establish before using a commemorative name.

Of course these recommendations are just what we need in Stockholm. Even if the power to decide – when it comes to naming streets, parks and other urban features – lies with the local political bodies, on a national level we can inform the persons responsible that this UN resolution exists, we can explain its background and we can use it as an argument when trying to avoid inappropriate and overhasty decisions.

Thus in Sweden, the National Place-Names Advisory Board, made a written recommendation and sent it to all the 290 local municipalities. The recommendation says – in accordance with the UN resolution – that new names shall not be created on the basis of a person's name if the person in question is still alive. It also recommends that this kind of commemorative naming shall not be undertaken until 3–5 years have passed after the death of the person in question.

A questionnaire on commemorative naming

What about the rest of the world? This kind of resolution is not binding in constitutional law. The UN cannot order or force single member nations to act in a certain way. But it is not unreasonable to presume – to put it very simply – that all the nations present when the resolution was adopted, should also interpret it in the same way and in the long run also use it in the same way. However we do not know this for a fact, so in order to find out, I decided to conduct a very simple enquiry.

I constructed a questionnaire with seven questions: the first five (1–5) each presented the question together with four alternative answers, graded from 'very

much' to 'not at all/nothing'. Only one of these alternatives was to be chosen. The two final questions (6–7) were of multiple choice-type, allowing the opportunity to select an optional number of alternative answers. After every question there was room for personal comments. I e-mailed the questionnaire to approximately 190 UNGEGN experts, according to the most recent available list of e-mail addresses. Around 80 of my questionnaires did not reach their respective experts, and about 85 recipients did not respond. Only 22 questionnaires were filled in and returned to me. This may seem to be a very small number¹, and it is not sufficient for any reliable statistical conclusions, but at the same time, the answers represent 18 nations from Europe, Africa, Asia and North America: Austria, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Israel, Libya, Malaysia, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United States. Thus these answers do provide a lot of information.

The first question was:

1. How would you describe the practice – in your country – of attributing a personal name to a geographical feature during the lifetime of that person?

- / / It is common practice.
- / / It happens quite often.
- / / It is not very common, but there are some examples.
- / / It never happens (as far as I know).

The most common answer was 'It is not very common, but there are some examples'. A few answered that it never happens or it happens extremely rarely. Two answered 'It happens quite often' (both from outside Europe). When this kind of naming occurs it is generally a matter of (re)naming streets or other urban features (normally decided by local authorities, as in my examples from Stockholm). When it comes to other features, this kind of naming is even more rare; being either extremely seldom or almost accidental. One important fact to point out though is that the term

¹ Many countries are represented by more than one expert. From the answers I can occasionally glean that national experts have discussed the questionnaire between themselves and agreed to return only one common answer.

‘geographical feature’, as used in the resolution title and in my questionnaire, can be interpreted in different ways. If you interpret it as ‘natural feature’, which some countries prefer to do, the whole question of streets and urban commemorative naming becomes irrelevant. I will return to this matter later below.

The second question was:

2. How would you describe the practice – in your country – of attributing a personal name to a geographical feature shortly or immediately after the death of a person?

- / / It is common practice.
- / / It happens quite often.
- / / It is not very common, but there are some examples.
- / / It never happens (as far as I know).

The answers here follow the same lines as the answers to question 1, but as expected this kind of naming seems to be a little more accepted and used, but still it is not very common in most countries. The length of the waiting-period after a person’s death is under discussion in some countries or cities or is already in practice, for example, the 25 years ‘by municipal order’ in Budapest. In quite a few countries, the UN resolution is said to be just a confirmation of the current practice, although the length of the waiting-period is not specified. One country replied that this kind of naming never occurs, but that there are lots of suggestions in this direction and there seems to be an ongoing change in attitude towards this problem. Both countries answering ‘it happens quite often’ in question 1, answered the same here.

The third question read as follows:

3. How would you describe the situation – in your country – of commemorative naming practices?

- / / These practices cause discussions and debate (in the press, amongst politicians, amongst the public etc.) to the point where I consider it a problem.
- / / These practices cause discussions and debate, but I would not consider it a problem.

- // These practices are rarely discussed or debated, but it happens occasionally.
- // These practices are never discussed.

The most common answer to question 3 was 'These practices cause discussions and debate, but I would not consider it a problem'. As many as seven delegates replied that 'These practices are rarely discussed or debated, but it happens occasionally'. But at the same time they cite examples similar to those in my introduction concerning Stockholm. Two delegates actually considered these discussions a problem according to the first alternative in the questionnaire.

Let us now look at questions 4 and 5 together:

4. How would you describe the situation today – in your country – concerning the awareness of this UN Resolution amongst the national and local name-giving authorities?

- // This UN Resolution is familiar to all or most of the authorities and other bodies involved in the official naming of geographical features.

- // This UN Resolution is familiar to some of the authorities and other bodies involved in the official naming – especially authorities on a national level.

- // This UN Resolution is familiar only to authorities or individuals directly connected to and involved in UN-matters.

- // This UN Resolution is probably familiar only to me and my personal connections (in or outside UNGEGN).

5. Has anything been done – in your country – to implement this UN Resolution and to make the intentions and purposes of it known to the proper authorities, bodies and individuals?

- // Very much has been done. (Give just a few examples below in the comments!)

- // Quite a lot has been done. (Give just a few examples below in the comments!)

- // Not much has been done, but I could point to the fact that ...

- // Nothing has been done at all.

The most common answer to question 4 was 'this UN Resolution is familiar to some of the authorities and other bodies'. Six delegates stated that the 'UN Resolution is

familiar only to authorities or individuals directly connected to and involved in UN-matters' and five delegates stated that it is 'probably familiar only to me and my personal contacts (in or outside UNGEGN)'. Concerning question 5 (on implementation) the most common answer was 'not much has been done'. Three delegates claimed that 'quite a lot has been done' and two replied that 'very much has been done'. But as many as seven delegates answered that 'nothing has been done at all'.

If we compare the answers to questions 4 and 5 with each other, it looks as if the UN resolution has been fairly well implemented in society. At the same time it seems as if not much has been undertaken to implement it. This could of course be interpreted by saying the resolution has implemented itself, but a more probable explanation for the discrepancy in the answers is that the content of the resolution were already in practice in many countries, completely or partly, so there was no need for creating awareness of its implementation.

And finally, let us compare the answers to questions 6 and 7. What is meant by a 'geographical' name? What is the subject of UNGEGN's work and concern? And what is the subject of the UN resolution we are dealing with here! Questions 6 and 7 were as follows:

6. Which one or which ones of the following name categories do you include in the term *geographical names* as used in the title *United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names* (UNGEGN) and thus should be treated as names of interest and importance to UNGEGN?

// names of topographical features like rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys

// names of 'man-made' topographical features like fields, meadows, pastures

// names of habitations like farms, cottages, villages, cities

// names of administrative areas like parishes, districts, counties, nations

// names of urban features like streets, squares, city-blocks, parks, bridges

7. Which one or which ones of the following name categories would you include in the range and intentions of the UN Resolution dealing with the

‘naming practices for *geographical features*’

- / / names of topographical features like rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys
- / / names of ‘man-made’ topographical features like fields, meadows, pastures
- / / names of habitations like farms, cottages, villages, cities
- / / names of administrative areas like parishes, districts, counties, nations
- / / names of urban features like streets, squares, city-blocks, parks, bridges

One of the 22 returned questionnaires was incomplete so I have excluded it from the following synthesis. The rest of the replies – of course without the experts’ comments – can be seen in figure 1 below.

Reply number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Name category: Question 6																					
Topographical features	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Man-made topogr. features	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X			X	X
Habitations	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Administrative areas	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X			X	X
Urban features	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X		X	X
Name category: Question 7																					
Topographical features	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			X	
Man-made topogr. features	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X						
Habitations	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X					X
Administrative areas	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X					
Urban features	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X		X

Figure 1: Overview of the 21 replies to questions 6 and 7 in the questionnaire, concerning what kind of names to include in the work of UNGEGN and in the UN Resolution VIII/2.

The first eleven replies (1–11) consider all the name-categories as ‘geographical names’ in the same way as I personally do; in other situations I prefer to call them *place-names*, but the term used by the UN has for quite a long time now been *geographical names*. All the name-categories in questions 6–7 are to be treated as names of interest and importance to UNGEGN according to these experts. These first eleven answers also consider that all these name categories are included in the aim

and goal of the resolution now under discussion. This means that the term *geographical* has the same meaning and the same implications in the expression 'geographical name' (UNGEGN) as it has in the expression 'geographical features' (the resolution). But as is shown from the final ten replies (12–21) in figure 1, this is not the only way to view things. As can be seen, there are many different ways of understanding what it is that UNGEGN should deal with or consider, and there are many different ways of understanding what the UN resolution is really about.

In reply no 20 we see that all kinds of names are considered to be a matter for UNGEGN, but at the same time according to the personal comments attached to this question, it is considered that the word *geographical* in the resolution text only means 'topographical' or 'natural'. If we compare this to reply no 21, the goals and objects for UNGEGN are the same as for no 20, but the resolution is not considered to concern topographical features at all, on the contrary it concerns only urban features and habitations. Reply no 18 considers that only names of urban features are the concern of UNGEGN and of the resolution. Reply no 19 on the other hand considers that while names of habitations should be discussed by UNGEGN, the resolution (which is a result of UNGEGN-discussions), should only concern names of urban features. And so on. I will not comment upon this figure any further.

Conclusion

In conclusion, commemorative naming offers possibilities but may also cause various problems. The UN resolution can be used in several ways when trying to avoid or solve some of these problems. The diverging replies I received from all over the world in the questionnaire are – I suspect – to some extent due to misunderstanding of my questions. But this cannot explain all discrepancies. While it is of course, utopian to expect that the important work carried out within the UN and UNGEGN should result in complete agreement and unity – there has to be room and scope for national adaptation – I still find it a bit worrying when the UN adopts resolutions, although the delegates are far from agreement about what they really refer to. What

are we actually recommending or protecting with such resolutions? This is something that needs to be discussed further.

Abstract

In 2002 the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (Berlin) adopted a resolution (VIII/2) on 'Commemorative naming practices for geographical features'. The Conference *recognizes* 1) that the attribution of a personal name to a geographical feature during the lifetime or shortly after the death of a person is a widespread practice, 2) that this practice is generally disadvantageous. The Conference *recommends* 1) that the appropriate national authorities discourage the use of person's name while the person in question is still living, 2) that the authorities include in their guidelines clear statements on the length of the waiting period they wish to establish before using a commemorative name.

This paper discusses commemorative naming in general and the UN resolution in particular: how it's understood and interpreted in different countries, and in some cases put into practice.

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