THE IMPORTANCE OF GEOGRAPHIC NAMES IN A SPATIAL DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

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Place Names - Their role in Spatial Data Infrastructures

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Abstract

Often under rated and often overlooked is the importance of the consistent use of place names or geographic names.

Names are a fundamental data set of any Spatial Data Infrastructure (SDI)and need to be considered very early in the development of a SDI. This is particularly important in developing countries where in some cases no formal mechanisms exist to determine the official name of a place or feature.

Many countries have more than one name in use for a place or feature which can cause confusion to many. Consistent use of accurate place names is an essential element of effective communication worldwide and supports socio-economic development, conservation and national infrastructure.

The paper will discuss the role of the United Nations and why it established a Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). UNGEGN promotes the consistent use worldwide of accurate place names.

Place names can identify and reflect culture, heritage and landscape. Correct use of accurate place names in a SDI can provide benefits to local, national and international communities engaged in:

- trade and commerce
- population censuses and national statistics
- property rights and cadastres
- urban and regional planning
- environmental management
- natural disaster relief
- security strategy
- search and rescue operations
- maps and atlas production
- navigation
- tourism
- Communications including postal services.

The paper will discuss the importance of a:

- standardised approach to naming
- national gazetteer
- names data base as a key element of spatial data and being a key fundamental data set to a SDI

INTRODUCTION

Place names are perhaps the most commonly and widely used form of geospatial information, consisting of official and local names of administrative, cultural and geographic features, including streets and roads. Each individual toponym (name), constitutes a relatively simple datum, but with growing community demands, and sophisticated advances in technology, place names are now required to meet many levels of service expectation, where the currency of data is of key importance.

Foremost is the demand for real time data, in the protection of life and property by emergency service organisations. At a more general level, current data on location and extent is required by a wide range of administrative and planning agencies, such as statistics for population and census planning and development programs. At another level again, there is a growing demand for, and expectation of, access to the historical data inherent in the record of successively assigned place names and their "meaning".

The role of geographic names is superficially, pretty self evident. Though there are aspects of the need to regulate/standardise the use, collection, and registration of place names for official purposes which are not so readily apparent. I will discuss these in the course of this paper.

In some parts of the world Regional Spatial Data Infrastructures (RSDI) are being developed, for example, the Asia-Pacific Spatial Data Infrastructure (APSDI) proposed by the Permanent Committee on GIS Infrastructure for Asia and the Pacific (PCGIAP) has the following objectives (as set out in Article 5 of the Statutes) which it is endeavouring to achieve:

a. To define the nature of a regional geographic information infrastructure that each country in the region can contribute to in order to meet regional and global mapping and GIS requirements.

b. To determine the nature of legislative and administrative procedures and orders appropriate to the acquisition and sharing of spatial data.

c. To develop a regional geodetic framework, regional topographic datasets, national cadastral datasets and regional **geographical names** datasets as the basis for regional GIS activity.

d. To document the status of key geographic datasets and key agencies in each member nation, and develop a framework for the exchange of such information.

e. To prepare guidelines and strategies to assist member nations for the implementation of cadastral development to meet individual member nation needs.

f. To determine the need for research, training and technology and policy exchange in relation to the beneficial impact of geographic information on the social, economic and environmental objectives of member

nations of Asia and the Pacific region.

g. To explore opportunities for aid funding to support development needs of member nations and for the development of a regional spatial data infrastructure.

I propose to outline the role I believe geographic place names will play, as a fundamental data set within a RSDI.

GEOGRAPHIC PLACE NAMES

The naming of places and geographic features is a very human activity, springing in the first instance from a need to know and relate to landscape. The mass movements of peoples, in the last several centuries, and nostalgia for "home" places, has uniquely marked the geography and history of the landscape.

There are two main areas in which the community as a whole, has an interest in the naming of places:

1. Ensuring the capacity to unambiguously identify and locate geographical entities and places, as an essential reference system for services, infrastructure and public administration.

2. Ensuring that the valuable record of a country's place names, with its variety of sources, reflecting unique patterns of settlement is preserved and accessible.

Given these public interest objectives, governments in many countries have established Geographic Names Authorities, whose central role is to authorise place names for official purposes and to issue policy guidelines on standard usage, and written form and spelling.

Government's primary role in standardisation and registration is to promote effective, useable place names, to provide unambiguous direction. While this is obvious, there are many ways in which clear identification and unambiguous use are compromised.

- Many places have more than one name
- Many names are duplicated even in local areas
- Names may have variant spelling
- Local names may be different to the more widely recognised international names
- Names in some countries can be written in non-Roman script.

I will discuss the role of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), later in the paper.

A secondary purpose, shared by a range of interested groups and organisations – is the collection and preservation of place and feature names, and their variants over time, as they retain much of our culture memory and heritage. Place names are often an important contributor to historical information.

REGIONAL SPATIAL DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

Geospatial Information (GI), has been collected and managed mainly in the form of maps and text, the advent of digital data has ereated a "sea-change" in the way we think about and want to use GI. These new possibilities are the impetus behind the conceptualisation and development of a system of integrated data sets, which are independent of, and integrate the data of the separate administrative and politieal jurisdictions of a country or a region.

It is important to note that micro-economic reforms and structural adjustment, such as competition policy, streamlining government business and focussing on core roles of government, have reinforced for all governments the need to develop a single integrated, easily accessible land information infrastructure. Many of the key land information projects in the planning or early implementation stage at the moment, require levels of investment, which emphasise the need for all jurisdictions to operate nationally and regionally to meet national and regional needs. Only a national system, a national market can maximise the investment required in data collection and maintenance.

The PCGIAP's vision for the Asia-Pacific Spatial Data Infrastructure (APSDI) is of a network of databases, located throughout the region, that together provide the fundamental data needed to achieve the region's economic, social, human resources development and environmental objectives.

Those distributed databases include geodetic, topographic, hydrographic, geographic names, administrative and environmental data. They may, in the future, be linked electronically so that they appear, to the user, as a virtual database, but they will also be linked together in a number of other important ways:

- they will be linked by an intra-regional institutional framework that provides mechanisms for sharing experience, technology transfer and coordination of the development of the regional fundamental datasets.
- they will be linked by the use of common technical standards, including a common geodetic reference frame, so that data from numerous databases can be brought together to create new products and solve new problems, both regionally and globally;
- they will be linked by the adoption of common policies on data access, pricing, privacy, confidentiality and custodianships, they will be linked by the implementation of inter-governmental agreements on data sharing;
- they will be linked through a comprehensive and freely accessible directory of available datasets containing descriptions and administrative information that accords with agreed standards for meta data;

It is this suite of administrative and technical linkages that distinguishes a RSDI from a collection of uncoordinated datasets, which will make it such a powerful tool for the region's economic and social development.

Many of the things that nations of a region want to achieve together can only be achieved if good, consistent spatial data is available and readily accessible. This is especially important when planning for the future.

Geographic (or spatial) data describes information that can be related to a position on the earth's surface whether that be on the land, sea or in the air. Information about geographic names, vegetation, minerals, road networks, property ownership, soils, air quality and population distribution can all be spatially related. Regional issues such as catchment management, land development and transport planning all require good, consistent spatial information. There are few areas of cooperation between nations which do not rely either directly or indirectly on this kind of information.

I am sure this conference believes that resources should not be wasted on duplicated effort. I am confident that the Permanent Committee for the Americas also believes that the nations of the region should reach agreement on what fundamental datasets are required to meet their common interests, to what standards they should be collected and maintained, which agencies should have custodianship of those data, and what the priorities are for their collection.

A RSDI can provide the institutional and technical framework to ensure the required consistency, content and coverage to meet regional needs. The infrastructure also ensures that national efforts are focussed and coordinated, thereby maximising investment in data collection and maintenance from a regional perspective. Finally, such an infrastructure will help achieve better outcomes for the region through better support for economic, social and environmental decision making.

In the Asia Pacific area the Permanent Committee on GIS Infrastructure for Asia and the Pacific has developed a spatial data infrastructure model that comprises four core components – institutional framework, technical standards, fundamental datasets, and access networks. These core components are linked as follows:

Institutional Framework

> Defines the policy and administrative arrangements for building, maintaining, accessing and applying the standards and datasets

Technical Standards

> Define the technical characteristics of the fundamental datasets and enable them to be integrated with other environmental, social and economic datasets.

Fundamental Datasets

> Are produced within the institutional framework and fully comply with the technical standards

Access Network

Is the means by which the regional fundamental datasets are made accessible to the community, in accordance with policy determined within the institutional framework, and to the technical standards agreed.

Appendix 1: **Toponymic Guidelines,**
As originally proposed by Dr. Josef Breu in his Circular No. 2, 12 December 1977, with additions, modifications and new numbering of 1981 (Circular Letter No. 20). The title reflects modifications from the Eighth Session of UNGEGN, 1979 and from the Fourth Conference, 1982. Item 6 follows a resolution of the Fifth Conference, 1987.

Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors, for International Use
Name of individual country

1 Languages
- 1.1 General remarks
- 1.2 National language(s)
  - 1.2.1 Legal situation and practical application in administration and official cartography
  - 1.2.2 Alphabet(s) and transcription(s)
  - 1.2.3 General spelling rules for geographical names
  - 1.2.4 Pronunciation
  - 1.2.5 Grammatical peculiarities which are essential for the treatment and understanding of geographical names
  - 1.2.6 Distribution of main dialects and their characteristics; how far are dialectal name forms adapted to the standard form of the language(s)? (In the case of many African countries with English, French, Portuguese or Spanish as official languages: Distribution of main vernaculars and their characteristics; how far are vernacular name forms adapted to the spelling of the official language?); linguistic maps
- 1.3 Minority languages
  - 1.3.1 - 1.3.6, as under 1.2

2. Names authorities and names standardization
- 2.1 National names authority. Aims, functions, rules, address.
- 2.2 Provincial names authorities. Aims, functions, rules, addresses.
- 2.3 Names standardization. Legal aspects, procedures, progress.

3. Source Material
- 3.1 Maps: map series containing standardized names. Which sheets of a series contain already standardized names?
- 3.2 Gazetteers containing standardized names.

4. Glossary of appellatives, adjectives and other words necessary for the understanding of maps (As such glossaries will serve the needs of foreign users they must contain also – and above all – words of the general vocabulary.)

5. Abbreviations used on official maps; the decoding and meanings

6. Methods of differentiating toponyms from other text on national maps.

Annex: Administrative maps.