

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: *Is the work of UNGEGN nearly finished?*

A: The first UN meeting of experts was held in 1960 and since then there have been ten UN conferences on the standardization of geographical names and over 25 UNGEGN sessions. UNGEGN encourages countries to take responsibility for the names of places and features within their own country – their correct spelling and written form based on local use. While names still remain to be recorded, while names continue to change, and while not every country has an authority for names, UNGEGN’s work will continue.

Q: *Are there many place name changes taking place today?*

A: Over centuries the world has seen many name changes. We are all aware of Byzantium becoming Constantinople and then Istanbul, but there are many more examples! As national boundaries change, so likely do the names (e.g. *in the Czech Republic, Karlovy Vary is the current “endonym” for what was referred to as Karlsbad*). With the decolonization of countries in Africa, place names also changed (e.g. *Lourenço Marques to Maputo, Mozambique; Salisbury to Harare, Zimbabwe*), as did place names in Asia (e.g. *Batavia to Djakarta to Jakarta, in Indonesia*). Systems of romanization change, so we see Beijing rather than Peking, Athína rather than Athinai. Since 2000, major cities in India have changed their names (e.g. *Bombay to Mumbai, Madras to Chennai*).



Photo: UN photo library

Every year within a country, cities and towns may change their names: as a result of municipal amalgamation, as a result of local communities passing resolutions to change names, or perhaps as a result of national authorities accepting indigenous names. In South Africa, with 11 official languages now recognized, processes are in place for the possibility of name changes. Also new names appear (e.g. *for new islands in the United Arab Emirates*) and places and their names vanish, as a result of rural depopulation, or inundation, volcanic eruption and other natural disasters.

For publishers of atlases, changes to place names, especially when countries break-up creating new nation states, provide an ongoing challenge for keeping maps up to date.

Q: *Why is the UN interested and involved in this work?*

A: Since the late 1940s the United Nations Cartography Section has needed to make decisions on geographical names to use on maps, and in general the United Nations is interested in agreement on geographical names as a way of promoting good communication and a more peaceful world.

Q: *Is there a database for all names of the world?*

A: There is a variety of geographical names databases available on the Internet; some have world coverage, but they are not necessarily authoritative. UNGEGN has developed a world database of names of countries, capitals and major cities, using the names in the writing system(s) and language(s) used by the country itself (see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/geonames/>). On the UNGEGN website links are also provided to national geographical names databases around the world (see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/naa.html>).

Q: What is standardization of geographical names?

A: Standardization of geographical names is the determination by an appropriate authority of one or more names with their exact written forms, for application to specific geographical features. Where necessary the conditions for their use are also determined.

Q: Does UNGEGN decide on names?

A: No, UNGEGN does not have a mandate to decide on geographical names. UNGEGN respects the authority of each UN member state to decide its own names for national and hence for international use. In the case of conflict over names beyond national jurisdiction, UNGEGN encourages discussion between the affected states towards resolution of the situation.



Photo: David Munro

Q: What is the difference between an “endonym” and an “exonym”?

A: An “endonym” is the name of a geographical feature in an official or well-established language occurring in that area where the feature is situated. For instance, Napoli, Mumbai, Göteborg.

An “exonym” is a name used in a specific language for a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language is widely spoken, and differing in its form from the respective endonym(s) in the area where the geographical feature is situated. For instance, Warsaw is the English exonym for Warszawa, Poland, and Lisbonne is the French exonym for Lisboa, Portugal.

More details of definitions may be found in the UNGEGN *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names* (see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/publications.html>). More information on the many questions arising about exonyms and their use can be found in the documents submitted at UNGEGN Sessions and UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/default.html>).

Q: Why do places have more than one name?

A: National names authorities may recommend more than one name for a place, if for instance, a country has more than one official language (as in Finland, with Helsinki in Finnish, and Helsingfors in Swedish). Various other circumstances could lead to more than one name referring to a place, for example: historically a place might have had a different name (for instance, the community name Iqaluit replaced Frobisher Bay, in northern Canada); the recognized romanization system used might have changed (as with Kyiv replacing Kiev, Ukraine); a name might be in the process of changing (as in Uluru/Ayers Rock rather than the former Ayers Rock, Australia); or multiple exonyms may exist for a place (Beč, Wiedeń, Вена, Dunaj, Vienna and Беч, in Croatian, Polish, Russian, Slovenian, English and Serbian for Wien, the capital of Austria).



Photo: Helen Kerfoot