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**United Nations Group of Experts On  
Geographical Names  
2019 session**

New York, 29 April–3 May 2019

Item 5 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports: Governments on the situation in their countries and the progress made in the standardization of geographical names**

## **Report of Iceland**

Submitted by Iceland\*\*

Summary:

The full report is the first national report of Iceland submitted to a conference or session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. A short report on the situation with place names in Iceland was included as an appendix to the report of the Norden Division and submitted to the twenty-third session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, held in Vienna in 2006.

The aim of the report is to provide general background on the status of collection, standardization and publication of geographical names in Iceland and to outline recent developments and initiatives in this sphere. The report contains six sections.

The first section concerns the linguistic background. Iceland is historically a unilingual country; Icelandic, which is written in a Latin or roman alphabet, is the national language and the only official language of the country, but Icelandic sign language is also officially recognized by the Government.

The second section sets out place name legislation in Iceland and a number of administrative procedures – outlined in the Place Name Act of 2015 – that apply to various standardization issues and involve the interaction and cooperation of government bodies at the municipal and national levels, as well as State institutes: the mapping agency – National Land Survey of Iceland; the address and cadastral office – Registers Iceland; and the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies. With regard to government bodies, the role of the official Place Name Committee is of particular importance.

In a subsection, the author discusses the increased role that the Place Name Act of 2015 gives to municipalities in approving new and changed names of farms and the challenges that this poses in fulfilling the general aims of the Place Name Act, including the maintenance of good place name practices.

The third section contains a sketch of the history and results of the work undertaken in collecting place names in Iceland. The Institute for Icelandic Studies is in charge of the

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\* GEGN.2/2019/1.

\*\* Prepared by Aðalsteinn Hákonarson of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.

Icelandic Place Name Collection containing an estimated half a million names. Work on digitizing the collection and creating an online database is expected to begin in 2019.

The fourth section provides an overview of available toponymic datasets. These include the Place Name Collection of the Institute for Icelandic Studies, the digital database IS 50V of the National Land Survey of Iceland, which includes more than 120,000 localized place names, and the digital address database of Registers Iceland.

The fifth section contains a list of relevant publications and websites.

The sixth section provides contact details

## **1. Linguistic background of place names in Iceland**

Iceland is historically a unilingual country; Icelandic, which is written in a Latin alphabet, is the national language and the only official language in Iceland according to the 2011 ‘Law on the position of the Icelandic Language and the Icelandic Sign Language’, which also states that Icelandic Sign Language is officially recognized by the Icelandic government. Only names in Icelandic are the object of official efforts to standardize and collect place names. Dialectal differences in Iceland are insubstantial and do not affect the written form of place names.

## **2. Legislation and administration**

### A. Historical Background

The impetus for the first Icelandic legislation on place names was concerns over frequent changes in farm names. In 1913, a law was passed in order to restrict such changes and regulate names for new farms and farms without a recognized name.

The original emphasis on farm names remained prominent in subsequent laws on place names, as indicated by the title of the 1937 ‘Law on Farm Names and related matters’. This law was revised in 1953 and the new version remained in effect, with significant later changes, until the current Place-Name Act was passed in 2015.

From 1913 to 2015, requests to change the name of a farm required official approval. A proposed name for a new farm also had to be approved by the government. In 1935, an official Place-Name Committee was set up, which, with the 1937 ‘Law on Farm Names...’, came to play an authoritative role in advising the government on decisions about new and changed farm names. Yet formally the final decision in these matters remained in the hands of a government minister until 1998 when changes were made to the revised ‘Law on Farm Names...’ from 1953. From then on the Place-Name Committee decided such matters alone, but only up until the current Place-Name Act took effect in 2015.

One reason to restrict changes in farm names was to maintain stability in naming and to prevent inconveniences that changes in names caused society and state. The regulation was also meant to protect farm names, many of which are very old and believed to date back to the period of Iceland’s settlement in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Generally, therefore, changes in farm names have only been allowed under special circumstances, i.e. when there exists another farm with an identical – or very similar – name in the same region, or when the present name is considered demeaning; some farm names clearly originate as derogatory appellations.

The regulation of farm names also has the aim of preserving traditional naming practices and for that reason names of new farms are also subject to official approval. The 1937 ‘Law on Farm Names etc...’ stated that applications for new and changed names should state the reason for the choice of a new name; e.g. if the name was based on some feature of local topography this was to be described. In 1938 the Place-Name Committee issued directions for the choice of names for

new farms where an emphasis was placed on new names reflecting local topography or earlier land use. Although the directions have been subject to some later revisions, its main points are still seen to be valid today.

When the official Place-Name Committee was first set up in 1935, its expressed purpose was that of “gathering reliable information about place names, both correct names and spelling, for use in land surveys and map making.” The 1937 ‘Law on Farm Names...’ provided that the Place-Name Committee should oversee place names on maps published by the state, but formally the committee’s role in this respect was advisory only. After changes made to the ‘Law on Farm Names...’ in 1998, the committee was meant to make definitive decisions on such matters. The changed law also contained a provision stating that in cases of disagreement about place names on official maps the issue should be announced publicly (e.g. in newspapers with wide circulation) so that whoever believed herself to have useful information about the matter would have a chance to make it known to the Place-Name Committee before it made its decision. Although the decisions of the committee in this sphere were meant to be definitive it remained unclear whether they were binding in cases of land disputes where the location of place names can be of crucial importance. In the 2015 Place-Name Act it has been clarified that the committee should not decide the outcome of such disputes.

With the revised 1953 ‘Law on Farm Names...’, names of newly formed towns and villages had to be approved by the Place-Name Committee before receiving official recognition. Yet a related matter, changes of names of existing municipalities, did not fall under the domain of the Place-Name Committee until after the passing in 1998 of a new ‘Law on Local Government’. In the years before it came into effect, a series of mergers of municipalities had taken place resulting in many new names, and this development has continued since. The provisions of this law, which are still in effect today, are discussed in the following subsection.

A novelty of the 1937 ‘Law on Farm Names...’ was that houses in towns should be identified by street names and numbers. The current Place-Name Act does not have provisions regarding the registration of addresses; these are now found in a ‘Law on the registration and evaluation of real property’ (see below in 2.D).

Thus, although the initial motivation for laws on place names in Iceland had to do with names of farms in particular, their focus broadened with subsequent revisions and changes. Provisions were added concerning names of municipalities, street names, place names on maps and about the official Place-Name Committee that, in addition to the roles mentioned above, was to advise the government on whatever place-name related issues might arise.

## B. Current legislation – the 2015 Place-Name Act

The 2015 Place-Name Act is the first legislative project in Iceland designed to encompass a broad spectrum of place-name matters, from issues of official standardization and regulation of geographical names to the status of place names as cultural heritage. This broad scope is set out in the first paragraph of the act where its aims are stated as follows:

- to promote the protection of place names and naming traditions in the country as part of the Icelandic cultural heritage and to ensure that it is maintained for future generations;
- that new place names conform to the rules of the Icelandic language;
- that new place names are consistent with topography and naming traditions;
- to coordinate administrative procedures in the registration of geographical names, so that the process of naming is open, transparent and effective.

Furthermore, the act contains special provisions regarding the following:

The top-level authority in matters of place-name protection is the cabinet minister for culture and education.

The minister for culture and education appoints an official Place-Name Committee made up of five members. The head is appointed without nomination by the aforementioned minister. The other four by nomination of i) the minister in charge of planning, ii) the minister for local government, iii) the Icelandic Language Council, and iv) the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies. The law states that among the members of the committee there should be expertise on the Icelandic language, place names, and topography.

The law outlines the main tasks assigned to the Place-Name Committee, and contains some broad provisions regarding the procedure for handling cases referred to the committee. For details, see below in 2.C.

The act contains a new provision concerning the naming of new natural phenomena. Municipalities should take initiative in suggesting names for new natural phenomena within their boundaries, and seek the Place-Name Committee's view on the proposed name before sending it to the minister of culture and education for confirmation. In case of new natural phenomena lying outside municipal boundaries the initiative in naming lies with the same minister.

According to the act, the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies provides municipalities, institutions and members of the public with advice concerning the collection, registration, and preservation of place names as well as regarding the formation of new place names. This advisory work is carried out by staff at the institute's Department of Name Studies.

The act also states that one of the legal roles of the National Land Survey of Iceland is to maintain and provide access to an official Place-Name Database in consultation with the Institute for Icelandic Studies. For more on this database, see below in 3 and 4.

As related above in 2.A, the 'Law on Local Government' (latest revision from 2011) contains provisions regarding names of municipalities. If need for a new name arises, e.g. as a result of the merger of two or more municipalities, the municipalities propose a new name, but are obliged to seek consultation from the Place-Name Committee on the proposed names. In particular, the aforementioned law stated that if a municipality intends to hold a referendum among its inhabitants about a future name, the suggestions to be voted on must be submitted to the committee for review before the referendum is held. The final decision on new names of municipalities is made by the

minister of local government. The minister is not bound by the view of the Place-Name Committee and has disregarded it several times.

### C. The Place-Name Committee

The various matters that may be referred to the Place-Name Committee can be categorized based on whether the role of the committee in the particular issue – as stated in the Place-Name Act – is to provide advice or make a definitive decision.

An important task of the committee is to provide a *substantiated view* in cases where a dispute has arisen regarding place names in the official Place-Name Database (for more information on the database, see below in 3.B and 4). As was related earlier (see 2.A), changes to the ‘Law on Farm Names...’ in 1998 provided that the committee’s decisions on place names on official maps should be definitive, whereas previously the committee’s role in this sphere had been advisory only. This change led some to think that the Place-Name Committee could be relied upon to decide disputes over land boundaries. As this was considered inopportune, it was decided that the new act should only provide that the committee give a substantiated view in cases of disagreement about place names in the official Place-Name Database. In effect this means that the view of the committee decides how names are registered in the database, but that it is for the court system to decide whether this view has implications for land disputes.

There are, however, cases where the committee is tasked with making *definitive decisions*. These are cases where disagreement has arisen in relation to new or changed farm names, street names or any other name that is used for the registration of (access) addresses (see below in 2.D). The committee also decides on place names on official signs.

In the third type of matter the committee is tasked with providing a *review* on proposals for names of municipalities, names of new urban districts or rural districts within a municipality, and names of new natural phenomena (see above in 2.B).

In addition to these specifically defined tasks, the Place-Name Committee may be charged with other tasks through laws, regulations or the decision of the minister of culture and education. Furthermore, the Place-Name Act provides that the committee may initiate cases on its own. The reason for this provision is discussed in the following subsection.

### D. Challenges posed by the expanded role of municipalities in registering place names

Prior to 2015, when the current Place-Name Act came into effect, the regulation of place names in Iceland emphasized *farm names* in particular, as was discussed earlier (see 2.A). From the administrative point of view, farm names constitute one of many kinds of names that are used to register addresses. The 2015 Place-Name Act does not contain direct provisions on the registration of addresses, neither for those involving farm names nor other kinds of names. However, the act did provide for changes to the ‘Law on registration and evaluation of real property’ where it now

says that “any real property [including farms] should connect to at least one access address by decision of the municipality. The name of the real property is determined by the access addresses connected to the property. An access address describes geographical location [...]. An access address contains the following information: name, number and coordinates.” Furthermore, the law provides for a special regulation (introduced in 2017) on the registration of access addresses that outlines administrative procedures in the registration.

But although the Place-Name Act does not contain direct provisions on the registration of access addresses, it nonetheless has crucial bearing on access addresses because these are defined as a type of place name, and as such they are subject to the provisions of the Place-Name Act. Municipalities are responsible for registering access addresses and must ensure that it is done in accordance with the Place-Name Act. Thus even if the law does not specifically mention that old farm names are to be protected and that traditional practices in the naming of farms should be adhered to, this nevertheless follows from the stated aims of the law, listed above in 2.B.

The administrative procedure in the creation and registration of place names in effect presupposes the fundamental role of local inhabitants. One reason is the fact, already mentioned, that the registration takes place at the municipal level, and that it is performed by officials recruited from the local community who may or may not be familiar with traditional naming practices.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the names to be registered are also normally *created* by people in the local community. This applies to new names of farms, streets, squares and whatever type of name is used in the registration of access addresses. In some cases, municipalities appoint people from the community to special naming committees that are tasked with creating names of streets and squares in particular, but are also sometimes asked to find a new name for a municipality. In the case of new names for municipalities, the proposals are sent to the Place-Name Committee for review (see above in 2.B), but usually not in the case of names of streets, squares, farms or other names used in addresses.

In order that the registration of place names for use in addresses proceeds in a manner agreeing with the aims of the Place-Name Act, it is considered of great importance that people involved in registering names at the municipal level should have ready access to advice from place-name experts. The same applies to those involved in suggesting new names for farms, streets, etc., who may not be responsible for the registration. It is for this reason that the Place-Name Act contains a provision about the advisory role of the Institute for Icelandic Studies in such matters (see above in 2.B).

As a means of facilitating the advisory role of the Institute for Icelandic Studies, as well as the overseeing role of the Place-Name Committee (more on which below), the two are preparing to publish new directions for municipalities on the naming of farms and streets as well as on the naming of municipalities and natural phenomena. The directions are prepared in cooperation with

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<sup>1</sup> Most municipalities in Iceland are small. Around half of the 72 municipalities have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, 23 have fewer than 500. As can be expected, the small municipalities are in rural regions with many farms.

the National Land Survey of Iceland, and are in part based on directions issued before by the Place-Name Committee.

The role of overseeing the registration of names in access addresses is carried out by the Place-Name Committee in cooperation with the Institute for Icelandic Studies. But although the committee has the authority to challenge the registration of particular names, it does not itself have the means to systematically review registered names. This is the task of staff at the Institute for Icelandic Studies, in particular its Department of Name Studies which also functions as the office of the committee.

It is not considered necessary to review all new names in addresses; what is of most concern are farm names. As was related in 2.A above, before the current Place-Name Act came into effect, the registration of new and changed farm names was regulated by the Place-Name Committee which evaluated whether there were sufficient grounds for changing a farm name and whether new farms were formed in accordance with traditional naming practices. The 2015 Place-Name Act presupposes that in general the municipalities are themselves capable – provided they have access to directions and advice on the matter – of registering names in accordance with the law. Nevertheless, the act does make provision for possible failures in the procedure by granting the Place-Name Committee the authority to initiate cases on its own, e.g. in order to overturn the registration of an unfortunate farm name.

In order that staff at the Institute for Icelandic Studies can have oversight over the registration of names in addresses, farm names in particular, the cadastral office Registers Iceland is supposed to provide access to a database connected with its register of access addresses. This responsibility of Registers Iceland is provided for in the 2017 regulation on the registration of access addresses. The regulation does not detail the design of the database, but the Place-Name Committee has emphasized that in cases of farm names, the registration must be accompanied with information about the reason for the choice of a particular name. Without this it is very difficult to evaluate whether a name agrees with topography and naming traditions more generally. Ready access to this information is an essential precondition so that the Place-Name Committee and the Institute for Icelandic Studies can carry out their overseeing role.

Unfortunately, the aforementioned database is not yet ready. This means that in the four years since the 2015 Place-Name Act came into effect, those charged with overseeing that the registration of farm names (and other names) is in accordance with law have had very limited opportunity to do so. In an effort to gather information about the registration of farm names, in late 2018 the Department of Name Studies at the Institute for Icelandic Studies and the Place-Name Committee sent a questionnaire to all 72 municipalities enquiring about the registration of farm names in the last four years. At present, about 40 municipalities have replied. The answers have not yet been systematically processed, but first indications are somewhat disappointing. Firstly, replies have not come from many of the municipalities where registrations of new farm names have historically been most frequent. Secondly, many of those that have replied have remarked that they do not keep records of new and changed names (as this is properly the role of Registers Iceland), and maintain that gathering the information is very time consuming. A few municipalities

have explicitly declined to answer the questionnaire for this reason. Thirdly, it also seems that in many municipalities there is limited awareness of the implications of the Place-Name Act, as well as about the available directions about the naming of farms and the possibility to seek advice from the Institute of Icelandic Studies.

But although the situation may appear somewhat bleak, on a more positive note it also seems that, for the most part, both those wishing to name new farms and those involved in the registration of the names are sensitive to naming traditions and good naming practices in general. Another positive point is that Registers Iceland, which works closely with registration officials at the municipal level, have recently published new and detailed instructions on the registration of access addresses that explain the obligations of municipalities with respect to the Place-Name Act and encourage municipalities to seek advice from the Institute for Icelandic Studies, in particular with relation to farm names. Furthermore, the information gathered with the aforementioned questionnaire will help in better understanding the current situation with place-name registration at the municipal level. This is valuable for future efforts to promote good place-name practices.

### **3. Place-name collection**

In Iceland, work on collecting place names currently takes place mainly in connection with a) the Place-Name Archive, housed and maintained by the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, and b) a database maintained by the National Land Survey of Iceland which is the *official Place-Name Database* referred to earlier. The archive and the database are very different and complementary in nature, and the two institutions work closely together in matters relating to place names.

#### A. The Place-Name Archive

The material in the Place-Name Archive mainly constitutes place-name registers for individual farms (on the nature of these registers, see below in 4). The farm is the unit of land about which the informants, usually farmers on the farm in question, can generally be expected to have the most comprehensive place-name knowledge. Historically, most habitable land in Iceland has belonged to a particular farm and so by gathering place-name registers from almost all farms in Iceland it has been possible to build up a very detailed collection of place names from most of the habited area of Iceland. The collection also contains registers of place names on common grazing areas, highland routes, as well as registers of names of fishing grounds on sea.

The work on collecting place names began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and it has in large part been carried out by volunteers. In the beginning, the Icelandic Archeological Society was most active in motivating and seeking state grants for the collection work. The resulting Place-Name Archive came to be housed at the National Museum of Iceland, and in 1969 a special Place-Name Institute was set up within the museum and charged with maintaining and expanding the archive's materials. In 2006, the Place-Name Institute, which in the meantime had ceased being a department

of the National Museum, became part of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies whose Department of Name Studies took over the functions of the Place-Name Institute.

### B. The official Place-Name Database

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the General Staff Topographic Department of the Danish army and later the Danish Geodetic Institute (precursor to the Danish Geodata Agency) performed extensive land surveys in Iceland and created the first detailed maps of the country.<sup>2</sup> As part of the work, the General Staff's surveyors collected a large number of place names for the maps. These maps (as well as maps later created by the US Military) were the foundation on which more recent maps created by the National Land Survey of Iceland (NLSI) were based, not least with respect to place names.

From 2003, the NLSI has been developing an extensive database on land information, named IS 50V, which includes place names as one of its layers. A new edition of the database is published twice a year. The basis of the place-name material in the database were place names located on older maps of the Land Survey. For a number of years now, the NLSI has been expanding the place-name material of the database by localizing names in the place-name registers of the Place-Name Archive of the Institute for Icelandic Studies. The nature of the information in the registers is such that it is not generally possible to accurately place the names on maps without familiarity with the land in question. Hence this work requires the help of informants who either know the names or are sufficiently familiar with the land to be able to interpret the registers. The NLSI is active in seeking informants who are either given aerial photos of land, on which to register place names, or given access to a special web tool designed for registering place names. The informants mostly locate names already found in the registers of the Place-Name Archive, but also names that were not previously found in the registers. Thus this work also leads to the expansion of the Place-Name Archive.

## **4. Toponymic datasets**

**The Place-Name Archive at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.** The archive is mainly made up of place-name registers for farms and holds such registers for almost all farms in Iceland, covering most of the (historically) inhabited part of the country. In most cases the registers are not mere lists of names, but a text with a broad topographic description of the land of the farm with emphasis on places that have names known to the informant. In each register the names are numbered in the order they appear in the text and then listed alphabetically at the end of the text to facilitate use. The registers are for the most part typed (sometimes only handwritten) on paper but have also been scanned as pdf-files. The archive is estimated to contain about 500,000

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<sup>2</sup> Before gaining independence in 1944, Iceland was part of the Danish Realm.

names. Work on creating a digital database of place names in the archive is expected to begin later this year.

**Database of located place names at the National Land Survey of Iceland (NLSI).** This is the official Place-Name Database referred to in Icelandic legislation about place names (see above in 2.B). It constitutes one of eight layers in a larger database on land information, named IS 50V, that is maintained by the NLSI (see above in 3.B). At present the database contains about 125,000 names and in recent years about 15,000 names have been added each year. The NLSI works closely with the Institute for Icelandic Studies whose experts provide advice when doubt arises about e.g. the form of a name, its exact location, or about issues of standardization (see also below in 5).

The Icelandic cadastral office, Registers Iceland, maintains a **Register of Access Addresses** (see also below in 5).

**List of standardized country names** compiled by an official committee with representatives of various official institutions (see also below in 5).

## 5. Some relevant publications and websites

Ari Páll Kristinsson. 2010. Um íslenska örnefnastýringu [On Icelandic place-name planning]. *Orð og tunga* 12:1–23.

Þórunn Sigurðardóttir. 2017. Den nya ortnamnslagen på Island. Immateriellt kulturarv och säkerhetsfrågor [The new Icelandic law on place-names. Intangible cultural heritage and safety issues]. *Namn och bygd* 104:51–62.

Lög um örnefni [The Place-Name Act]. Text of the Place-Name Act of 2015 from the site of Alþingi, the Icelandic parliament: <https://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/2015022.html>

Örnefnanefnd [The Place-Name Committee]: <http://ornefnanefnd.is>

Örnefni – leiðbeiningar handa sveitarfélögum um nafngiftir býla, gatna, sveitarfélaga og náttúrufyrirbæra [Place names – directions for municipalities on the naming of farms, streets, municipalities and natural phenomena]. Issued jointly by The Place-Name Committee, The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies and The National Land Survey of Iceland. <http://arnastofnun.is/is/leidbeiningar-um-nafngiftir-by-la-gatna-sveitarfelaga-og-natturufyrirbaera>

Ríkjaheiti [Country names]. A list of standardized country names: [arnastofnun.is/is/rikjaheiti](http://arnastofnun.is/is/rikjaheiti)

Örnefnasjá [Place-Names Web Map]. At any given time this web map displays the place names in the latest version of the database of the National Land Survey of Iceland: [ornefnasja.lmi.is/](http://ornefnasja.lmi.is/).

IS 50V Örnefni [The official Place-Name Database]. The data in the official Place-Name Database of Iceland maintained by the National Land Survey of Iceland can be downloaded here: <https://gatt.lmi.is/geonetwork/srv/eng/catalog.search#/metadata/AED93950-4043-4D42-B8F8-C118611F33C9>

Staðfangaskrá [Access address register]. The Register of Access Address of Registers Iceland can be downloaded here: <https://opingogn.is/dataset/stadfangaskra>

## 6. Contact details

The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies  
(Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum)  
Department of name studies  
Laugavegi 13, 101 Reykjavík  
(<https://www.arnastofnun.is/>)

The National Land Survey of Iceland  
(Landmælingar Íslands)  
Stillholti 16–18, 300 Akranes  
(<https://www.lmi.is/>)

Registers Iceland  
(Þjóðskrá Íslands)  
Borgartúni 21, 105 Reykjavík  
(<https://skra.is/>)

Icelandic Coast Guard – Hydrographic Department  
(Landhelgisgæsla Íslands – Sjósmælingar)  
Skógarhlíð 14, 105 Reykjavík  
([www.lhg.is](http://www.lhg.is))