

18 March 2019

English

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

New York, 29 April – 3 May 2019

Agenda item 5(b) of the provisional agenda *

Reports: Divisions of the Group of Experts

Report of the Norden Division

Submitted by the Norden Division**

Summary:

The full report outlines the activities carried out by the Norden Division since the Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and includes materials of common interest to the Division.

The main activity for the Norden Division was the convening of a joint meeting with the Dutch- and German-speaking Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, as part of a larger event that included a scientific symposium and joint working groups meetings, held in Brussels from 11 to 13 October and hosted by the National Geographic Institute of Belgium. The scope of the symposium was to highlight the role and importance of expert knowledge in the steps needed to standardize geographical names, including to establish a national framework for standardization, select name variations for a given geographical feature, determine a written form, and implement, promote and evaluate authorized name forms. The symposium also served to highlight conflicting views and interests with regard to the standardization of geographical names and to stimulate discussions on how to manage and balance such views and interests. A total of 19 members of the Norden Division attended the event, giving presentations and engaging in relevant and valuable discussions and knowledge-sharing. The Norden Division was especially proud to have been able to welcome three experts on Sámi names, one expert on Kven names and one expert on Inuit names, reflecting the multilingual dimension of the Division. As the event helped to show, the approach to standardizing geographical names varies from country to country in terms of organization, principles, policies and procedures. The web page¹ dedicated to the event, including the agenda, list of participants, presentations, documents and photographs, is available on the website of the Group of Experts.

The Nordic countries share a common interest with regard to legislation on geographical names. All the countries within the Norden Division have laws and regulations on language and language use, but only a few have specific laws on

*GEGN.2/2019/1

**Prepared by Ingvil Nordland and Peder Gammeltoft.

geographical names. In Iceland and Norway, geographical names have merited special legislation, while in Sweden, geographical names are protected under the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act, which provides instructions on maintaining a good place name practice. In Finland, there have been several attempts to legally regulate geographical names standardization, with the most recent initiative dating back to 2011. In Denmark, principles and the scope for legislation on geographical names are laid out in a Department order.

Another subject of interest to the Nordic countries concerns the extensive toponymic dataset in the region, including name archives with collection of geographical names.

Report of the Norden Division

Divisional meetings

The Norden Division held a meeting in New York on 8 August 2017, in conjunction with the 11th UNCSGN Conference and 30th UNGEGN Session 7–18 August 2017. The meeting took place at the United Nations Headquarters with participation from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. In this meeting, the Norden Division formally elected its new Chair, Ingvil Nordland of the Language Council of Norway, and its new Vice-Chair, Peder Gammeltoft, now of the University of Bergen, Norway.

On 10 October 2018, the Norden Division held its yearly meeting in Brussels in connection with the joint division meeting with the Dutch- and German-speaking Division. Nineteen members from Denmark, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden were present at the event. It was particularly nice to have representatives from the Inuit, Kven and Sámi communities present, resulting in much new information and knowledge. The meeting started with a joint session with the Dutch- and German-speaking division where the individual experts of each division were acquainted with each other. Then followed a round of country-specific information on geographical names and news from the division. The remainder of the meeting focused on items specific to the Norden Division and on the upcoming UNGEGN plenary meeting in the spring of 2019. The joint meeting was a great success and it is our impression that everyone were much inspired by the information shared between the two divisions – particularly geographical name regulations, effects of administrative changes, minority name issues, as well as new and ongoing projects.

In preparation for the upcoming UNGEGN plenary meeting 29 April–3 May 2019, the Norden Division held a meeting in Copenhagen on 23 January 2019. The meeting took place at the Danish Agency for Data Supply and Efficiency with participants from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, while Finland and Iceland participated via Skype. In this meeting, content and structure for the individual country reports was discussed, as well as common issues between countries.

Scientific symposium on the standardization of geographical names

The main activity for the Norden Division in this period was the joint division meeting with the Dutch- and German-speaking Division, followed by a scientific symposium and joint working group meetings in Brussels, Belgium 10–13 October 2018. The event was jointly organized by the Dutch- and German-speaking Division and the Norden Division, and hosted by the National Geographic Institute of Belgium.

Symposium topic: “Role and importance of expert knowledge in the standardization of geographical names”

The scope of the symposium was to highlight the role and importance of expert knowledge in all steps towards a standardized name. This includes the establishment of a national framework for standardization, the selection of name varieties for a given geographical feature, the determination of a written form, and the implementation, promotion and evaluation of authorized name forms. Chair of Norden Division, Ingvil Nordland (the Language Council of Norway), opened the symposium by giving an introduction to the symposium topic. She argued that standardization is an act of prioritization, and that prevailing social, political, economic and

cultural understandings of toponymic standardization in our respective nations inform our decisions. With this in mind, she encouraged the experts to reflect on the knowledge, values and rationalities behind this act of prioritization.

Presentations from members of Norden Division

Among the presenters at the symposium from our division was Lisathe Møller Kruse (Language Secretariat of Greenland). She gave a presentation on the methodology of collecting geographical names in Greenland. Up until recently, indigenous geographical names in Greenland only existed in an oral tradition. Over the years, multiple names have been collected. In this presentation, methodological issues in the field collection of names in Greenland were raised, for instance the selection of local informants and how field workers overcome practical obstacles such as the lack of communication and infrastructure.

Ulla Onkamo (Institute for the Languages of Finland), and Teemu Leskinen (National Land Survey of Finland) discussed conflicting conceptions between the laity and experts in the approach to place naming. In this presentation, Onkamo and Leskinen described an increased tendency to replace inherited toponyms of historical and cultural value with commercial toponyms. This development, they argued, is a potential threat to the preservation of geographical names as intangible cultural heritage.

Like Onkamo's and Leskinen's presentation, the presentation given by Rikke Steenholt Olesen and Johnny Gøgsig Jakobsen (both from the University of Copenhagen) raised questions about conflicting views in the standardization of geographical names. The topic for their presentation was divergence and convergence in spellings of Danish geographical names. Illustrated by the case of *Kramnitse/Kramnitze*, they discussed how a local wish for a certain spelling sometimes compromises the established norms provided by the Danish Place Name Committee. They also questioned how such divergence can be balanced.

Katriina Pedersen (the Language Council of Norway) gave a presentation on the role of geographical names in the revitalization of the Kven language in Norway. The Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990 serves as an important tool in protecting Kven language. However, this is no guarantee for securing a living tradition of toponyms. This presentation discussed how to encourage the Kven community to actively use Kven names and thereby contribute themselves to the maintenance of a living tradition of geographical names in the minority language.

On the last day of the symposium, we were honored to welcome Kaisa Rautio Helander as our special invited keynote speaker. Helander is a Professor of Sámi Onomastics at Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Guovdageaidnu (In Norwegian: Kautokeino) in Norway. She holds a PhD in Sámi language from the University of Oulu in Finland, and her doctoral thesis is a multi-disciplinary study of the history of official place name policy in Norway with regard to indigenous toponymy. The title of her presentation was Place name policy, official use of Sámi toponymy and standardization. Her symposium presentation included an overview of the toponymic policies and legislation on Sámi language and Sámi geographical names in Norway, Finland and Sweden. Using multiple examples, Helander illustrated the divergence in policy and practice. She particularly raised critical questions on the implementation of the Norwegian Place Name Act in northern parts of Norway. Helander emphasized that the existence of national legislation does not necessarily guarantee that official policy is practiced.

Concluding remarks and takeaways from the symposium

According to the UNGEGN publication *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names* (UNGEGN 2006), no method is better than another, provided each achieves the goal of establishing consistently written names that are nationally accepted and agree with the local and written usages. As this event illustrated, the approach to standardization of geographical names varies from country to country in terms of organization, principles, policies and procedures. Where the standardization of geographical names used to be a top-down activity, an increasing number of political, social, economic and commercial actors nowadays seek power and influence in the standardization process. In a world where the concept of “one language, one people, one state” is no longer valid, it is no longer obvious which name forms are “nationally accepted” and “agree with the local and written usages”.

Meeting program, list of participants, presentations, documents and photos from the UNGEGN symposium and joint divisions and working group meetings in Brussels are available on <https://unstats.un.org/Unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/Brussels.html>.

Legislation on geographical names in the Nordic countries

A common interest for the Nordic countries is legislation on geographical names. All countries within the Norden Division have language laws and regulations on language use, but only a few Nordic countries have specific laws on geographical names. In Norway and Iceland, geographical names have merited special legislation. In Sweden, geographical names are protected under the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act, in which a passage gives instructions on maintaining a good place name practice.

In Finland, there have been several attempts to regulate the standardization of geographical names by law. The most recent initiative dates back to 2011. In the special issue of the Information Bulletin (No. 55 December 2018) on the Legislation on geographical names, Ulla Onkamo from Finland points out that there is no single national name authority in Finland. The absence of any clear legislation, she argues, has led to a number of problems, where for example local authorities have attempted to rename geographical features with inherited names.

In the country report submitted by Denmark, the Danish experts argue that specific legislation can strengthen geographical names in official use. Like Finland, Denmark lacks an official definition and description of the responsibilities of different institutions involved in standardization. Clear aims and tools for securing orthographic correctness, expert knowledge and transparency in the authorization process are also called for.

As discussed and illustrated during the symposium in Brussels, however, special legislation on geographical names is no guarantee for the implementation of toponymic policy. Standardization of geographical names as a top-down activity is no longer valid in the Nordic countries. The need to balance expert knowledge and community knowledge will therefore be crucial in future policymaking. For more detailed information on the legislation on geographical names in the Nordic countries we refer to the individual country reports submitted for the 1st Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.