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

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**Agenda item 13 of the provisional agenda\***

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity, including indigenous, minority and regional languages and multilingual issues (Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage)**

**Necessity of Creating A Working Group or Sub-Working Group On Non-Written Language Transcription Systems**

Submitted by Task Team for Africa \*\*

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Unquestionably, language is a fundamental element of identity of a people, a nation, a minority, and is therefore the mirror of a society and its cultural, sociological, and identity variety etc.

UNESCO considers that languages belong to the intangible cultural heritage of humanity and works for linguistic diversity.

2,511 is the number of living languages whose situation is either vulnerable, endangered, seriously endangered, in a critical situation or extinct in the world. ("The 2009 Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger ",) : One language disappears on average every two weeks; If nothing is done, 90% of languages will probably disappear in this century.

Linguists are concerned about this phenomenon because languages that disappear are often languages that contain rare or even unique linguistic phenomena , and if they have not been listed , recorded and studied, they will be lost forever.

It will be the same for geographical names from these languages. UNGEGN in taking into consideration the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention , adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 17 October 2003, considers that geographical names are indeed intangible cultural heritage and notes that there are various threats to the use of certain geographical names , particularly from unwritten languages, which provide a sense of identity and continuity (IX / 4) and also recognize by several of its resolutions (II / 27 , II / 36, V / 22, VII / 5, VIII / 1 and VIII / 9,) that the geographical names are a 'component of the historical and cultural heritage of the nation' and recommends that they be preserved and safeguarded by asking countries that have not yet done so '*to undertake the systematic collection of geographical names and the promotion of better understanding ...*'

The concentration of languages in danger and by the same of the geographical names, is particularly strong in the regions of the world which also have the greatest linguistic diversity, especially in Africa and more particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

This part of Africa is characterized by a large number of unwritten languages: on the 6912 languages listed (by *the Ethnologue*) more than 2000 are located in Africa (Wikipedia)

Millions of geographical names are derived from these languages and which may disappear with the disappearance of these languages, hence the need for their safeguarding.

That is the reason why the United Nations Group of Experts on the Standardization of Geographical Names, at its first Conference in 1967, paid particular attention to the geographical names deriving from unwritten languages , and recommended at its first and second Conference:

1. " It is recommended that countries with a complex ethnic and linguistic structure that have not yet done so should study and attempt to solve the problems caused by the existence on their territory of geographical names which belong to unwritten languages or to minority languages (written or not) or to dialects of the main language. The solution of the problems caused by the existence of names belonging to unwritten languages or to dialects of the main language may face enormous challenges , interested countries could collaborate and fruitfully use the experience of other countries experiencing similar challenges , to look for solutions that meet their needs ... "
2. Recommends, for names that belong to languages using different writing systems, to systematically use transliteration or transcription as appropriate."
3. Recommends that the forthcoming United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names continue its consideration of this matter.

Another recommendation:

#### The Conference

Noting that in some regions ..., a minority language is spoken on the territory of several countries.

Noting further that the geographical names of the minority language are sometimes spelled according to different principles in the different countries where the minority language is spoken .

Acknowledging the desirability to treat in a consistent manner the minority languages spoken in these regions.

Recommends if possible, that the countries concerned, after consultation with persons who speak the minority language as their mother tongue

- a) Adopt a common spelling to write all the geographical names of the minority language
- b) Apply this spelling to standardize the names of places in the territories that come from the minority language
- c) Publish the standardized names in their official maps and in their national toponymic gazetteers.

Aware of the African specificity of languages and hence geographical names, GENUNG, since the first Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in Geneva in 1967, recognized this specificity and made recommendations for a special treatment of this African geographical names.

In fact, on the proposal of the Liberian delegate, the Conference adopted a resolution (No. 18) on the transcription of African geographical names in which it recognizes the particular nature of African geographical names:

*"The Conference, recognizing that there is in Africa a large number of unwritten languages for which the transcription of geographical names in the Latin alphabet raises very complex challenges ,*

*Noting that the French and English alphabets are most often used to transcribe the geographical names used in these languages,*

- 1. Draws attention of the future United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names on the peculiarity of these challenges .*
- 2. Urges the future Commission to give special attention to in order to reach an accurate transcript of sounds ... '*

Since then several progresses have been made: Of a single Division linguistic-geographical divisions in 1967, Africa is currently divided into 4 Divisions!

A Working Group on Romanization Systems has been established; but this one only deals with existing systems of writing: at this point in time, it has standardized about 30 Systems on almost 300 existing writing systems in the world.

In order to reinforce and further clarify this problematic, another Working Group dealing with pronunciation was also set up by resolution III / 7 after noting *that 'the transfer of names from a writing system to another would be facilitated by information on pronunciation, and having recognized that **in** practice it is difficult to indicate precise pronunciations but that it is possible to provide indications of the approximate pronunciations which may be included in the target writing , recommends that the Expert group consider the nature and design of research and experiments that could help to establish the range of understandable pronunciations. '*

But as can be seen, this one is much more concerned with the target languages but not with the source languages *'likely to be included in the target writing '*

The particular 'nature ' and the 'special attention' of the transcription of African geographical names derived almost entirely from unwritten languages, is not taken into consideration.

This specificity, moreover, is not specific to Africa, but it is also extended to all continents: as an example in New Guinea alone, there are about 800 unwritten languages!

It is for this reason, we suggest that the United Nations Expert Group on Standardization of Geographical Names for the implementation of the provisions of these recommendations, to consider this 'African particularity' and generally the issue of unwritten languages and to create either a Working Group on Transcription Systems like Romanization or pronunciation or a subgroup.

If this proposal enjoys large support of UNGEGN, we can propose, at the end of our work, a resolution in this direction.