
**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
2021 session**

New York, 3 – 7 May 2021

Item 4(a) of the provisional agenda *

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

Report of Iceland

Submitted by Iceland**

Summary:

The full national report of Iceland is divided into six sections.

The first section provides a brief overview of the linguistic background of toponyms in Iceland.

The second section provides a summary of current toponymic legislation and administrative activity pertaining to the standardization of geographical names. Please note that detailed information about the historical background of the current legislation can be found in the report of Iceland submitted to the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at its 2019 session (GEGN.2/2019/45/CRP.45/Rev.2).

The third section contains information about current initiatives regarding place-name collection in Iceland.

The fourth section provides information about toponymic data sets that are actively maintained by the National Land Survey of Iceland (Landmælingar Íslands) and the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum), respectively. The National Land Survey of Iceland and the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies work actively together on ensuring the interoperability of the official national toponymic database (maintained by the National Land Survey) and the newly opened database “Nafnið.is” (maintained by the Institute) that makes the Institute’s place-name archive accessible on the Internet.

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

The sixth section provides contact details.

* GEGN.2/2021/1

** Prepared by Emily Lethbridge, Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavík, Iceland.

Report of Iceland

1. Overview of the linguistic background of toponyms 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’ (<https://www.government.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettir2015/Thyding-log-um-stodu-islenskrar-tungu-og-islensks-taknimals-desember-2015.pdf>), which also states that Icelandic Sign Language is officially recognized by the Icelandic government. Only names in Icelandic 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. Current toponymic legislation and administrative activity pertaining to the standardization of geographical names

A. Current toponymic legislation

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. The 2015 Place-name Act can be found here (<https://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/2015022.html>, in Icelandic). The 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 2015 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 (Icelandic: Örnefnanefnd) 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 (ÁMI). 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.
- 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 ÁMI 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 (NLSI) 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.
- 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.

Further details, including the historical background to the 2015 laws, the laws themselves, and the role of the Place-name Committee, can be found in the Full Report of Iceland submitted to UNGEGN for the 2019 session, in sections 2A, 2B and 2C (GEGN.2/2019/45/CRP.45/Rev.2).

B. Current administrative activity

Administrative activity relating to geographical names in Iceland in the period 2019 to March 2021 included the following

- the unification of four local authorities in east Iceland (Borgarfjarðarhreppur, Djúpavogshreppur, Fljótsdalshreppur and Seyðisfjarðarkaupstaður) in 2020 to form one municipal unit that was given the name Múlaþing. A vote on the new name for the municipality was held as part of local elections. Prior to the vote being held, the Place-name Committee reviewed 17 suggestions for the new name that a committee working on behalf of the four older municipalities collected together.
- consideration by the Place-name Committee of a proposal submitted in 2020 by the Borgarbyggð municipality in west Iceland to name a lake formed of glacial meltwater that stands at the top of a mountain where the now-vanished glacier Ok was before. The toponym proposed was Blávatn and this suggestion was accepted without comment by the Place-name Committee.
- examination by the Place-name Committee of a number of proposals for new farm-names, or changed farm-names, submitted to the Committee by local authorities.
- discussion in 2019 by the Place-name Committee on the phenomenon of English toponyms being coined for Icelandic topographical features for which Icelandic toponyms already exist. These English toponyms can be found on Google Maps: prominent examples include the toponym 'Diamond Beach' for a coastal area already named 'Breiðamerkursandur' in Icelandic, and the toponym 'Black Sand Beach' for the coastal area already named 'Reynisfjara' in Icelandic. Sometimes these English toponyms are translations of the Icelandic toponyms but in other cases (as in the two examples noted above) they are new names. The recommendation of the Place-name Committee to local authorities is to try to monitor this new trend and to find ways of countering it where possible, since it is potentially problematic (from a practical and from an ideological perspective) if these English names become fixed in the toponymicon, even possibly replacing the Icelandic names.
- Annual reports that outline the work of the Place-name Committee can be found at <https://www.arnastofnun.is/is/arsskyrslur-ornefnanefndar>

At the time of writing (March 2021), the question of what toponym should be given to the new lava-field on the Reykjanes peninsula (in the Fagradalsfjall mountain range where a volcanic eruption began on 19th March) is being discussed by the local authority (Grindavíkurbær) and widely on national media channels. Toponyms in the area have been discussed in media channels and there is significant interest amongst the general public.

3. Current initiatives regarding place-name collection in Iceland

In Iceland, work on collecting place-names currently takes place mainly in connection with a) the Place-name Archive, housed and maintained by the ÁMI, and b) a database maintained by the NLSI which is the official Place-name Database referred to in section 2A above. 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. Concerning current place-name initiatives, the following points are worth mentioning:

- A small-scale pilot project was undertaken by the ÁMI in the summer of 2020 which involved a student collecting information about field-names in existing place-name registers for ten farms in the Borgarbyggð administrative district in west Iceland. Interviews with current farmers on each farm were conducted and the recorded field-names looked over. Where new names have come into being since the place-name records were created (some decades ago), these were recorded, along with other new toponyms that are currently in use on each estate but otherwise unrecorded. It is hoped that this initiative might be expanded on in the future.
- At the time of writing, the ÁMI and the NLSI are working together to prepare and launch a comprehensive, country-wide crowd-sourcing initiative. The aim is to get locals to review existing place-name records for areas they know well and provide the GIS co-ordinates for toponyms that are not currently in the Official Place-name Database maintained by NLSI. A major stimulus for this initiative is the ÁMI's launch of a new online website, <https://nafnid.is>, where all place-name records can now be freely accessed and searched (see more on this in section 4 below). Previous work overseen by NLSI and undertaken by local volunteers to review place-name records and provide GIS co-ordinates for toponyms has resulted in the addition of small numbers of previously unrecorded toponyms to the toponymicon. It is therefore hoped that this major collaborative initiative will result not only in a greater proportion of known toponyms being given GIS co-ordinates so they can be added to the Official Place-name Database, but also that the toponymicon itself will be added to, and older records expanded or updated.

4. Actively maintained toponymic data-sets

A. 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 prior to 2019, had been scanned as pdf-files.

Work on creating an online relational database for the archive began in 2019 and the first open version of the online user interface at <https://nafnid.is> was launched in December 2020. ÁMI directed the project, with NLSI as a collaborative partner. The work was funded by an Icelandic Research Council Infrastructure grant, and a supplementary grant from the University of Iceland. As well as the technical development of the database back-end, the work involved cataloguing each document in the collection (approximately 15,000 in total), mostly text documents but also hand-drawn maps or marked-up and annotated printed maps. Information about each document was catalogued (e.g. type of document, collector, informants, date of production etc) and toponyms were extracted using OCR-technology. This resulted in a high (but not perfect) rate of data extraction. The OCR-generated results were hand-checked against the documents and adjusted as necessary. GIS co-ordinates for toponyms that are in the NLSI were linked to the Nafnið.is database so toponyms in the place-name records can be displayed on a map view as part of the user interface. It is hoped that amongst other results, this major new innovation in granting open access to the Icelandic place-name records will stimulate general public interest in Icelandic place-names, aid the work done by municipalities that concerns geographic names, increase participation in the NLSI-led initiative to add GIS co-ordinates to the official Place-name Database, and stimulate new academic research on Icelandic place-names.

- B. 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. At present the database contains about 137,000 names and in recent years about 15,000 names have been added each year. The NLSI works closely with the ÁMI 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).
- C. The Icelandic cadastral office, Registers Iceland, maintains a Register of Access Addresses** (see also below in 5).
- D. List of standardized country names** compiled by an official committee with representatives of various official institutions (see also below in 5).

5. Relevant publications and websites

Ari Páll Kristinsson. 2010. Um íslenska örnefnastýringu [On Icelandic place-name planning]. *Orð og tunga* 12:1–23. <https://ordogtungu.arnastofnun.is/index.php/ord-og-tunga/article/view/170>

Þórunn Sigurðardóttir. 2016. 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. <http://gustavadolfsakademien.se/tidskrifter/bok/namn-och-bygd-2016>

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 náttúruyfyrirbæra [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-byla-gatna-sveitarfelaga-og-natturufyrirbaera>

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

Nafnið.is online database for the Icelandic place-name archive held at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Research, Reykjavík. <http://nafnid.is>

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: <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)