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**United Nations Group of Experts on**

**Geographical Names**

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**Item 6 (a) of the provisional agenda \***

**National and international standardization of geographical names : Names collection, office treatment, national authorities, features beyond a single sovereignty and international cooperation**

**Basis and principles of the standardization of geographical names in Finland**

Submitted by Finland<sup>\*\*</sup>

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\*\* Prepared by Ulla Onkamo, Institute for the Languages of Finland, and Teemu Leskinen, National Land Survey of Finland

Resolutions concerned: I/4 (National standardization), V/15 (Establishment of national geographical names authorities), VII/5 (National standardization based on local usage) and VIII/9 (Geographical names as cultural heritage).

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In Finland there is no specific Act on place names that would determine 1) who has the power to decide on different place names and their spelling, 2) who registers the approved names and 3) what place names the authorities have to use. Rather, statutes concerning place names can be found in various acts and several different authorities are responsible for place names. For example, municipalities decide on the names in town and city plans, generally the Government decides on the names of administrative areas, the Finnish Transport and Communication Agency decides on the names on Finnish nautical charts and the Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency decides on the names on roadside signposts.

The names of natural features, such as islands, lakes, hills, and forests have not been mentioned in legislation at all. No authority in Finland has the power to name natural features or change their names.

### Who is responsible for the standardization of place names?

Although Finland has neither a specific authority on place names nor legislation concerning place names, there is an established national standardization process for inherited place names. It is based on the verification of map names, which has long traditions in Finland.

Since the late 19th century, nomenclature specialists have verified place names on maps when requested to do so by the predecessors of the National Land Survey. Since 1959, the predecessors of the Institute for the Languages of Finland have verified place names on the basic map. The work continues on commission of the National Land Survey. Since 2014, specialists at the Institute for the Languages of Finland have verified the place names in the National Land Survey's Geographic Names Register, rather than the names on map sheets.

The process is supported by the act on the Institute for the Languages of Finland and the Act on the National Land Survey of Finland. According to the act, the Institute is devoted to language planning and guidance of Finnish and Swedish. In practice, this means issuing normative recommendations on the orthography, use and planning of Finnish and Swedish place names. The statutory task of the National Land Survey is to produce basic spatial and topographic data and national topographic maps. The National Land Survey has the right to decide the names that it will use in its own map products. To ensure the best results, the names are verified by language specialists.

### Starting point is names used by local community

The starting point for the standardization of place names is that in every circumstance, the place names used are those that the local inhabitants use. The inherited place names of natural features, as well as habitations and other cultural features, have been born out of a practical need, when it has been necessary to determine which house, field or lakelet is the topic of conversation. Names are a way to both position a feature and to describe it. In addition, place names are a part of our immaterial heritage as they transmit information about the history and culture of the area. In Finland, natural features are not given intentionally planned names. If a place does not have an established name in local linguistic usage, it will remain nameless. Natural features, which do not have a name, are often so small that there has been no need to talk about them.

The most important source for the verification of map names is the corpus of material in the Names Archive of the Institute of the Languages of Finland containing more than 2 million place names from all parts of the country. Most of the collection is based on information from oral sources collected in the field by trained linguists and students. The collectors went from one house to the next and interviewed local inhabitants. Most of the material was collected from the 1950s to the 1970s. The names have been stored on card files and itemized by parish. Each place name card file contains the

name in standard Finnish, as well as its pronunciation in the local dialect, type of place, location, collector and year of collection. In addition, the specialists who verify map names continue to contact local inhabitants when necessary and ask them about the names that are currently in use.

The purpose of the national map is to guide not only local inhabitants but also other people in an unambiguous and understandable way. This is why names are largely normalized on the map. Certain characteristics of the local dialect can be retained to ensure that the local inhabitants can relate to the names on the map. There are well thought-out principles for retaining dialectisms, which have been followed in the standardization process for decades. In addition to normalizing place names, the person who verifies nomenclature is responsible for verifying the orthography of place names and the name and location of the place that the name refers to, as well as correcting errors and adding names. Based on established orthographical recommendations, they check whether the parts of a name have been correctly written as open or closed compounds, or if the hyphen is used in accordance with recommendations in hyphenated compounds.

### How is the multilingual environment considered in the standardization of place names?

The national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish, the latter of which is spoken mainly in certain coastal areas in Southern and Western Finland. In addition, in Northern Finland three indigenous Saami languages are spoken: North Saami, Inari Saami and Skolt Saami. One place can have a name in several languages. Every name that is used by the local population is marked on the National Land Survey's basic map. One place can have as many as five names on the map, one example of this is Inari municipality: *Inari* (Finnish), *Enare* (Swedish), *Anár* (North Saami), *Aanaar* (Inari Saami) and *Aanar* (Skolt Saami). Saami place names are verified by a specialist in the Saami languages at the University of Oulu. The verification work is coordinated by the Institute for the Languages of Finland.



### Planned place names and address names are not standardized systematically

In the legislation pertaining to place names, the normative role of the Institute for the Languages of Finland has only been recognized for municipal names. The municipal names are usually inherited place names, which have been recognized as official names by the municipalities. By law, if a municipality intends to change its name or merging municipalities intend to choose a name which is none of the existing names of the merging municipalities, the council(s) will have to ask the Institute for the Languages of Finland to issue a statement on the new proposed name. Municipalities choose their names themselves and the decisions do not always take the contents of the statement into account.

The responsibility for planned place names, such as the names of streets and roads, administrative areas, new residential areas, and traffic operating points has been decentralized to several different authorities. Authorities can, if they wish, ask or request help in the creation of place names and address names and to ensure correct orthography, but in practice this happens only rarely. For example, annually only a few municipalities ask the Institute for the Languages of Finland for assistance in planning address names.

The website of the Institute for the Languages of Finland contains instructions for planning nomenclature, which is freely available to the authorities. The recommendation is to use standardized inherited place names when possible in planned place names and address names to associate them with already familiar names and places.

In accordance with the Finnish Language Act, planned place names and address names are formed based on the linguistic status of the area. If both Finnish and Swedish are the official languages of the municipality, the municipality is bilingual. In a bilingual municipality, names must be planned in Finnish and Swedish. In the Saami Domicile Area (Enontekiö, Inari, Utsjoki and the northern part of the Sodankylä municipality) it is recommended that planned place names and address names are formed in at least the Saami language that is most frequently used in the area, in addition to Finnish. There is, however, no obligation to do this.

### Why is legislation on place names needed?

Efforts have been made to bring legislation on geographical names to Finland for several decades now. The most recent initiative dates back to 2011, when the Institute for the Languages of Finland together with the National Land Survey of Finland proposed the enactment of a law on place names and the establishment of an official body responsible for geographical names to their respective ministries. The need for such legislation has been reported on in several meetings of the UNGEGN and its working groups.

The absence of any clear legislation has led to several problems. For example, local authorities have tried to change the names of natural features for no good reason and without jurisdiction, proposals to change the names of villages for reasons of language policy have been presented and rail traffic operating points have been given unclear names that do not help in locating the place. The problems not only take time and money to solve, but they also threaten the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage – inherited place names.

The purpose of the proposals for legislations is not to grant an authority the right to decide on the names of natural features. The idea is rather to ensure the established standardization process through legislation – even in future, it is most appropriate to continue to use only such names as have become established in the linguistic usage of local inhabitants. The objective is that authorities should use only standardized place names that are stored in the Geographic Names Register of the National Land Survey in official circumstances. This would ensure that communication by the authorities regarding places is precise and reliable even in emergencies. In addition, this would ensure that inherited place names remain as a part of our intangible cultural heritage.

### Points for discussion

#### The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (a) Take note of basis and principles of the standardization of geographical names in Finland.
- (b) Comment and provide input on basis and principles of the standardization in other countries.