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**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names  
2021 session  
New York, 3 – 7 May 2021  
Item 4(b) of the provisional agenda \*  
Reports: Divisions of the Group of Experts**

## **Report of the Pacific South-West Division**

Submitted by the Pacific South-West Division \*\*

### Summary

The Pacific South-West Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names consists of experts from Australia, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu. It was formed in 2012 after the separation of the former Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division. The Asia South-East Division was also formed in 2012.

Despite the fact that no divisional meetings have been held to date under the new arrangements, there is an existing relationship between the names authorities of Australia and New Zealand. The Pacific South-West Division is currently co-chaired by Australia and New Zealand as an interim arrangement, and options for connecting with and understanding the situation of other Member States within the Division are under consideration. The main role of the Interim Co-Chairs is to provide points of contact for Division members until the Division becomes formally established and elects its own officers. At that time, it will also be able to fully address its purpose and structure, as required under the rules of procedure of the Group of Experts ([GEGN/30/2](#)). That includes understanding each Division member's needs, for example, and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. The report contains a summary of the steps taken to activate the Division, as well as opportunities to engage with members and encourage their participation.

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\* GEGN.2/2021/1

\*\* Prepared by Susan Birtles (Australia) and Wendy Shaw (New Zealand), Interim Co-Chairs of the Pacific South-West Division

## **Background**

The Pacific South-West Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) currently lists its members as Australia, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu. It was formed in 2012 after separation of the former Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division, however it has not yet held a divisional meeting. In 2020, Australia and New Zealand took on the joint role of Interim Co-Chairs with the intention of connecting with other members and re-initiating Divisional activities for the Pacific South-West nations.

## **Australia and Zealand Working Group on Place Names**

Australia and New Zealand have been liaising on geographical naming matters since an International Cartographic Association meeting in Perth, Australia in 1984. This led to the inaugural meeting of what would become the Committee for Geographical Names of Australasia (CGNA). Since then their naming jurisdictions have met annually to share experiences, strengthen relationships, deliver products, and develop comprehensive policies and practices for consistent and standardised geographical naming. Until separation of the former Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division in 2012, Australia and New Zealand were actively involved in Divisional activities. CGNA has been through two name changes; in 2015 to the Permanent Committee on Place Names (PCPN) and in 2021 to the Australia and Zealand Working Group on Place Names (ANZ-WGPN). However during its nearly four decades of operation, its intent and commitment remains strong and is well supported.

The ANZ-WGPN has discussed how Australia and New Zealand could engage with other nations in the Pacific South-West Division, however regional requirements are not its mandate. The process to productively engage on regional matters requires support from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). While approaches have been made to DFAT and MFAT, no formal support has yet been sought. Their support is necessary to ensure alignment with other programmes in place between the Australian and New Zealand governments and various Pacific island nations. Reason in part due to the existing networks available, resources being limited, and respect for other priorities, for example, wellbeing, environment, infrastructure, education, and economy.

## **Member States' needs**

Unique to the Pacific South-West Division is that Member States are islands, all representative of diverse cultures, and most being small and remote. Isolation means that there is no common language though English is generally understood. This poses some challenges with engaging across the Division, but the most pressing challenge is that most States do not have national naming authorities and have had limited involvement in UNGEGN previously.

An issue immediately facing many Pacific nations is sea-level rise and adverse weather events due to climate change. These threaten continued existence and ability to sustain communities. The impact of this reality and how people maintain their connection to and identity with, the land needs to be addressed. Matters of diversity and inclusion are also relevant. With hundreds of languages and cultures represented, an informed Pacific viewpoint is important input into UNGEGN's deliberations and body of expertise. Such issues are important to conversations for the UN's 2030 Agenda and information gathered to inform the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The part that geographic names play in these conversation is fundamental to understanding context and affect.

The rationale for standardised, consistent and accurate geographic naming, and the benefits they accrue (whether for practical purposes or for cultural/social/language imperatives) when successfully conveyed and understood could start to give attention across the Division to managing geographical

names by following good practice encouraged by UNGEGN. Divisional activities will provide a platform for diverse perspectives to be shared, and opportunity for involvement of many more representatives in possible more frequent dialogue than is currently possible through full UNGEGN sessions.

To understand each State's situation and the collective need, the Division needs to meet and decide what will best serve them; this cannot be determined by Australia or New Zealand alone, nor copied from the situation in other Divisions. However it is expected that identifying representatives and establishing national names activities would likely be an initial priority, along with education through UNGEGN's training resources.

The inclusion of other Pacific nations not currently identified by UNGEGN, must also be considered.

### **Purpose and Structure**

Under current arrangements the Interim Co-Chairs are identifying connections and providing points of contact for Division members. When the Division meets it can decide on its mode of operation and goals, including the appointment of a Chair and other positions. Once established, it will also be able to fully address its purpose, as required under the rules of procedure of the Group of Experts (GEGN/30/2).

### **Opportunities**

The New Zealand government has established a Pacific Re-set<sup>1</sup> initiative to enable a stable, prosperous and resilient Pacific. Australia's Pacific Step-up<sup>2</sup> is a similar initiative and it is hoped that the expectations of these initiatives might help support the Pacific South-West Division's activation and ultimately its purpose and structure. As such, Australia and New Zealand will continue to pursue advice and support from DFAT and MFAT respectively.

The UNGEGN Secretariate has kindly provided contact details for corresponding UNGGIM members, and we are aware that potential expertise may be identified through the existing connections of our in-country colleagues, as well as networks such as the Pacific Community<sup>3</sup>. We also note the recent appointment of individuals to UNESCO's<sup>4</sup> Global Taskforce for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, and will monitor shared opportunities through existing connections within that Taskforce.

### **Recommendation**

Divisional members are invited to liaise directly with the Co-Chairs from Australia and/or New Zealand to assist in giving practical effect to the successful operation of this Division.

### **Contacts**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/OIA/R-R-The-Pacific-reset-The-First-Year.PDF>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/countries/pacific-step>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.spc.int/>

<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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