
**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
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Social and economic benefits, supporting sustainable development, measures taken and proposed for the implementation of resolutions and evaluation of the work of the Group of Experts

Geographical names and the environment

Submitted by Australia **

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Introduction

Geographical names are core to human existence as we know it; we cannot communicate without them, and the toponymic record reflects what is important to different parts of humanity at different points in time. Whether it be food and fibre sources, creation stories, or commemorating people and events - no matter the geographic or thematic scope of investigation, there is always a story revealed.

The resolutions of UNGEGN and the previous conferences, when viewed as a summary of what the group has identified as important components of geographical names standardisation, also tell a story. They reflect the problems we face, the solutions we agreed to pursue, and our own evolution as a group in supporting the lofty goal of a peaceful and sustainable world.

UNGEKN works to promote the benefits of standardised geographical names and through its resolutions has been influencing toponymic policies and practices across the world. Looking over UNGEGN's resolutions and working group arrangements against the backdrop of current global challenges and UNGEGN's aims in relation to supporting the UN's 2030 Agenda, reveals a theme that is woven through so much of our work, yet currently unexplored in an explicit way and not reflected within UNGEGN's existing operating arrangements.

Geographical names and the environment

A healthy environment is the foundation to everything we do. As we gather for this second session of the new UNGEGN it is impossible to ignore the uncommon arrangements under which we convene. The session theme (Geographical Names Supporting Sustainable Development and Management of the Pandemic) serves to remind us of the global framework developed to help guide our future, and that we have a role in supporting other bodies of the United Nations.

A point of difference sometimes noted in relation to the SDGs over previous global goals is that there must be an integrated approach across the economic, social and environmental elements of sustainable development. UNGEGN's work to date very clearly acknowledges the economic benefits of names standardisation and easily accessible data, and discusses the social value of geographical names in relation to cultural heritage. It seems that we have not given as targeted a focus toward exploring the relationship that geographical names, national names programs, and the work of UNGEGN has, or could have, in shaping human understanding of, and impact on and of, the environment. As a result, it is possible that UNGEGN is missing an important value proposition in relation to the natural environmental, the integrated nature of all three components of sustainable development, and some broader opportunities to support its strategic focus areas.

UNGEKN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029

It is appropriate to recognize the alignment of UNGEGN's strategic intent with environmental concerns. In relation to the SDGs, UNGEGN recognizes that they aim to 'address global challenges, including those related to poverty, inequality, **climate, environmental degradation**, prosperity, and peace and justice.' An action of Strategy 4: Culture, heritage and language recognition, is to 'Encourage presentations and discussions relevant to current key cultural aspects of naming and renaming, and to naming in particular environments'. Thirdly, Strategy 2: Relationships, links and connections, acknowledges the intent to strengthen existing collaborations (such as those across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and UNESCO) as well as creating new strategic partnerships to address new challenges. Further alignment may be also be found in relation to Strategy 1: Technical expertise, such as through advice on data management and identifying trends and future directions, as well as through Strategy 3: Effective Work Programs, which notes the need for 'more elaborated relevance of UNGEGN to achieve the 2030 SDGs'. Overall, there is the potential for

greater visibility for UNGEGN and capacity building for member states (Strategy 5: Promotion and capacity building) through being able to communicate value in new ways and/or to new audiences.

Some examples of areas for discussion

The types of places included in gazetteers and geographical names databases varies across the globe, presumably driven by the differing technical, cultural, and legal environments within which our governments operate. Including geographical names in gazetteers and making them easily accessible and re-usable via geospatial and other data formats provides for broad discoverability, mapping and geospatial analysis; and for promoting their existence to the public, industry, and various levels of government. Therefore, the prioritization that geographical names authorities and data managers give to the types of geographical names they consider, influences the discoverability and potentially the perceived importance of certain types of places.

As an example we could consider protected area names, which are published in some national gazetteers and not others. Are the omissions or inclusions conscious decisions, or artefacts of organizational arrangements? And has consideration been given to understanding the benefits or risks of the different approaches? At a global level, the nomination and listing of international places of importance such as World Heritage Areas and Ramsar sites could be considered as naming specific types of protected area places. National parks and reserves offer comparative national level examples. UNGEGN promotes that geographical names are one of the most commonly used geographical identifiers, and the vision in UNGEGN's proposed strategic plan reiterates the fostering of communication and cooperation through easily accessible names. Therefore, working towards standardised geographical names as a common platform through which to enable data interoperability and promote awareness of internationally and nationally important protected areas could be an opportunity for UNGEGN and names authorities to contribute to the work of other UN or national bodies with environmental mandates¹, and further its own vision.

When to name, and when to avoid names. There can be various reasons for needing to name a particular place, usually driven by communication needs or sometimes seeking to find a commemorative opportunity. It is widely accepted that naming places is a useful practice, but has consideration been given to when it is not? Guidelines that provide for certain areas to remain predominantly nameless in order to preserve a sense of a wilderness are both recognising and seeking to shape human impact on the natural environment. In other cases, naming temporary, seasonal, or very small places may be of limited interest from an economic or social need, but undertaken on account of the need to communicate environmental or scientific values. By providing a forum for discussion on these types of situations, UNGEGN and national names authorities may support each other to discuss the merits of such approaches and contribute to effective work programs.

Language and culture. Geographical names programs that prioritise consideration for indigenous and minority languages are not just preserving toponymic heritage or revitalising languages through geographical names, they are often also helping to preserve and share the environmental knowledge within those cultures – past and present. While UNGEGN has created a strong focus on geographical

¹ Part of UNESCO's world heritage mission is to encourage participation of the local population in the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage, and support international cooperation in the conservation of our world's cultural and natural heritage (See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/about>). Similarly, the Ramsar Convention's mission is the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world (See <https://www.ramsar.org/about/the-convention-on-wetlands-and-its-mission>).

names as cultural heritage, an important subset of that focus is natural heritage within the toponymic record. Studies that use toponyms to help identify locations of natural disasters, specific environmental conditions, or flora and fauna distributions are interesting in and of themselves. When such studies are then used to help guide planning, development, or environmental decisions today to help mitigate the potential impacts of future environmental conditions, we are seeing directly the benefits and hence some good arguments for investment in geographical names programs. This is an area of applied research that could be encouraged by UNGEGN; it has the potential to directly contribute to sustainable development conversations and demonstrate greater value for national names programs in collating and making available comprehensive geographical names data.

Sense of place: In resolution IV/2 (accelerating the work of names standardisation), the Group of Experts had acknowledged the need for unambiguous reference in fields such as land development, natural resources management, and conservation of environment. By resolution X/3 (recommending criteria for establishing and evaluating the nature of names as cultural heritage), the group had acknowledged potential testimoniality², appeal³ and imageability⁴ of a name. While much focus has been given to recognizing the heritage value in existing names, less seems to have been given to reflecting on the potential of creating future heritage value through current decisions. Has consideration been given to whether concepts similar to those used in determining cultural heritage are also applicable to choosing and promoting contemporary names; with the aim of creating situations where geographical names elicit a sense of place that encourages greater connection to the natural environment they represent? As humans become less connected to the rest of the natural environment and surround themselves with more names commemorating people or far-away places rather than those that describe local natural phenomenon, what long-term impact is there on our sense of the places we inhabit? And how might names authorities help shape attitudes toward the environment in and around certain places through the principles and guidelines they adopt? Research and case studies are required (perhaps with academic assistance from the field of ecolinguistics), to understand how our name choices are evolving and what impact certain naming principles may have over the long term, on human perception in relation to the environment.

Publicity: Promoting the value of standardised geographical names is often approached in a very broad manner. In the interest of improving awareness and helping explain the nuanced and ubiquitous nature of our work, there could be opportunity within the numerous programmes and events designed to raise awareness for environmental issues, to promote specific geographical names applications or principles. Strategy 2 of the strategic plan identifies a desire to strengthen collaboration with UNESCO because of geographical names as intangible cultural heritage. UNGEGN may like to consider engaging more broadly with UNESCO to see if there are potential connections into their environmental programmes as well. Similar collaborations may be possible at national and sub-national levels, as part of moves to understand a new sets of stakeholders.

Climate change and SDGs: An issue immediately facing many 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, their environment, needs to be addressed. The part that geographic names play in these conversations is fundamental to understanding context and affect, yet the priorities facing such communities may limit their interest and capacity in collecting and standardising geographical names. Consideration may also be given to whether there is a correlation between biodiversity and linguistic diversity, and how geographical names activities may affect the sustainable development challenges facing highly diverse communities that are most impacted by climate change. Such considerations may

² The “testimoniality” of a name, or its capacity to clearly embody a cultural, geographical, historical, social or other reality that is specific to the place and an essential component of local, regional or national identity;

³ The appeal of a name, which corresponds to a feeling of belonging associated with the name and the place it designates;

⁴ The imageability of a name, or its capacity to inspire ideas or strong, rich images within users, without these images or ideas necessarily referring to history or local trivia.

reveal the need for more support to geographical names programs in these areas, or identify beneficial collaboration opportunities with other disciplines undertaking priority work (e.g. environmental scientists and linguists working together within the same community).

The ideas noted above are not exhaustive but have hopefully prompted thoughts of case studies or other areas of connection the group may wish to share.

For consideration

UNGEKN discussions to date appear to have touched on the environmental theme, but not explicitly. And while we have articulated the important role geographical names have as a fundamental geospatial data theme for enabling measurement and communication related to each of the sustainable development goals, we have made less specific statements about whether we have a role in supporting the goals in other ways. The environment is fundamental to each of those goals and until we dig deeper into the theme of geographical names and the environment, we may not fully realise our capacity and contribution in relation to the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, or our ability to influence beyond the life of those goals.

There's potentially a number of case studies or considerations that demonstrate connections between geographical names and the environment, and we have seen some already submitted under related themes in recent years. It is a topic that is woven throughout our work and can support elements within each of the five strategies of the proposed strategic plan, as well as alignment to the SDGs. This paper aims to prompt consideration of the topic "geographical names and the environment" and provide an initial forum (through written submissions/discussion) for the sharing of experiences and thoughts on whether this is an area of influence and impact that UNGEKN and names authorities would like to explore further.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- a) **Consider** the current and potential connections between geographical names and the natural environment,
- b) **Share** examples of practices, research or working relationships where geographical names and naming practices improve human understanding of the natural environment, and/or seek to influence the level of human impact on the natural environmental.
- c) **Discuss** whether geographical names and the natural environment is an area of interest that merits further discussion for it's potential in supporting UNGEKN's aims, particularly in relation to;
 - a. understanding the role of geographical names and the actions of names authorities in relation to the sustainable development goals,
 - b. pursuing synergies across ECOSOC subsidiary bodies, and
 - c. promoting the value of establishing national geographical names authorities.
- d) If further discussion is supported: **Decide** an appropriate platform/methodology for considering these important matters and to make appropriate recommendations to UNGEKN that address the relationship between geographical names and environmental considerations and impacts.