

27 January 2023

English

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

**2023 session**

New York, 1 – 5 May 2023

**Item 12 of the provisional agenda \***

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity, including indigenous, minority  
and regional languages and multilingual issues**

**Focus group on Indigenous and minority language  
geographical names**

Submitted by Canada\*\*

Summary:

At the meeting of the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage held during the 2021 virtual session of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Canada was appointed to lead the focus group on Indigenous and minority language geographical names.

In 2022, Canada began to conceptualize the focus group and, in 2023, has begun to reach out and meet with interested Member States. The intention is to hold the first official meeting of the focus group as an in-person side event during the 2023 session of the Group of Experts.

Member States that wish to participate and provide input, guidance or support to the focus group are invited to email their expressions of interest to the following address: [nrcan.gnbc-ctc.nrcan@canada.ca](mailto:nrcan.gnbc-ctc.nrcan@canada.ca).

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\* GEGN.2/2023/1

\*\* Prepared by Carla Jack, Natural Resources Canada

## Focus Group on Indigenous Geographical Names

### Background

The UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029 identifies several Culture and Heritage items within **Strategy 4: Culture, heritage and language recognition** (p.23):

#### Strategy 4: Culture, heritage and language recognition

- i. Declare, promote, celebrate and demonstrate that geographical names matter because they recognize unique culture, heritage and language that connect people to physical locations;
- ii. Promote good geographical naming practices that acknowledge people's place in the world;
- iii. Recognize that geographical names are a source of identity, encourage recognition of heritage and equality, and support indigenous, regional and/or minority groups' language revitalization and preservation; and
- iv. Contribute to building technical capabilities, such as developing guidelines, legislation, communication tools and databases to enhance culture, heritage and language recognition.

The action items in this section (p. 24) includes a focus on Indigenous geographical names:

#### Action items, actors, output and time frame

As the scope of cultural heritage is wide there will be several formalized, structured and active Focus Groups within the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage:

1. *Geographical names in relation to minorities and indigenous people.*
2. Legislation, policies & best practices relating to geographical names.
3. Commercial and commemorative naming, including urban naming.
4. Crowd sourcing for collecting stories behind the names.
5. The names of unwritten languages.
6. Naming within tourism and branding.

At a side event of the 2021 UNGEGN meeting, Canada was appointed to lead the Focus Group on geographical names in relation to minorities and Indigenous people. To define and target the work of the Focus Group, Canada proposes to direct the work primarily on Indigenous geographical names.

### Indigenous Geographical Names

Indigenous geographical names are the place names of the lands and waters as expressed by the original peoples of that place. Indigenous languages evolved from and with those lands, and Indigenous place names contribute to the revitalization, strengthening and visibility of Indigenous histories, languages, and cultures.

Indigenous place names tell the histories, teachings, uses, and express the world views of the people who have always lived there. They carry important ecological and cultural information from thousands of years of interaction and knowledge of the places. Indigenous place names can help all peoples understand the deep histories of where they live and can be tools for monitoring the changes of a place through time.

In some colonial histories, Indigenous names have been ignored, replaced or erased along with cultures and languages of the peoples. Official recognition and restoration is now necessary and efforts in various nations are underway to this end.

Other United Nations bodies are connected with Indigenous place names:

- Article 13 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* specifically mentions place names.

- 2022-2032 is the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.
- Topics related to Indigenous cultural heritage connect to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.
- Topics related to cultural heritage connect to UNESCO.

### **Aims and Purpose of the Focus Group**

The Focus Group on Indigenous Geographical Names will support the international promotion and recognition of the significance of Indigenous place names and support Member States in establishing, updating or improving their operational and standardization practices related to Indigenous place naming.

Possible types of work and activities that will be undertaken by the Focus Group include an international policy scan for national naming authorities' policies related to Indigenous geographical names, compiling best practices resources for awareness of Member States, identifying and discussing matters unique to Indigenous place names (e.g. defining feature types spatially and temporally, understanding cultural landscapes, supporting evolving and special orthography in databases).

The field of Indigenous toponymy is vast and overlaps with the work of other working groups and will be important for effective and broad support to Member States.

### **2023 Meeting**

Member States are invited to join the first official meeting of the Focus Group, in-person, at a side event of the UNGEGN meeting in May 2023 to express their priorities, interests and needs related to Indigenous geographical names. The ongoing work of the Focus Group will be determined by the Members.

Related links:

UNEGN Strat Plan and Programme of Work:  
[https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/UNEGN\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_Programme/](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/UNEGN_Strategic_Plan_Programme/)

International Decade of Indigenous Languages: [2022 - 2032 International Decade of Indigenous Languages \(idil2022-2032.org\)](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/2022-2032-international-decade-of-indigenous-languages)

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | Division for Inclusive Social Development \(DISD\)](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples)

### **Points for discussion**

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Take note of the present report on the formation of a Focus Group on Indigenous geographical names.
- (2) Encourage Member States/National Names Authorities to join the Focus Group on Indigenous Geographical Names
- (3) Express its views on priorities and topics of interest related to Indigenous geographical names.