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**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
2023 session**

New York, 1–5 May 2023

Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

**Social and economic benefits, supporting sustainable
development, measures taken and proposed for the
implementation of resolutions**

Preventing and handling criticisms concerning place names

Summary**

Place names are sometimes the subject of symbolic measures taken in response to outrage caused by current events, particularly because there are often few options for effective action. Sometimes the intention behind new names is openly contentious, such as in Paris in 1885, when the name of the Chevalier de La Barre, the last French person convicted of blasphemy in 1766, was given to a street leading to the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur, then under construction. Sometimes, names that have become unacceptable have been replaced by other politically motivated names. More broadly, commemorative names are frequently used as place names, particularly names of municipalities (such as those named after saints) and of roads and squares. They reflect the moral landscape of the time of their attribution.

The legal competence given to municipalities and certain other public authorities to name certain places implies a great deal of freedom in the choice of these names. The National Committee on Toponymy (France) fully respects this freedom, but it is also responsible for ensuring the avoidance of any instability that would be detrimental to the very function of place names and their heritage value. It therefore considers it useful to recommend to those authorities that they follow certain good practices when exercising their responsibilities in this area. On 18 March 2022, it adopted a recommendation on the subject.

The recommendation emphasizes first of all the need for place names to be permanent, given their practical function and heritage value. It makes practical recommendations to avoid any detrimental instability:

1. For any process of naming of a place, even without an official name, it is recommended that precautions be taken to ensure consensus among the different

* [GEGN.2/2023/1](#).

** The full report was prepared by Pierre Jaillard (France). It will be available under document symbol GEGN.2/2023/29/CRP.29, in the language of submission only, at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/3rd_session_2023/.



stakeholders on a meaningful and distinctive name, and thus to prevent subsequent changes;

2. It is recommended that the etymology of place names and the circumstances of their emergence and evolution be publicized and disseminated widely so that they are fully understood;

3. It is recommended that contentious trends in place-naming be balanced out through the names chosen for places that are not yet named rather than by changing existing names;

4. When a decision is nonetheless made to change a place name, it is recommended not only that recommendation 1 be followed, but also that preference be given to returning to an old name that has remained in use in the same language, or to maintaining at least formal continuity with the previous name.
