

United Nations Group Of Experts On Geographical Names

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SUMMARY

UNGEGN

Discussing the strategic aims of UNGEGN and its divisional structure, future direction, and the benefits of a place naming program.

This will include a summary of

- the social and financial benefits of a place naming program
- development of international protocols and standards
- support from UNGEGN for jurisdictional programs

It will also outline some of the recent achievements on both a world and divisional perspective.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1948 during debates in the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the problem of standardization of geographical names was raised, particularly with regard to cartographic services provided within ECOSOC.

I am assuming that the impacts caused by the lack of standardised place names was recognised. The concept of place names being easily identified with a particular place without confusion or ambiguity was seen as an important aspect of effective communication on both international and national arenas.

From this humble beginning the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) began.

UNGEGN is tasked with:

- Encouraging countries that do not have name standardization mechanisms, databases (digital or manual) or national gazetteers;
- Supporting the development of single Romanization systems for languages with other forms of script;
- Encouraging the dissemination and wider use of nationally authorized names;
- Developing of communication and training tools

As can be noticed, the role of UNGEGN is one of supporting and encouraging these efforts at a national level. UNGEGN has no decision making or compelling ability, but does provide a very effective forum where best practice methodologies and direction can be presented, reviewed, adapted and adopted at the national level.

In summary, UNGEGN is a group of place names experts, cartographers, surveyors, linguists, historians and geographers who work together in a spirit of cooperation to assist each other develop, maintain and improve the process of standardizing place names.

2. STANDARDIZATION BENEFITS

What is standardization of place names?

A brief summary of what can be a complex issue is that it is the methods used within a country to:

- Record existing place names – this can include such issues as the identification of authoritative sources, method of spelling, Romanization of non-roman scripts, feature types, relationships between generic terms and the specific names, transliteration of non written languages.
- Creation of new names – covering such issues of effective consultation methods, education and implementation.
- Legislation and Ministerial involvement.
- Office management and structures – covering such areas as central or regional structures, jurisdiction within agencies.
- Dissemination of information – both internal and international, including use on mapping, database structures, web based applications and signage.

There is a significant range of functioning models used throughout the world for place names standardization. The only requirement is that the process works for the community.

On the basis that a country has a standard method aimed at accomplishing those areas outline above, then benefits to a wide range of areas, including:

- Heritage retention and revitalisation;
- Trade and commerce;
- Population censuses and national statistics;
- Property rights and cadastre;
- Urban and regional planning ;
- Environmental management - sustainable development and conservation;
- Natural disaster relief, emergency preparedness and receipt of aid;
- Security strategy and peacekeeping operations;
- Search and rescue operations;
- Map and atlas production;
- Automatic navigation ;
- Tourism ;
- Communications , including postal and new services

3 INTERNATIONAL PROTOCOLS AND STANDARDS

As mentioned above, UNGEGN has no mandate to compel any country to establish a place names standardization process, follow a particular protocol or adopt a particular method.

To accomplish its mandate, UNGEGN follows the method summarised below:

- Each 5 years a major conference is held, the last in New York in 2007. The next one in 2012. The conferences provide an opportunity to:
 - Present reports on progress of particular projects, emerging technologies, new initiatives and emerging trends and discuss the issues raised.
 - Network with other countries facing similar issues.
 - Attend meetings of working groups.

- During the 9 United Nations Conferences on the Standardisation of Geographical Names, over 150 resolutions have been passed, covering the following subjects:
 1. Standardization of Geographical Names
 2. United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
 3. International Cooperation in the Standardization of Geographical Names
 4. Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors
 5. National Standardization
 6. Regional Meetings
 7. Education and Training in Treatment of Geographical Names
 8. Terminology, including Glossaries
 9. List Country Names
 10. Preparation of Gazetteers
 11. Bibliographies
 12. Exchange of Experience
 13. Automated Data Processing / Digital Data
 14. Exonyms
 15. Romanization
 16. Romanization by Languages
 17. Maritime and Undersea feature Names
 18. Names of Features Beyond a Single Sovereignty
 19. Extraterrestrial Feature Names
 20. Geographical Names from Unwritten Languages
 21. Manual of National Name Standardization
 22. Aids to Pronunciation
 23. Minority Languages
 24. Physiographic Names
 25. Geographical Names on Tourist Maps

- These resolutions form a what can be termed best practice guidelines. Not all are applicable to every country, but from my experience, most of us can, in some way, use at least 70% of the direction contained in them.
- Between the conferences, UNGEGN usually meet in three sessions, the purpose of which is to chart the progress of the implementation of resolutions. Again, there are opportunities to present papers on these topics and to network effectively with others.

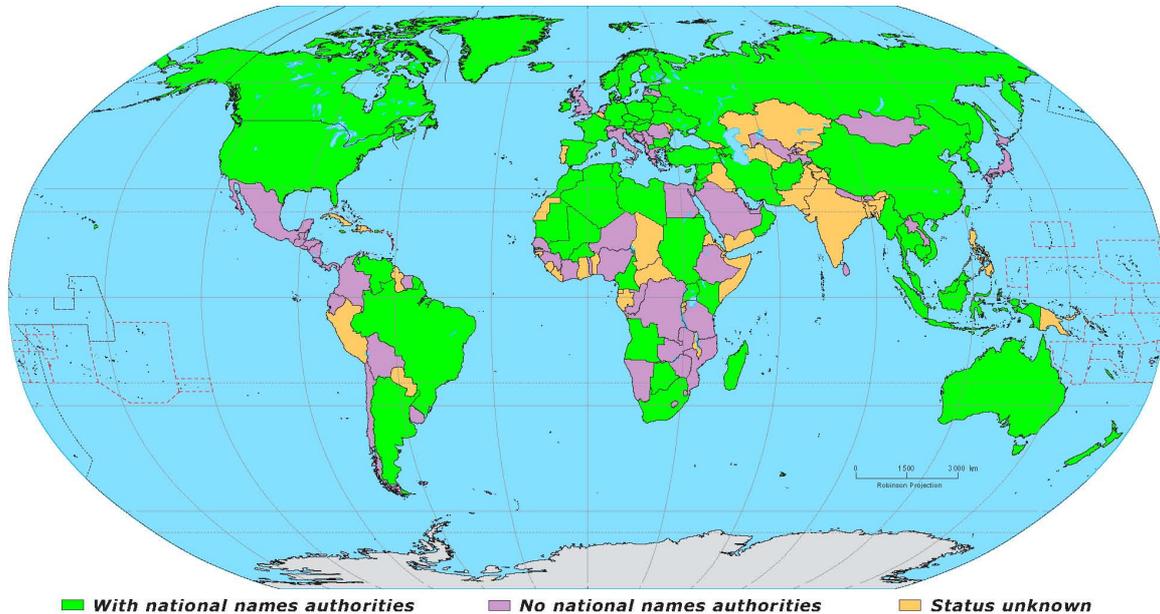
- To facilitate the work, UNGEGN has established geographic or linguistic divisions and working groups and to focus on particular issues.
 - There are currently 23 divisions, as listed below – a countries can belong to more than one division if applicable:
 1. Africa Central Division
 2. Africa East Division
 3. Africa South Division
 4. Africa West Division
 5. Arabic Division
 6. Asia East Division (other than China)
 7. Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division
 8. Asia South-West Division (other than Arabic)
 9. Baltic Division
 10. Celtic Division
 11. China Division
 12. Dutch- and German-speaking Division
 13. East Central and South-East Europe Division
 14. Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division
 15. East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic)
 16. French-speaking Division
 17. . India Division
 18. Latin America Division
 19. Norden Division
 20. Portuguese-speaking Division
 21. Romano-Hellenic Division
 22. United Kingdom Division
 23. USA/Canada Division
 - There are 10 working groups, providing an ongoing forum to focus on a particular issue, as follows:
 1. Working Group on Country Names
 2. Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers
 3. Working Group on Toponymic Terminology
 4. Working Group on Publicity and Funding
 5. Working Group on Romanization Systems
 6. Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy
 7. Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation
 8. Working Group on Exonyms
 9. Working Group on Pronunciation
 10. Working Group on the Promotion of Recording and Use of Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names

The organisational structure and resolutions are the backbone of the work to achieve international standardization through national standardisation programs.

Further information on both the structure and resolutions can be found on the UNGEGN website at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/about_us.htm.

The success of this effort can be best shown by the attached map, showing those countries that have established a national names authority to oversee their standardization efforts.

Geographical Names Authorities (September 2009)



4. SUPPORT FROM UNGEGN FOR JURISDICTIONAL PROGRAMS

As mentioned above, involvement with UNGEGN by those countries with an established national standardization process provides a forum for the sharing of ideas and keeping current with emerging technologies and issues. Exchange of information is not limited to the conferences or UNGEGN sessions, but is available at all times through both the formal structures of divisions and working groups and the informal networking contacts.

I have found these level of support very valuable for a range of issues faced in Australia. To be able to contact other through the world who are facing similar issues to discuss aspects of solutions and possible directions.

For those countries without a national standardization process, or whose program is not functioning effectively, there is a range of other support mechanisms available.

UNEGN has produced a range of publications aimed at assisting jurisdictions. A full list of these publications is available on the web site, but of particular interest for the purpose of creation of a national standardization program and the training of staff are the following two publications:

TS 7I - Geographical Names
Rudolph Matindas or William Watt
United Nations Group Of Experts On Geographical Names

6/7

- Manual for the National Standardization of Geographical Names
- Technical Reference Manual for the Standardisation of Geographical Names

In addition to these publications, there is also a possibility of face to face training sessions being organised by application to the Working Group on Training Courses on Toponymy (web site <http://toponymycourses.geog.uu.nl/>)

5. CONCLUSION

Within Australia, the States and Territories all have jurisdictional programs to standardize geographical names, some in operation since the early 1900's. The national committee has been established since the early 1980's. We do regard ourselves as having a high degree of understanding and abilities in relation to the processes for managing geographical names.

However, the involvement within UNGEGN has added considerably to our understanding of process, other options available for methods of approaching current and emerging issues and provided support from the international forum for the policies, procedures and guidelines we have developed internally.

I would strongly recommend that any country become involved with UNGEGN. The greater degree of understanding and expertise available within a country will have a direct bearing of the financial and heritage benefits gained from a national standardization program.

REFERENCES

United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names - Consistent Use of Place Names

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