ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

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pp 109-119 in : in Ferjan Ormeling, Jörn Sievers and Hans Stabe (eds.), Training Course on Toponymy, Enschede, Frankfurt and Berlin 2002. Mitteilungen des BKG 28, Frankfurt am Main 2003

Geographical names mean many things to many people! They are embedded in our minds as daily reference points, as integral parts of local or national history, or perhaps as places with special connections or interesting stories to tell. To a cartographer or GIS specialist they are an important element in georeferencing, to a journalist a vital colour in his reporting palette. For all, geographical names may provide a clear communication tool or a source of ambiguity and confusion.

Avoiding ambiguity implies some sort of standardization of geographical names and their applications. Although this concept may have been acknowledged long ago, it was at the 5th International Geographical Congress in Bern, Switzerland, in 1891, that the German geographer Albrecht Penck first proposed this on a worldwide scale. He launched the idea of a World Map at 1:1 million scale, not only with map projection, symbolization and design laid out, but with proposals for the standardized writing of geographical names.[1]

1. Geographical names at the United Nations: early years

Details of the "formative years" of establishing a United Nations focal point for the standardization of geographical names are well documented in Max de Henseler's report to the Sixth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (de Henseler 1992). He discusses chronologically, the meetings, debates, and recommendations from the sixth session of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1948 to the First Regional Cartographic Conference for Asia and the Pacific in 1955 and the ECOSOC resolution 715 A (XXVII). This resolution provided the foundation stone for the formation of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) and the holding of the five-yearly UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN).

In the late 1950s, the work of geographical names standardization at the UN level was recognized to address:

- the standardization in one form (univocity) of geographical names at the national level by the country concerned, and

- the agreement on standard methods of transliteration of the accepted form into other languages at the international level.

Resolution 715 A (XXVII) of ECOSOC in 1959, requested the Secretary-General

- To provide encouragement and guidance to those nations which had no national organization for the standardization and co-ordination of geographical names to establish such an organization and to produce national gazetteers at an early data;

- To take the necessary steps to ensure the functions of a central

[1] de Henseler, Max C. (1992): pp. 4-5.

clearing-house for geographical names, including:

- the collection of gazetteers; and
- the collection and dissemination of information concerning the technical procedures adopted by Member States for standardization of domestic names, and concerning the techniques and systems used by each Member State in the transliteration of the geographical names of other countries.

To set the action in motion, a small consulting group of experts from different linguistic groups and with a wide geographical distribution was set up. Its task was to consider and to prepare draft recommendations on technical problems of domestic standardization of geographical names, and on the appropriateness of the UN holding an international conference on geographical names standardization.

This group, chaired by Dr. Meredith F. Burrill (USA), met in New York in 1960. It recommended a conference be held, and was subsequently tasked with preparing the specific objectives for the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names convened in Geneva, 4 - 22 September 1967. In summary, the objectives of the conference were as follows:

- to confirm that national standardization is the proper basis for international standardization
- for countries to take greater account in their standardization programmes, of the problems others might encounter in using their geographical names (especially to make sure that all linguistic details are included for proper conversion to other scripts)
- to compare problems and programmes of countries
- to identify topics for further study
- to formulate principles of international standardization and transfer from one writing system to another
- romanization from other writing systems for application in the UN Roman-alphabet languages (English, French, and Spanish)
- consideration of establishing systems for international standardization based on the Cyrillic and Arabic alphabets
- identification of categories of names of features extending beyond the sovereignty of a single country and the possibilities of standardization
- developing a mechanism for international exchange of information
- proposing the establishment of a programme of regional conferences / working groups to follow up the Geneva conference
- promoting the establishment of names standardization bodies in all countries

The Group of Experts continued to work after the First Conference. From the endorsement of ECOSOC of a resolution from the Second Conference held in London in 1972, this ad hoc group became one of seven UN standing expert bodies.

2. Participation at UN Conferences

Up until the summer of 2002, the UN has now held seven conferences (the Eighth being held in Berlin, summer 2002) and twenty sessions of UNGEGN (with the twenty-first session to be held in conjunction with the Berlin Conference, 2002).

Participation of delegates and countries in the conferences is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Some comments on these figures are included in the author's paper in *Onoma* (2000) and are summarized here.

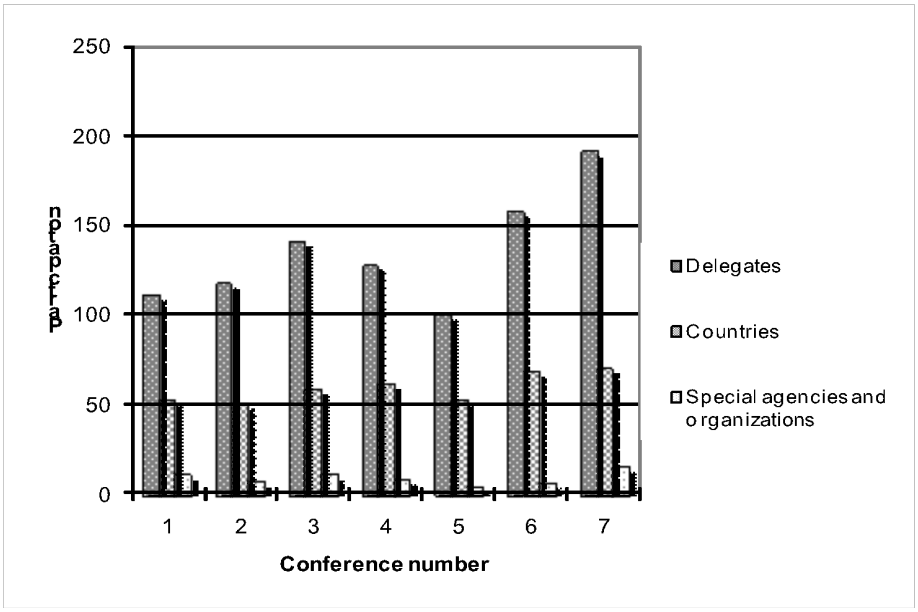

Figure 1. Numbers of delegates, countries, and special agencies and organizations participating at UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names

Figure 1 shows the participation at the seven conferences held between 1967 and 1998. Max de Henseler's report to the Sixth Conference had shown participation in the first five conferences. The results noted that the Athens Conference of 1977 had the peak of delegates participating (141) and the Fourth Conference in Geneva in 1982 had the greatest number of countries represented (62). One might have thought that the main aims of standardization had been achieved. However, the data from the last two conferences shows increased participation in recent years - with 71 countries and 191 representatives at the Seventh Conference in New York in 1998. There is every expectation that even more countries and delegates will participate at the Eighth Conference in Berlin in 2002.

Although the numbers for the participation of Special agencies and organizations, as shown in Figure 1, are small, UNGEGN has been trying to create stronger ties with international organizations and professional groups (e.g. International Hydrographical Organization, UN Economic Commission for Africa, International Cartographic Association, International Council for Onomastic Sciences). Increasing their involvement and collaboration will further the work of UNGEGN and the Conferences.

Figure 2 shows the number of times countries have been represented at the Conferences. Of 133 countries that have participated, 38% have attended four or more conferences (i.e. in over half of the conferences). Only 11% have been represented on all seven occasions. It is encouraging to note, however, that of the 45 countries that have attended only one conference, 26 of them were at either the Sixth or Seventh Conference.

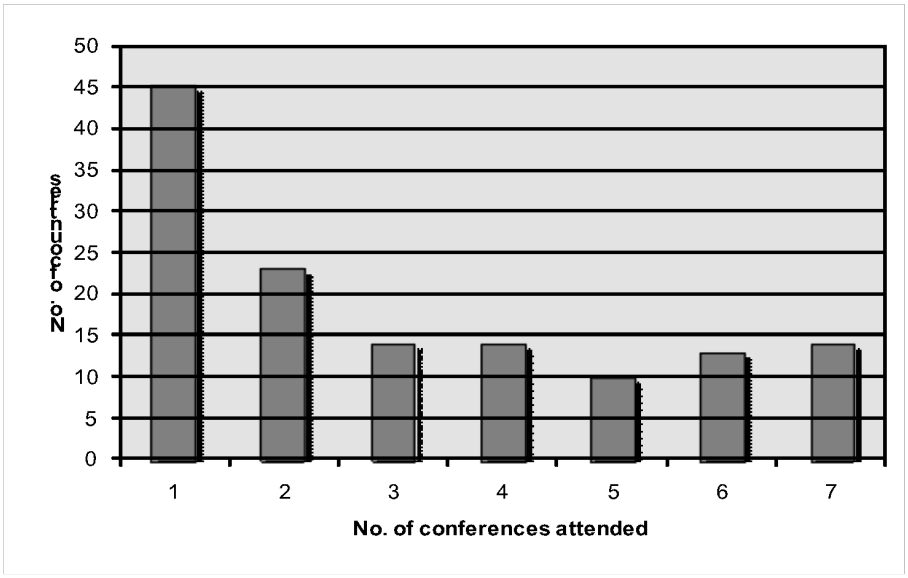

Figure 2. Number of times that countries have participated at UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names

3. Continuing need for standardization

Since the early gatherings of the 1960s, exponential advances in technology and communication have provided a more sophisticated approach to geographical names data storage and retrieval, and the possibility of instantaneously reaching a world of name users in many fields of endeavour. These opportunities to provide and receive data easily, and often cheaply, do not detract from the original concepts of standardization enabling communication. In my own mind they actually go a long way to enhance the need for UNGEGN and the conferences to meet the challenges of national and international standardization. Data may be easy to come by, but reliable authoritative information is at a premium. Hence the onus on Member States to work at the grass roots to record and disseminate accurate and appropriate geographical names information is increasing, as a tide of often spurious and unsubstantiated second and third hand data rises ever higher.

To summarize the benefits of using consistent and accurate geographical names, UNGEGN developed text for a brochure that could be widely circulated to government managers, UN officers, the media, etc. At first printed in English in Australia, but later (2001) published by the UN in the six languages of the UN, the brochure underlines the socio-economic benefits of a standard set of names for national - and thence for international - use. The benefits for such standardized names are apparent in communication, and can avoid ambiguity while providing clarity and cost savings in commerce, planning, search and rescue, emergency preparedness, censuses, property rights, environmental management, etc. Several additional language forms of the brochure have now been created within various UNGEGN divisions, to assist their own programmes. The text or .pdf file is available for any country of UNGEGN division that would like to translate the brochure into other languages to meet their own needs.

The concept of national standardization of geographical names is a significant tenet of this UN work. The financial benefits of this authority being undertaken through a single authority (committee, department, etc.) are not easy to gather, but the duplication of effort among government departments, for example, where no organization has this responsibility, become apparent. Furthermore, such an authority has valuable input into the protection and preservation of a particular element of a country's values that are embedded in its history and culture. The UN conferences promote this process of national standardization as a basis of international standardization.

4. UNCSGN resolutions

During the seven conferences held between 1967 and 1998, many resolutions were adopted[2], with the aim of furthering and directing the work on geographical names standardization around the world.

At the Fifth Conference in 1987, Max de Henseler, then Secretary of UNGEGN, compiled the resolutions of the earlier conferences, grouped under general subject headings. This work was continued by Canada, producing English- and French-language compendiums of resolutions of the seven conferences. The following subject headings continue to be used (with a few resolutions listed under more than one heading: (see table 1)

Following the Fifth Conference an UNGEGN Working Group was established to evaluate the work in hand. Among the issues discussed, were the resolutions. Various suggestions were made to try to eliminate resolutions that are obsolete, re-write resolutions that are contradictory, revise those where approaches may have changed over the years, and drop ones that are non-substantive in nature. As might be imagined, this is not easy and has not yet been done. In effect, even more resolutions would be necessary to achieve such objectives!

5. United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN)

To follow up on the implementation of the resolutions, the United Nations Group of Experts (UNGEGN) takes over during the years between the conferences. UNGEGN usually meets twice between conferences, and in addition to the two meetings before the First Conference, has held 20 sessions to now. As well, tasks of common interest required by the resolutions are undertaken by UNGEGN Working Groups. In addition, the 22 linguistic/geographical divisions of UNGEGN provide the opportunities for Member States to work in smaller groups with common interests (see Figure 3).

Support for UNGEGN is provided by a Secretariat, currently provided by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), located in New York.

At the UNGEGN session in 2002, 22 geographical/linguistic divisions[3] of UNGEGN were in place. The French-speaking Division (Division francophone), had been created at the Seventh Conference (1998) to provide guidance to UN member states that can benefit from documents and

[2] 167 resolutions were adopted, but it should be noted that about 20 of these would be considered non-substantive (i.e. related to votes of thanks, proposals for forthcoming conferences, etc.)

[3] Africa Central; Africa East; Africa South; Africa West; Arabic; Asia East (other than China); Asia South-East and Pacific South-West; Asia South-West (other than Arabic); Baltic; Celtic; China; Dutch- and German-speaking; East Mediterranean (other than Arabic); French-speaking; India; Latin America; Norden; Romano-Hellenic; United Kingdom; United States/Canada.

discussion on French-language issues in geographical names standardization.

	Subject area	No. of resolutions
1.	UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names	10
2.	UNGEGN	27
3.	International co-operation in the standardization of geographical names	5
4.	Toponymic guidelines for map and other editors	4
5.	National standardization	9
6.	Regional meetings	5
7.	Education and training in treatment of geographical names	9
8.	Terminology (including glossaries)	7
9.	List of country names	6
10.	Preparation of gazetteers	6
11.	Bibliographies	4
12.	Exchange of experience	2
13.	Automated data processing	8
14.	Exonyms	7
15.	Romanization / General	6
16.	Romanization by language	25
17.	Maritime and undersea feature names	6
18.	Names of features beyond a single sovereignty	8
19.	Extraterrestrial feature names	3
20.	Geographical names from unwritten languages	3
21.	Manual of national name standardization	3
22.	Aids to pronunciation	1
23.	Minority languages	2
24.	Physiogeographic names	1
25.	Geographical names on tourist maps	1
26.	Votes of thanks	6

Table 1 List of subject areas

The Conferences have produced the following numbers of resolutions:

Conference	No. of resolutions
1	20
2	39
3	27
4	26
5	26
6	14
7	15

The divisions are important grass root networks encouraging national standardization, and providing focal points for discussion of themes of common interest. Countries can select to be a part of more than one division, if this is of benefit to them. Many divisions function well and convene regularly. The cost of participating in such sessions is generally less than for UNGEGN and the structure allows experts to contribute to discussion of regional issues.

Unfortunately there are currently a number of inactive divisions. However, it is hoped that we may be able to encourage new cooperation in those areas to provide mutual assistance in establishing and promoting names authorities and standardization programmes.

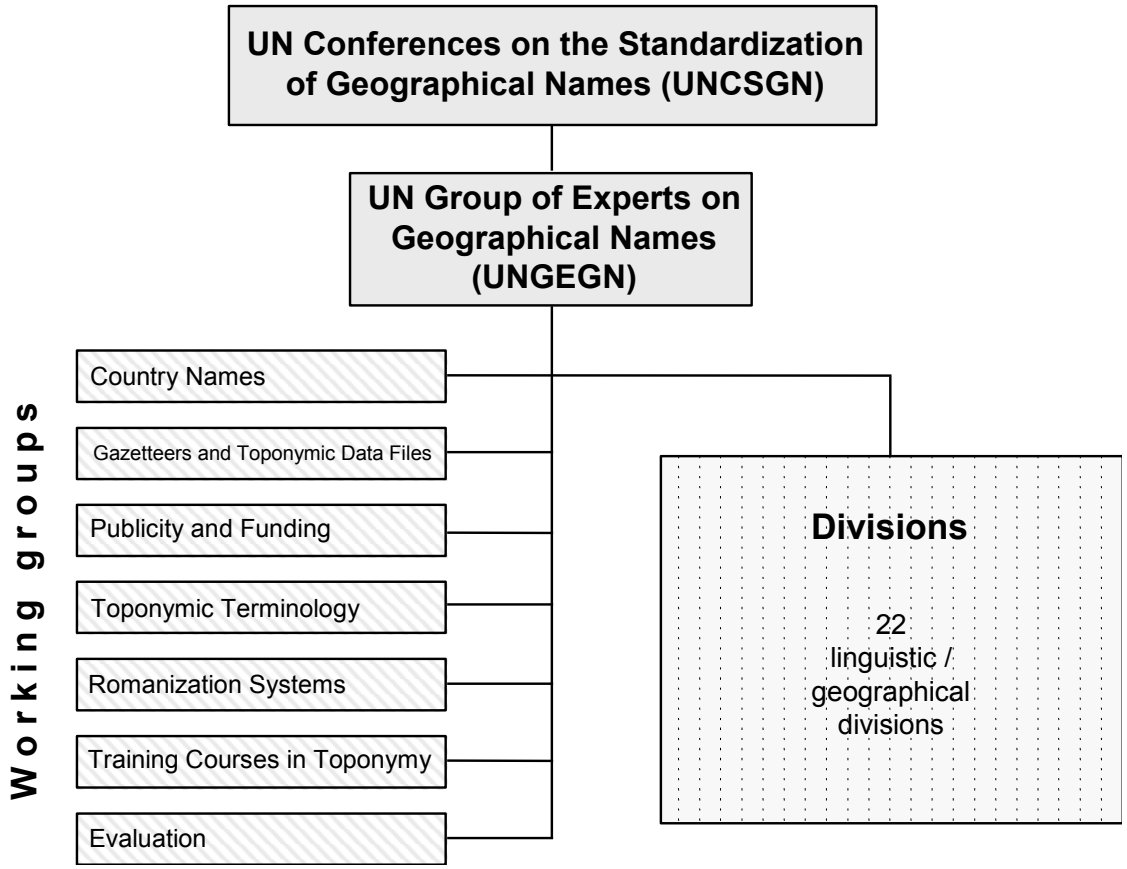

Figure 3. UNGEGN working groups and the overall structure of UN Conferences, UNGEGN and Divisions

6. UNGEGN Working Groups

To follow up on Conference resolutions, there have been six UNGEGN working groups active since the 1998 Conference:

	Convenor (as of June 2002)
• Country names	Ms. Sylvie Lejeune, France
• Gazetteers and Toponymic Data Files	Mr. Randall Flynn, USA
• Publicity and Funding	Mr. David Munro, UK
• Romanization Systems	Mr. Peeter Päll, Estonia
• Toponymic Terminology	Mr. Naftali Kadmon, Israel
• Training Courses in Toponymy	Mr. Ferjan Ormeling, Netherlands

In addition, at the Twentieth Session of UNGEGN in 2000, a need was expressed for the re-establishment of the Working Group on Evaluation to look at the activities, functioning, cost-effectiveness and efficiency of UNGEGN.

The tasks of the working groups are normally technical in nature, and are more detailed and go into greater depth than can be dealt with by UNGEGN as a whole. The convenors of each working group coordinate the continuity of effort of these groups between UNGEGN meetings. In response to the wish of experts to involve a wide variety of individuals in the working

groups, meetings of the groups during UNGEGN sessions have been included as committees of the whole, so that the simultaneous interpretation facilities are available. The accomplishment of working group tasks is fundamental to the effectiveness of UNGEGN.

6.1 Country Names

A complete reference manual of country names is available through the United Nations (United Nations 1997) and is used by all UN departments and agencies. The short, as well as the full or formal, names of UN Member States are recorded in the six official languages of the UN. As well, the two- and three-letter ISO codes are provided.

In 1992, UNGEGN formed a working group to study the writing of country names and to record the forms used by the countries themselves in their official languages and writing systems. Transliterated forms, where possible using the UNCSGN-recommended systems, were also to be included. A carefully researched document, providing this information for 193 countries was presented to the Seventh UNCSGN in 1998. This has now been updated and modified where necessary and will be available as E.CONF.94/CRP 11 at the Eighth Conference in August 2002.

Efforts are ongoing to update and upgrade this publication and to rationalize variances in usage with the 1997 UN Terminology Bulletin just cited.

6.2 Gazetteers and Toponymic Data Files

Since its inception, and under different titles, this working group has had, over several decades, major tasks in promoting consistency in presentation and fields of data to be included in paper copy gazetteers, the development and maintenance of digital toponymic data files and data bases, and more recently the questions of toponymic data exchange formats and standards. Just recently, a stronger liaison has been established with the Unicode Consortium in the context of digital text encoding with the ISO technical committee dealing with geographic information/geomatic standards. At present this working group has a number of objectives, including provision of information on software, fonts, data exchange formats and standards, and availability of gazetteers and data files. The working group's web site is located at <http://www.zrc-sazu.si/ungegn/>

6.3 Publicity and Funding

Following the Fifth Conference, a working group on evaluation and implementation was established. After reporting to the Sixth Conference in 1992, this group was re-centred to concentrate efforts on a narrower focus: that of publicity and funding. Through this working group the UNGEGN brochure was first published with the support of the Australian Intergovernmental Committee on Survey and Mapping and the efforts of John Parker of Australia, then convenor. The efforts of this group continue to be dissemination of material on the work being undertaken by UNGEGN. In the last few years it has been promoting the importance of ensuring an effective web site be established and maintained by the UNGEGN Secretariat in New York.

6.4 Romanization Systems

Throughout history many ways have been used to convert non-Roman writing systems to the Roman alphabet. Such a variety of methods, also often unscientific in nature, causes considerable difficulty in communication. Since their inception, UNGEGN and the Conferences have had

the important task of achieving agreements on recommended systems of romanization based on scientific principles. This working group strives between sessions to reach agreements on such systems. At the Twentieth Session of UNGEGN (UNGEGN - WGRS 2000) it was reported that systems had been ratified for 28 languages, although not all had been fully implemented at national and international levels. Another 19 languages were cited as having romanization systems used in toponymic guidelines of individual countries, but not yet recommended for international use.[4]

The working group continues to look towards the future when UNCSGN recognizes and implements single romanization systems for each writing system of the world. On a continuing basis, it also monitors modifications to existing systems. The working group maintains a web site at http://www.eki.ee/wgrs/. A letter database that displays languages, special characters and Unicode with images of the letters can be found at the Institution of Estonian Language (http:www.eki.ee/letter/).

6.5 Toponymic Terminology

Having a systematic account of the terminology used in the standardization of geographical names is important as a basis for common understanding. In 1984, a glossary was published through the United Nations. Since that time, this working group has made refinements and added further definitions. Experts from different language groups have translated the original English-language text; some languages have been published (e.g. Chinese, German) and others have been made available on the web (e.g. French). The new *Glossary of Terminology used in the Standardization of Geographical Names* is being published by the UN, and will be available in the six language format in 2002.

6.6 Training Courses in Toponymy

On the working group web site (http://toponymycourses.geog.uu.nl/) information is provided on the courses offered in toponymy to international audiences since 1982. In some cases, the associated lecture notes, manuals, fieldwork guides, etc. is available also. These courses held under various auspices and in different parts of the world have been provided in the form of lectures, exercises, workshops, fieldwork and digital toponymic processing techniques. In all cases the concept of national standardization (and hence international standardization) is the focal point of the course.

Although the total number of different sorts of courses grows (currently near 20), the number of individuals reached still remains relatively small. As a means of making the concepts and materials more widely and freely available, a primary focus of this working group during the next few years will be the development of a web-based course programme. This has now been started on-line within the framework of a cartography web course being produced by the Commission of education and training of the International Cartographic Association.

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[4] Languages with romanization systems supported with resolutions of UNCSGN: Amharic, Arabic, Assamese, Bengali, Bulgarian, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Kannada, Khmer, Macedonian Cyrillic, Malayalam, Marathi, Mongolian (in China), Nepali, Oriya, Persian, Punjabi, Russian, Serbian, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan, Uighur, Urdu.

Other languages for which romanization systems are noted in reports, but which are not yet supported by UNCSGN resolutions: Armenian, Belarusian, Burmese, Dzongkha, Georgian, Japanese, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Korean, Laotian, Maldivian, Mongolian (Cyrillic), Pashto, Sinhalese, Tajik, Tigrinya, Turkmen, Ukrainian, Uzbek.

7. Some other activities of UNGEGN

7.1 Toponymic guidelines

Prof. Josef Breu of Austria, when Chairman of UNGEGN in 1979, initiated the concept of toponymic guidelines for map and other editors. The idea was for every country to create commonly presented material to advance the understanding of their country's toponymy, in particular for those involved in the treatment of geographical names for cartography. Some countries have presented one or more editions of guidelines at UN conferences or UNGEGN sessions, others have published them, either independently or in *World Cartography*. Estonia, Slovenia, and Slovakia were the first to make guidelines available on the World Wide Web. Working Paper 6 (Kerfoot and Närhi) presented at the 20th session of UNGEGN (2000) summarized the progress of this worldwide project, up to 1998. With the guidelines of Algeria, Greece, Iran, Italy, Poland and Slovakia present to UNGEGN 2000, some 35 countries have contributed to the project. Others (e.g. Cyprus) report guidelines in progress. From now on, it would appear that use of the Web would be favoured for the distribution of such material.

7.2 Exonyms

The consistent use of names on cartographic products, and the use (pro's and con's) of nationally standardized names (endonyms) worldwide have been discussed at many conferences. UNCSGN resolutions support the reduction of exonyms (often in the form of conventional names long in use), and oppose the creation of new ones. The issue of exonyms and their historical/cultural associations is dealt with in detail elsewhere in this course. However, I will mention the efforts of the Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division to create and update a digital regional map (1:10.5M) with standardized names from each country of the Division. Also in the 1990s, New Zealand published an endonymic world map - using donor names (albeit it romanized) for names of cities, rivers, and country names.

Currently the Cartographic Section of the Library and Publications Division of the United Nations (New York) is leading a UN project to make available a worldwide database, initially for internal use of all UN departments. An outline of the project was presented to UNGEGN 2000 by Miklos Pinther in Working Paper 71. A globally georeferenced database will be created, reflecting appropriately the views and policies of the United Nations. What better opportunity should there be for national names authorities to assure that their standardized names are included in this project?

7.3 Publications and other information

7.3.1 UNGEGN session and UN conference documents

For each session of UNGEGN and each UN conference, documentation is available in various forms:

UNGEGN sessions:
- individual technical papers presented
- report of the session (with agenda, participants)

UN conferences:
- individual technical papers presented
- Vol. I ... report of the conference (with agenda, participants, resolutions)
- Vol. II ... collection of the technical papers presented (now to be discontinued for future conferences)

Back issues of some documents are available from the UNGEGN Secretariat, or can be consulted in the Main Library or the Map Library. Recently, efforts are being

made to scan documents to make them available for a wider public through the Web.

7.3.2 UNGEGN web site (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo)

In response to a resolution of the Seventh Conference in 1998, the UNGEGN Secretariat has now established an UNGEGN web site where documents and information about activities can be accessed. The aim is to keep this site up to date and to provide links to UNGEGN division and working group web sites, as well as those of individual national names authorities.

7.3.3 UNGEGN brochure: *Consistent use of place names*

After preparation of the text by the UNGEGN Working Group on Publicity and Funding, and its adaptation for general appeal, the UNGEGN brochure was first published in English in Australia. In 2001, the brochure was printed in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. The text, photos, and maps included in the brochure can also be downloaded from the UNGEGN web site.

The brochure explains the UNGEGN programmes, and the economic and social benefits of geographical names standardization. It is primarily intended for those trying to interest their own governments in the work of the United Nations in this field.

7.3.4 *Glossary of terms used in the standardization of geographical names*

This new glossary, developed by UNGEGN, through the Working Group on Terminology convened by Naftali Kadmon, is being published by the United Nations in 2002. This will provide a six-language reference of many of the terms used world wide in the standardization of geographical names.

This new publication containing 345 terms will replace the 1984 version of the UN *Glossary No. 330: Technical terminology employed in the standardization of geographical names* (with 115 definitions).

7.3.5 Other useful reference documents

Many papers could be mentioned, but among the standard reference documents, I draw your attention to the following:

"Organization and functions of a national geographical names standardization programme: a manual", prepared by Donald Orth (USA) and published by the United Nations in *World Cartography*, vol. XXI, 1990.
This addresses in detail: geographical names and language; how to begin a programme; a national names authority; technical and administrative support; regional, local and advisory committees; standardization procedures; office treatment of geographical names; field treatment; publishing.

United Nations documents on geographical names, prepared by Peter E. Raper and published by the Names Research Institute in Pretoria in 1996.

This is a collection of pertinent documents: statute of UNGEGN, rules of procedure for UNGEGN and UNCSGN, UN resolutions, glossary of toponymic terminology, Romanization systems ... (up to the Sixth Conference).

Toponymy - the lore, laws and language of geographical names, written by Naftali Kadmon and published through Vantage Press in New York in 2000.

Privately produced, based on the author's extensive experience with UN geographical

names activities. Covering many aspects of toponymy - "cultural (and even humorous), historical, linguistic, technological and legalistic..."

Place names: how they define the world - and more, written by Richard R. Randall and published by Scarecrow Press in Maryland, USA in 2001.

Privately produced by an author with extensive experience with the work of UNGEGN and the UN conferences. Includes various aspects of place names and "providing details about how the United States, other countries, and the United Nations deal with place names".

Reports of the UNGEGN Working Groups provide useful references on country names, Romanization, data exchange standards, etc. Such reports are updated on quite a regular basis.

8. Concluding comments

Although the UN conferences and UNGEGN sessions have accomplished much since their inception, efforts must be of a continuing nature. Some countries have not yet heard of the work of the UN in this regard; others have not yet seen the advantages, or have been unable to create a national names authority; yet others have started out on the path, but been unable to continue. Through the UNGEGN divisional structure we hope we can reach out further to help countries promote standardization processes. And by UNGEGN sessions and Working Group activities we hope we can share experiences in the development of procedures, data bases, writing systems, etc. If we can all learn from each other's successes - large or small - we can all move forward in the same direction towards improved international communication.

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