

UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES (UNGEGN)

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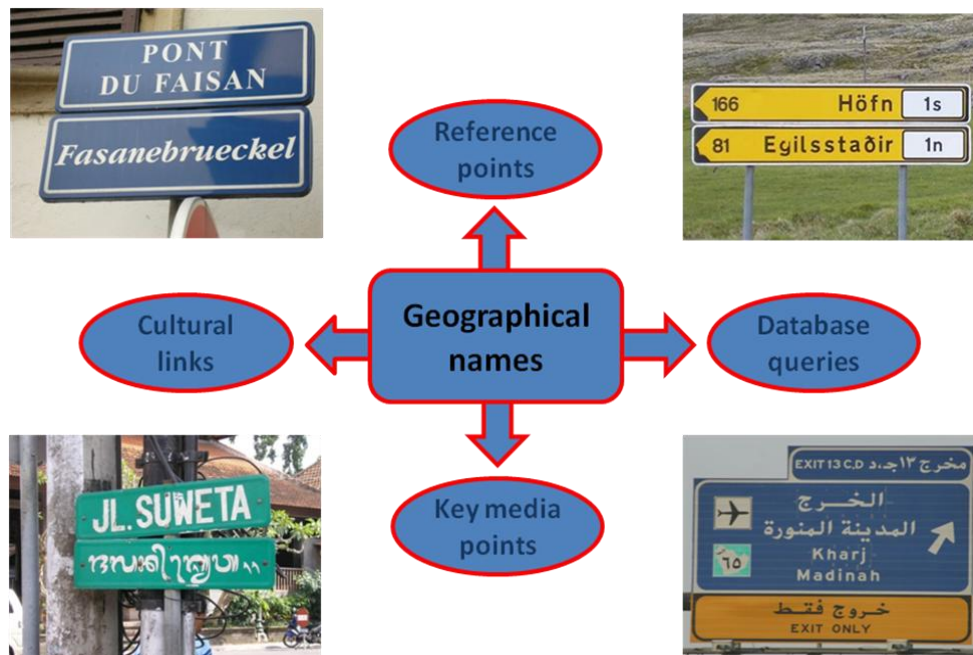
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Geographical names (or toponyms)

Geographical names - the names of populated places, administrative areas, landscape and hydrographic features, streets and so on – serve a very pivotal role for all of us, particularly as knowledge is increasingly based on the concept of “place”.

- They provide:
 - important reference points for mapping, census, and other geo-referenced data
 - logical query points for accessing knowledge-based information, for the general public
 - key focal points for the use of the media in communications
 - linking points for us to the land, our history, culture and identity – and so also have a temporal as well as a spatial character
- They come in different languages and different writing systems.



The pivotal role of geographical names

- They may be given only passing acknowledgement when they are clear, but cause many difficulties (involving time, money and even lives in emergency situations) when they are inaccurate, ambiguous, too frequently repeated, incomprehensible, misapplied, ill-defined in their application, or just not readily available to all users. But maps without names are silent and of minimal use.

... Hence the UN's involvement with standardization of geographical names to improve communication.

UNGEGN: its establishment and role

A proposal for a UN Group to be formed to address the issues of geographical names in their written forms was formulated at the First Regional Cartographic Conference for Asia and the Pacific in 1955, and led to ECOSOC resolution 715A (XXVII) of 1959. This today provides the basis for the ongoing work of UNGEGN and the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names¹.

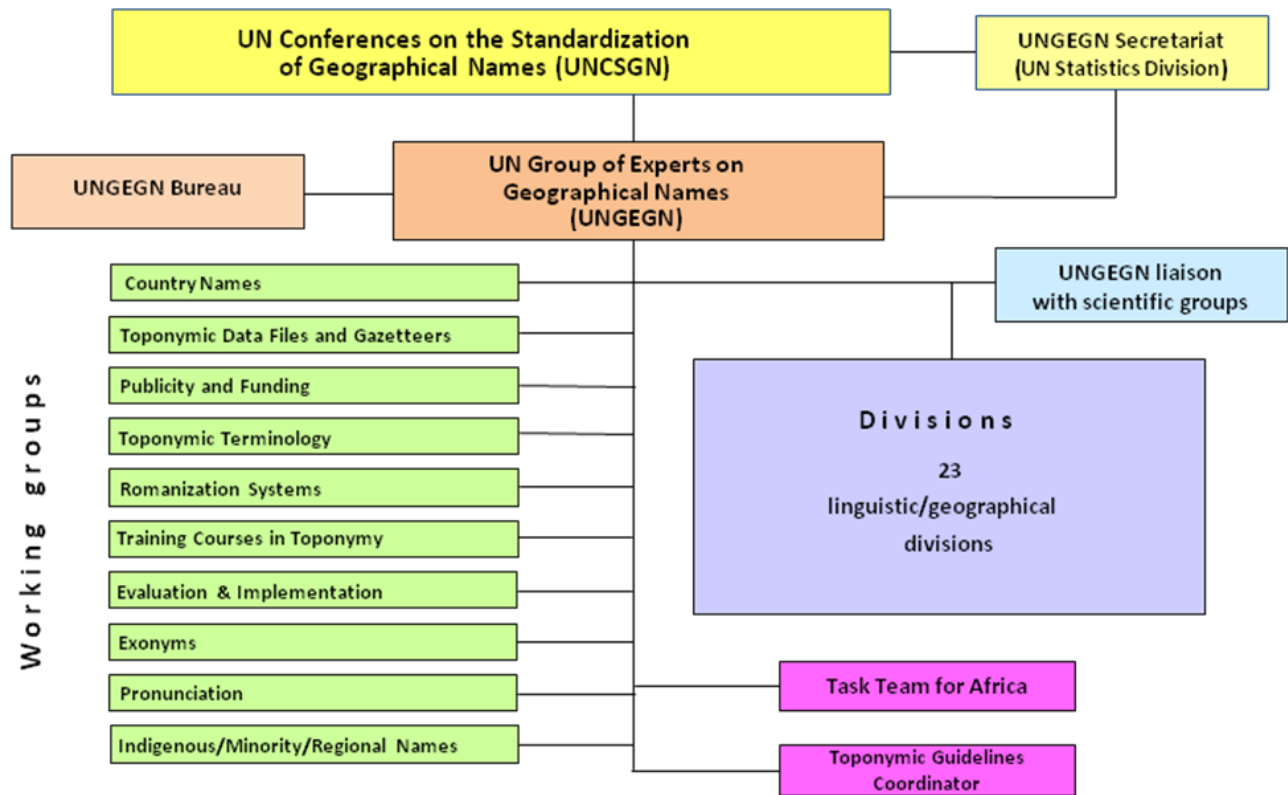
The UNGEGN forum provides a network of technical specialists (geographers, cartographers, planners, GIS specialists, language and linguistic experts from government, universities, publishing houses, and so on) who follow up resolutions of the Conferences and provide for continuity of activities in between. UNGEGN experts have the opportunity to discuss the technical, cultural and politically sensitive issues that are associated with the process of furnishing nationally "standardized" names for government and public use.

How should we write the capital of Ukraine? Kiev, Kyiv, Kyev, or Kyyev? Cape Town, eKapa, Le Cap, Kaapstad, Kapstadt, Kapkaupunki – which are standardized forms? As primarily users of names data most of you need, and we want you to have, the "finished" product, but behind the scenes are questions addressed by UNGEGN ... such as, local names usage; romanization systems for names from other scripts; treatment (recording and status) of indigenous and minority group names as well as names and their use in bilingual or multilingual areas; training in names collection and database creation in developing area, and so on. These activities are undertaken on the basic tenet that each country has the right and responsibility to develop its own suite of names and to have them form the basis for international use, be used in spatial data infrastructures and in information management .

Structure of UNGEGN

Between five-yearly Conferences and two-yearly Sessions, UNGEGN works with individual countries, but primarily across national boundaries, through geographical and linguistic divisions (23), working groups and special task-oriented teams (12). The UNGEGN Secretariat is provided by the UN Statistics Division and we have ongoing liaison and cooperation with a number of organizations, for instance, IHO, ISO, ICA; other parts of the UN – ECA for gazetteer and database development, SALB, UNGIWG, etc., as well as with UNESCO; with special projects (such as EuroGeoNames – which benefitted significantly from the UNGEGN network) and with private industry – Google, ESRI, ICANN, etc.

¹ The first meeting of experts was held in 1960 and the first UN Conference in 1967.



UNGEGN and its structure

The challenge continues

Certainly we face challenges, for instance in Africa, to achieve the collection, approval and distribution of suitable suites of names for each country, and to build and distribute multinational datasets. Changing levels of management interest and commitment, lack of continuity in personnel, as well as limited resources and few administrators trained in toponymy present hurdles. With the vast technical advances, names work becomes more challenging. Providing up-to-date data at any point in time may sound straight forward, but the gap between the capabilities of countries to do this appears to grow.

Although we may be one of Paul Cheung’s smaller responsibilities, UNGEGN is one of ECOSOC’s seven standing expert bodies. We are an active group and have a robust website (unstats.un.org/unsd/geonames) maintained for us by the Statistics Division. I invite you to access this to see examples of publications, technical papers, working group activities, UNGEGN’s world database, and so on. As specialists we develop the tools, harness the technology, provide the outreach, and share the belief that accurate and consistent use of a common framework of geographical names can offer considerable benefits to the world.

We are keen to work closely and have a strong liaison with a UN CEGGIM and in our own forum could certainly address issues that arise as key items for here, as geographical names are definitely very pertinent to geographic information management.