

Report to ICA on the work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) (slide 1)

I thank the Hungarian colleagues for inviting me, indeed I am most lucky to have friends in high places here! Even so, this presentation would have been much better when given by Mr Bela Pokoly, who is the long-term Hungarian expert to UNGEGN, but possibly because I am the liaison officer between ICA and UNGEGN I was selected for this presentation. It is in small countries like Hungary and the Netherlands, where only very few people share the strange predilection for toponymy, the study of place names, that the same persons represent their country in UNGEGN for a long period, and so my predecessor in the Netherlands knew the former Hungarian expert Mr Ervin Földi who attended from the first conference in 1967 onwards, for a long time, and I have known his successor Mr Pokoli some 25 years now.

The importance of standardizing place names was realized early within UN, but a body to promote it was only set up in 1959. This *United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names* has been in operation since then (slide 2), and it has organized its first conference on the standardization of geographical names in 1967. Its first focus is national standardization, as this is the precondition to international standardization, and this is stipulated in Resolution 4 of the first conference. The UNGEGN is now one of the seven permanent expert groups of ECOSOC (slide 3), it has a secretariat at the UN, which organises sessions of UNGEGN and UN conferences on the standardization of geographical names. These conferences have been repeated every 5 years, and this August we will have the tenth conference. In between conferences, the UNGEGN meets twice in 1- or 2-week sessions, in order to prepare for the conferences. UN Resolution I-4 shows that the basis of the work of UNGEGN consists of the stimulation of national names standardization, and on that basis international standardization can proceed. Thanks to Internet, we have access to all papers presented at these conferences (slide 4) and sessions, and so everyone can read all the papers handed in by his national representatives over time. This is an example of a Hungarian document handed in in 1977 (slide 5). At this time already Hungary was preparing for the names database for the International Map of the world

at the scale 1: 2,500,000, the Karta Mira, produced by the then socialist countries.

As I said, the conferences are held every 5 years (slide 6) , they attract some 300 experts from 90 countries, and what it really does is to show the best practice of names collection and processing, on behalf of standardization, the building of names databases that everyone can access in order that names can play their role as essential link in the spatial data infrastructure. And the conferences accept resolutions (slide 7), binding for UN member countries, on all types of issues like ; systems of romanization; distribution of data through gazetteers; data exchange in accepted formats; training and education; tools, toponymic guidelines; exonyms.

Structure

The UNGEGN structure is the following: (slide 8) There is a bureau that consists of a chairperson, vice chairs and rapporteurs, it is assisted by a secretariat that organises the sessions and conferences and looks after website and news bulletin. The experts from the member states are grouped in 23 divisions, on the basis of geographical proximity or linguistic affinity. The idea behind this is to group countries with similar problems, to assist each other. On the basis of their expertise experts are also working in the 10 or 12 working groups, on education, terminology, romanization systems, pronunciation, gazetteers and databases, country names, exonyms, minorities and publicity and funding. In order to check whether the resolutions voted are actually implemented, there also is a Working group on evaluation and implementation.

Two working groups in statu nascendi are those for special African problems and on toponymical guidelines. Each country is to produce such guidelines to help foreign cartographic editors to deal with the specific characteristics of the spelling of a country's names. In the Netherlands for instance we have a special letter which actually is a combination of I and J, and which we pronounce as –ei- . When this letter occurs at the start of a word we have to capitalise both the I and the J linked to it, as in IJsselmeer. The task team for Africa tries to boost participation of African countries in UNGEGN and stimulates toponymy courses in all African divisions. There is a complex meeting network of divisions and working groups (sometimes even combined with training

courses), often in different combinations, and here material for the sessions and conferences is prepared.

Then there are liaison officers with several scientific groups: with IHO – especially important in view of the continuous deadlock over politicized issues like East Sea/Sea of Japan, Persian Gulf/Arabian Gulf, Macedonia or Fyrom; this liaison also is important as UNGEGN has left the names of undersea features to the IHO-parented GEBCO, General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans-organization, after some 25 years of intensive commitment. I should mention here the Hungarian efforts on the standardization of names of Undersea features, leading to the Multilingual Lexicon of Undersea Features, by Matyas Marton and Andras Dutko. There is a liaison officer with ICA – I think we cartographers are the principal user of the standardized geographical names resulting from the work of UNGEGN, together with the geographers in IGU, the International Geographical Union, with whom we just initiated a joint commission on toponymy; there is liaison with ICOS, the International Council of Onomastic Sciences, ISO (international Standardization Organization), SCAR (Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research, which is in charge of Antarctic naming) and with PAIGH (Panamerican Institute for Geography and History, which also coordinates mapping in the Americas). Finally there is the IAU, the International Astronomical Union, which is in charge of extraterrestrial names. UNGEGN had its own working group on extraterrestrial names until this was delegated to the IAU some 20 years ago, and not all experts are happy about this disposition – also within ICA we have the Commission on Planetary Cartography, chaired by Henrik Hargitai, which urges us to use our influence in UNGEGN to have a larger say in these extraterrestrial names.

If we look at the divisions ([slide 9](#)), you can see that some of them are contiguous, and some have a more dispersed nature, because of former colonial ties, still reflected in languages, like the Dutch and German-speaking division which also includes South Africa and Suriname, and the French one including Quebec or the Portuguese one. Hungary is a very active part of the East Central and Southeast Europe Division.

Next slide ([10](#)) shows the **working groups**, with a similar structure as the commissions within ICA. The two most important ones, certainly for cartographers, are those on **romanization systems** and on **data files and**

gazetteers. All the working groups have their own websites. The *WG on Romanization systems* decides which systems to use when converting non-roman scripts to roman script, with the ideal to have one single conversion system, so that there will be just one standardized form of a Cyrillic or Chinese or Thai place name in the Roman alphabet (**Slide 11**). More generally expressed it strives for one version of a name in each script. Its website contains the romanization systems, not only UN-recommended ones but other current ones as well. The WG not only reports on the conversion systems (**slide 12**) but also (**slide 13**) on the fact whether these are implemented or not. The *WG on data files and gazetteers* deals with the creation, maintenance and outputs of toponymic data files (including gazetteer production) and aspects of toponymic data exchange formats and standards. Issues of providing geographical names information within national and international spatial data infrastructures (SDIs) through web (gazetteer) services and multipurpose toponymic database solutions in the context of SDIs are becoming increasingly important for this working group.

Slide 14: The promotion of indigenous or minority names is becoming increasingly important from the viewpoint of preserving the cultural heritage. In many countries it is an issue because property rights may be associated with the recognition of indigenous names. Education and training in toponymy poses a challenge, as every country would need only a few experts in this field, so it does not pay to set up special training programs on a national basis, except for large countries. This has been recognised by UNGEGN, which has come up with a working group on training courses in toponymy (**slide 15**). As with these courses we can only reach a limited number of staff, we are also producing webcourses. With the help of Hungarian colleagues I am finalizing an English-language webcourse in toponymy, as part of the ICA web cartography course (url: <http://lazarus.elte.hu/cet>). The Francophone Division of UNGEGN has produced a toponymy webcourse in French (<http://www.divisionfrancophone.org/>), and now also the Panamerican Institute for Geography and History (PAIGH), a supranational institution which coordinates mapping in the Americas, has started to produce a toponymy webcourse, in Spanish. I will come back to the webcourses later.

So we have come up with **training courses** (slide 16), held worldwide, in conjunction with PAIGH, which serves the new World, while UNGEGN looks after the old one. On the website of the UNGEGN Dutch- and German-speaking Division (<http://141.74.33.52/dgsd/>) teaching material for some of these courses will be uploaded this summer. On the slide you can see the locations of the toponymy courses we held, since 1982, with the green dots showing courses given by PAIGH and the pink one by UNGEGN. In view of the fact that large countries like US, Russia, India and China are capable of looking after their own education and training in toponymy, the distribution of course sites reflects the needs. This year we are again moving to Indonesia for a course for South-East Asia and the SW Pacific division, in conjunction with the Indonesian national mapping organization. Such courses involve theoretical lectures, fieldwork (which often is an eye-opener), the creation of digital names databases and derived products like gazetteers or named maps.

We have come across local communities where males and females use different sets of names for the same topographical objects, we have been in areas where different nomadic groups use different names for the same objects, we have come across situations where there are age differences in the use of names, or social differences: On Java when speaking to a higher status person one would use another name version for a locality as when speaking to a lower status person about that same locality. And there are situations when different communities in the same area designate and name different groups of objects, that do not overlap. The Same in Scandinavia are very interested in slopes for the grazing of their reindeer herds, and not so much in summits or river valleys as the sedentary Norwegian farmers are. We have learned that in some areas in Southern Africa villages are named after the village chief, and when he or she dies, the name will be changed. In Northern Canada, where Helen Kerfoot has done fieldwork, there is an enormous difference between the summer and winter landscapes, so the objects to be named change seasonally.

In the courses we give, we not only use the specially prepared course manuals, but also other material developed by the UNGEGN (slide 17). In the first place, as shown at the start, all the reports of meetings and conferences and all papers presented there. In order to speak the same technical language,

UNGEGN has developed a **glossary**, which can also be accessed on-line. There are manuals on the collection and processing of geographical names and on data transfer standards. All of these are accessible through the UNGEGN website ([slide 18](#)), and can be downloaded there: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo> . It also informs about meetings, initiatives and events important for toponymy.

Names databases

One of those initiatives is the **World Geographical Names database** ([slide 19](#)). Set up to serve as a tool for UN sections, but also globally accessible, this is an embryo global names database, populated with official names information. Currently it only contains information on country names, cities over 100 000 inhabitants and capitals, but that is just a first step. Attribute information consists of location data, exonyms and pronunciation. The database has a map interface ([slide 20](#)) and can be accessed in all 6 UN language. Sources of the data are provided, and these are also responsible for the updating, and the pronunciation of names is given when clicking a sound hotspot. The format of the tables ([slide 21](#)) shows that also short and long name versions are given for country names, like 'Netherlands' and 'Kingdom of the Netherlands'.

This is just a first step to arrive at a global database, and in the near future I expect that this UN database will be merged with some regional initiatives, like *EuroGeoNames*. That is the virtual database linking all national European names databases, providing a reference service through a names server currently located in Finland. All the light blue countries shown at the next slide ([slide 22](#)) have promised to be connected soon, as a matter of fact Britain has joined already, and the objective is to join all 27 EU countries plus Norway and Switzerland. Not only is it accessible for speakers of all European languages, but also for different scripts, as Greek and Cyrillic alphabets also can be accommodated.

Similar regional names database initiatives have taken place in the Asia Southeast Pacific Southwest division, where another regional database is created, and in Latin America. These will be used as building blocks for the global database. The difference with commercial name servers like GeoNames is that the data are official and kept up to date by the countries concerned.

-GGIM and UNSDI

Within the United Nations there has been a working group linking the various sections and departments working with geospatial information, called UNGIWG. UNGIWG has taken the step to initiate UNSDI, an institutional and technical mechanism for establishing system coherence for the exchange and applications of geospatial data and information for UN. UNSDI (chaired by Suha Ulgen) aims at managing the existing geo-spatial assets of the United Nations System more effectively. Additionally, UNSDI will serve as a model and vehicle for capacity building in Member States that request assistance from the United Nations in managing and applying geospatial data to support their national development agenda. It has now been placed under the supervision of the FAO. It has launched an Centre of Excellence for UNSDI Project funded by voluntary contributions of Member States. This centre will be located in Bonn, and its first project will take place in Indonesia.

Next to this UNSDI initiative, which is very much a hands-on practical initiative to deliver core datasets in time of emergency, last year at a meeting in Seoul the *UN Statistics Division*, which was already in charge of UNGEGN and of the *UN regional cartographic conferences*, has set up a *Global Geospatial Information Management committee*, GGIM. Our former ICA president Bill Cartwright is on the board of this GGIM (slide 23). This body seems to be of a more administrative and facilitating nature, and the hope is that GGIM and SDI will be able to cooperate with the latter as the executive branch of the former. It is most important that GIS has been recognized by the UN as a core area, essential for its operations, and that cartographers are involved in its activities.

ICA webcourse

I would like to draw attention to the help from ICA to UNGEGN, consisting also of the development of a toponymy webcourse, as part of a larger Internet Cartography Teaching Courses programme, set up here in Budapest for the ICA when Laszlo Zentai chaired the ICA Commission on Education and Training (slide 24). This programme consists of both existing material freely available on the web and of material specially developed for ICA, and the toponymy course is an example of the latter. The object of the ICA was to provide teaching material to those unable to develop that themselves, and also to provide

quality standards in education. Toponymy is an example of a course which is too expensive to develop for the few experts needed in most countries, and internet is a suitable medium for its provision to all countries that don't have toponymy teaching programmes themselves (slide 25). Antal Guszlev, Laszlo Zentai and Krisztina Iras helped to set it up here in Budapest, and currently it is being completed in the Netherlands by Nicoline McCarthy, ready for its launching at the 10th conference. The contents range (see slide 26) from field collection of names to names databases and from languages and scripts to name placement on maps, toponymical planning and names as cultural heritage. All chapters or modules contain theoretical contents, have practical exercises and offer literature to be downloaded.

27th session and 10th conference

On July 30 the 27th session of the UNGEGN (slide 27) will start in New York, and one day later the tenth UN Conference on the standardization of geographical names. ICA will be presented there, both because its liaison officer also serves as vice chair of UNGEGN, and because the chair of the Joint ICA-IGU Commission on Toponymy Paulo de Menezes will attend and be able to present a paper on the commission's activities.

The following subjects will be discussed: (slide 28) (I leave it to you to read them)

- 7. Measures taken to implement UN resolutions on stand. of geographical names.
- 8. National standardization:
- 9. Geonames as culture, heritage and identity
- 10. Exonyms.
- 11. Toponymic data files and gazetteers:
- 12. Terminology.
- 13. Writing systems and Romanization:
- 14. Country names.
- 15. Toponymic education.
- 16. Features beyond a single sovereignty

In addition websites for dissemination of geographical names information will be discussed, the new Portuguese language division will be initiated, and we

have already seen a boost of the toponymical activities of the Portuguese-speaking countries, especially in Brazil, but also in Angola and Mozambique. Cooperation with statistical offices will be an item (they frequently use their own sets of names, distinct from those in use by topographical offices, and this can cause discrepancies in names spelling). Cooperation with UNSDI and GGIM will be discussed, as will the crucial and essential role of standardized geographical names in the geospatial information exchange process: in my final 4 slides ([slide 29-32](#)) I will show that international communication needs standards for the exchange of geospatial information, but this exchange only works if the names and the conversion systems have been standardized!

Thank you