

# GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN A CHANGING WORLD

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We live in a dynamic world where political, social, economic and environmental changes take place all the time. Here are some examples of changes that influence geographical names.

## The World's Growing Population

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw rapid population growth as a result of plummeting death rates. The number of people living in the world rose from 1.6 billion to 6.1 billion in a hundred years, most of this growth taking place in developing countries. Asia, with over half the world's population in 1965, added over 1.7 billion people to its population over the following 40 years, but Sub-Saharan Africa, whose population nearly tripled in the same time period, had the highest growth rate. Settlement growth and the creation of new towns and villages constantly provide us with new names. Between 1970 and 2002 a total of 1,354 new rural settlements were established in Amazonia, and the pace of development has increased again in the last 10 years. And in 2010 the President of South Africa announced that 8,000 human settlement projects were being rolled out countrywide, including the upgrading of 2,700 informal settlements. Many of these South African projects involve the creation of new settlements such as Cosmo City and Lufhereng located close to major cities such as Johannesburg.



*Photo: UN photo library*

In 2008 more people lived in urban areas for the first time and it is projected that by 2050 68 percent of the world's population will live in towns and cities. There are now almost 50 megacities with populations in excess of 10 million people. Shanghai, which had a population of 5.5 million in 1960, now has a population in excess of 25 million (2020 census). New names appear on the map all the time, the process of urbanization in China, for example, creating the need for 20,000 new street and community place names each year.

## People on the move, poverty and place names – no address, no identity

Over 3.5 percent of the world's population – 258 million people – are now living in countries in which they were not born. Some are economic migrants, others are refugees from war and oppression. For example, UN studies currently record over 6 million internationally-displaced Syrians. If refugees are to be repatriated to their homes, relief agencies need to be able to identify the names of often small and remote places, many of which are not easily found on the map.

People flock to cities to gain access to work, public services and a higher standard of living. However, it is estimated by UN Habitat that approximately 1 billion people worldwide live in urban slums. The majority of these people do not have an address and therefore do not have an identity that allows them access to basic services such as schools, health care, social welfare benefits, bank accounts, postal delivery and emergency services. The urbanization of poverty therefore has a geographical and spatial dimension that includes the challenge of providing people with named addresses that will not only help them find their way about but also give them an identity.

UNGEKN is now working actively to support the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), recognizing that authoritative and standardized names, as a core theme within geospatial data, are crucial in monitoring the progress of the SDGs.

## Political Change

Two world wars, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of countries from imperial rule resulted in many place name changes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Country names such as Iraq appeared on the map when the Middle East was carved up between Britain and France after World War I and East Germany, which emerged at the end of World War II under Soviet influence, reunited with West Germany in 1989. Czechoslovakia survived from 1918, when it separated from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, until 1992 when the Czech Republic and Slovakia parted company. An amalgam of Balkan states took the name Yugoslavia in 1929, a name that survived until the final break up of the Yugoslav republics in 2006. Ceylon changed its name to Sri Lanka on gaining independence in 1972, British Honduras became Belize after it attained internal self-government in 1973, and in the past decade Czech Republic has become Czechia (2016) and Swaziland has become Eswatini (2018) and in 2019 a name was agreed for North Macedonia.



*Photo: UN photo library*

With the break up of the Soviet Union in 1990, some countries which had used the Russian Cyrillic script decided to change to the use of Roman script. For example, Uzbekistan, where people speak a Turkic language influenced by Persian with later Soviet elements, changed from using a modified Arabic script to a modified Cyrillic script during the era of Soviet rule. On gaining independence a new Roman alphabet was introduced in 1993. That is why former romanized Russian Cyrillic place names of the Soviet era such as Bukhara and Samarkand are now spelt in the Uzbek Roman form Buxoro and Samarqand. Such changes have been made in a number of other former Soviet countries, with others, such as Kazakhstan, currently working towards a change.

## Environmental Change

Global warming has had a marked effect in polar regions in recent decades. All over Greenland and the Arctic the melting of ice is changing the geography of the coastline. In 2007 explorer Dennis Schmitt, for example, discovered a new island off the east coast of Greenland which was named Uunurtoq Qeqertoq (Warming Island). Equally, there are places that disappear as a result of environmental change. In 2006, for example, Lohachara Island in the Bay of Bengal was the first inhabited island to disappear as a result of inundation.

Equally environmental change has necessitated moves away from certain inhabited locations, such as the ongoing development of a new capital for Indonesia, Nusantara, in part because of Jakarta's sinking as a result of diminishing groundwater.



*Photo: Helen Kerfoot*

All these issues influence geographical names: creating a need for new names, changing existing names and even reverting to former names. UNGEKN's work promoting names standardization has to accommodate such changes and ensure that methods of information-sharing are efficient and current so that new and changed names are captured in data systems and on maps.