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**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names**

**Second session**

New York, 3 – 7 May 2021

**Item 16 of the provisional agenda \***

**Other geographical names issues**

**Creating an Equal Society through Geographical Names**

Submitted by the Moderator of the Side Event Panel Discussion\*\*

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\* GEGN.2/2021/1

\*\* Prepared Dr. Peder Gammeltoft, Norway.

### **Written Statement:**

The UNGEGN Bureau in pursuing its mandate is responsible for giving practical advice on calls for greater equality emanating from Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 societal inequality demonstrations, a panel discussion was arranged as a side event in connection with the second UNGEGN Session, on Wednesday 5.

The panel discussion, under the title of “**Creating an Equal Society through Geographical Names**”, fits thematically within the Group of Experts current practices to discourage offensive, inappropriate, derogatory, discriminatory, and frivolous geographical names.

The objective of the side event was to begin exploring how to advance inclusion and create an equal society through geographical names standardization. Restoring indigenous and minority geographical names is an important step in gaining a more inclusive society by giving identity and voice to hitherto 'silent' groups, orientations, peoples and cultures. Geographical names are seriously and inherently imbued with power. Those who name are in control of identity and control the historical discourse through those they name.

To kick-start this complex and difficult conversation, a panel of experts in different aspects of inclusion and equality sat on the panel and provided UNGEGN experts with a deeper understanding of underlying issues and of how society becomes enriched by adapting an inclusion and equality as a parameter of geographical names standardization.

The event was opened by the Mr. Pierre Jaillard, Chair of UNGEGN and moderated by Mr. Peder Gammeltoft, who also gave the introductory statement. The panel participants discussed several subjects. Carla Jack, Canada, spoke on benefits of restoring indigenous geographical names. Tara Wallace, United States of America, discussed derogatory geographical names and how to handle them. Rikke Steenholt Olesen, Denmark, described efforts to have a greater gender balance in new urban naming in Copenhagen, and finally, Annette Torensjö, Sweden, investigated the concepts of inclusion and equality in relation to the notion of Cultural heritage preservation. The panelists, the moderator and participants engaged in constructive and valuable discussions on the issue.

The conversations were very fruitful and provided experts with a collective understanding of the need to keep up with developing societal demands and begin establishing rules for geographical names standardization to respect indigenous and minority geographical names, work for gender balance in naming situations and avoid geographical names seen as being offensive and disrespectful. Mechanisms should also be set up to have regular reviews of the compatibility of standardization rules with societal needs. The cultural heritage aspect weighs very heavily the discussion of inclusion and equality in geographical names and all name changes must be made on an individual basis and public consultation is critical. This will help achieve the desired changes, and with the added benefit of building beneficial relations with indigenous and minority communities.

Much work is still needed, but for UNGEGN to be able to provide Member States with the best advice, the following decision is suggested for inclusion in the final report:

**Decision:** Panel discussion on "Creating an Equal Society through Geographical Names"

The Group of Experts:

- a. Welcomed the convening of the panel discussion "Creating an Equal Society through Geographical Names" held on the margins of the session, and notes with satisfaction the appreciation and interest expressed by the 70 participants in the exploration of the role of geographical names in the pursuit of an inclusive and equal society;

- b. Invited the UNGEGN Bureau and the Working Group as Cultural Heritage to consider the development of guidelines aimed at equality and inclusion in geographical names in harmony with the principles on restoring, protecting and preserving cultural heritage, noting the contribution to relevant UN SDGs;
- c. Expressed hope that national names authorities consider developing processes and mechanisms for geographical names standardization to achieve greater equality in naming, and respect the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities, to their own geographical names; and
- d. Urged the UNGEGN Bureau and its relevant working groups to pursue the topic in future events and sessions through dedicated meeting arrangements.

Information on the Panel Discussion is available on the Side Event webpage of the second UNGEGN Plenary Session: [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd\\_session\\_2021/#sideevent](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/#sideevent).

It is also possible to access the Side Event information from the links below:

- Side Event Flyer  
([https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd\\_session\\_2021/documents/Inclusion\\_Geo\\_Names\\_5May2021\\_UNGEGN\\_Session.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/documents/Inclusion_Geo_Names_5May2021_UNGEGN_Session.pdf))
- Recording from the Panel discussion  
(<https://youtu.be/9KPP-uGPJaQ>)
- Presentation Material  
([https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd\\_session\\_2021/documents/Geographical\\_names\\_%20creating\\_an\\_equal\\_society\\_2.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/documents/Geographical_names_%20creating_an_equal_society_2.pdf))