14 February 2023

Original: English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names**
2023 session
New York, 1–5 May 2023
Item 14 of the provisional agenda*
Geographical names data management

The gazetteers.net web application: a tool for harvesting digital gazetteers

Summary**

Having access to and the availability of many types of digital gazetteers reduces the effort involved in conducting place-name research. Some digital gazetteers cover the whole world and diverse languages. However, the coverage of separate regions varies. In addition, global gazetteers marginally cover small regional languages, which in turn become the focus of small initiatives, some of which are managed by one person. Moreover, digital gazetteers usually do not reflect administrative changes, such as incorporated towns, which are often not represented. Since there is no standard definition of place as a geographical unit (human settlement), the scope of places that are mentioned in the individual gazetteers include individual farms, mills and municipalities.

The sheer number, different geographical coverage and metadata schemes of digital gazetteers make it difficult to compare existing gazetteer entries systematically and to use existing data in other applications. At the same time, current digital gazetteers show how geographical orders of knowledge are transformed from analogue structures (for example, printed indexes) into digital structures. The gazetteer research project in Germany, undertaken by the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe (Marburg), the Institute for Regional Geography (Leipzig) and the Justus Liebig University Giessen, has developed a publicly operational web application, gazetteers.net. The objectives of the application are to support users working with different digital gazetteers and to help them explore content and metadata structure of the gazetteers.

The gazetteers.net web application enables users to search several place name-related databases simultaneously in a unified manner and to view and compare data

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from different gazetteers. In addition, the application supports the identification of items in different databases that refer to the same geographical entity, regardless of the definition of geographical place in the individual gazetteers or its administrative status. By linking corresponding items across gazetteers, the application facilitates data aggregation and comparison. In addition to the major and well-known web gazetteers, the official gazetteers and some small local gazetteers for a selected country (Poland) have been connected in order to be able to cover regional languages and historical names. A comparison of these specific and general gazetteers has also facilitated, among other things, the identification of differences regarding languages, spelling and administrative changes throughout history.

The project team has examined existing digital gazetteers for their structure (semantics, description of metadata) and content (reliability of assignment between place names and coordinates). The project team has also discussed geographical discourses inherent in existing gazetteers and examined strategies to reveal specific power-knowledge relationships within existing gazetteers. Having examined the results of this testing, project participants revised and refined the metadata structure and web application interface.

The recent version of the harvesting tool was launched online after a positive evaluation by the expert communities. Despite the current regional focus of the project, searches can also be conducted at the global level. Current work on the tool is aimed at finding a way to incorporate more gazetteers, for example, of other countries or regions, without sacrificing clarity and responsiveness. Since the application is designed to support searches in the existing gazetteers, the quality of the results depends directly on the quality of each connected source.

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