

United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names  
2025 Session  
28 April – 2 May 2025  
Item 8 (a) of the provisional agenda  
**Culture, heritage and language recognition: geographical  
names as culture, heritage and identity**

Background document  
Available in English

**Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage**

**Terms of Reference**

**Prepared by UNGEGN Secretariat, WGGNCH Convenors & Members**

## Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage

### Terms of Reference

#### 1. Preamble and Background

- 1.1. UNGEGN has consistently highlighted the technical, economic, social, and cultural benefits of standardizing geographical names. It recognizes these names as key elements of cultural heritage, reflecting historical, folkloric, traditional, and ideological changes within societies. This includes encouraging the development of principles and practices to support the less tangible social concepts of geographical naming. These include connection to place through traditional, ancestral, historical, cultural, and language associations. Recognizing the importance of these human needs acknowledges a sense of place and why geographical names matter. Beyond the practical need for communicating location identification, geographical names preserve identity and belonging. Aligned with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition of cultural heritage, UNGEGN has initiated discussions on preserving and managing the cultural aspects of geographical names.
- 1.2. This ongoing focus on geographical names as cultural heritage led to resolutions by the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names<sup>1</sup> (UNCSGN) in 2002, 2007, and ultimately in 2012, when a resolution was adopted to establish criteria for recognising and protecting the cultural heritage aspect of names within the framework of UNGEGN. In 2012, the name of the Working Group for the Promotion of the Recording and Use of Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names (as per the 2007 resolution) was altered to that of the Working Group for Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage.
- 1.3. The ‘new’ United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) was established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution 20/18/2 in November 2017. In implementing this resolution, ECOSOC decision E/2019/230 approved the development of the UNGEGN Strategic Plan 2021–2029 and Programme of Work to be overseen by the UNGEGN Bureau.<sup>2</sup>

This Strategic Plan presents the vision, values and aims of UNGEGN and is aligned to five strategies:

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Strategy 1: | Technical expertise                               |
| Strategy 2: | Relationships, links and connections              |
| Strategy 3: | Effective work programmes                         |
| Strategy 4: | <b>Culture, heritage and language recognition</b> |

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<sup>1</sup> UNCSGN Conference resolutions on this subject were passed, for example, VIII/9, IX/4, X/3 and IX/10. Several resolutions have promoted collection and recognition of indigenous and minority toponyms (for example, II/36, V/22, VIII/1, IX/5); and UNGEGN Recommendation 5 (2019), follows up I/16 and I/20 in addressing geographical names from unwritten languages

<sup>2</sup> UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021–2029:

[https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/UNGEGN\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_Programme/documents/UNGEGN\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_Programme\\_2021\\_V5.2.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/UNGEGN_Strategic_Plan_Programme/documents/UNGEGN_Strategic_Plan_Programme_2021_V5.2.pdf)

### Strategy 5: Promotion and capacity building

In this regard, the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage seeks to implement UNGEGN Strategy 4 on Culture, heritage and language recognition.

- 1.4. The UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021–2029 recognises that Member States have significant work to do in declaring, promoting, celebrating and recognizing the importance of the unique connections between culture, heritage, language and geographical names. Relationships with external bodies could be further developed to strengthen and enhance the connection that geographical names have with culture and heritage, e.g. UNESCO or the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). UNGEGN could facilitate Member States' progress in this field by sharing 'model' or 'example' case studies from other members, on particular issues. Greater support could be offered to determine and highlight the benefits and scope of investigating the principles and methodology of writing geographical names emanating from unwritten languages, thereby providing a means of representing geographical names in a standard way and allowing these to receive a wider audience. A financial impact may be relevant as the benefits of recognizing culture and heritage do not necessarily have an obvious tangible advantage and therefore may be overlooked or side-lined by some Member States. The Strategic Plan 2021–2029 outlines a comprehensive plan for the Working Group, but at the midpoint of this plan, it is an opportune moment to review progress and realign where appropriate.
- 1.5. In the intersessional period between the 2023 and 2025 sessions of UNGEGN the WG as a whole body was inactive, although the Focus Group for Indigenous and minority language geographical names continued its work. As part of the preparatory work leading to the 2025 session, the Working Group was revitalised. This Terms of Reference document provides a basis for the Working Group's future work plan(s), outlining the group's aims and objectives, and establishing working modalities to advance the implementation of UNGEGN's Strategic Plan 2021-2029 and prevailing mandates.

## 2. Aims, Objectives and Mandates

- 2.1 **As of 2025, the overarching aim of the Working Group remains to highlight the importance of names as cultural heritage.** Specifically, as set out in the UNGEGN Strategic Plan 2021–2029, the group aims to:

- Declare, promote, celebrate and demonstrate that geographical names matter because they recognize unique culture, heritage and language that connect people to physical locations;
- Promote good geographical naming practices that acknowledge people's place in the world;
- Recognize that geographical names are a source of identity, encourage recognition of heritage and equality, and support indigenous, regional and/or minority group's language revitalization and preservation;
- Contribute to building technical capabilities, such as developing guidelines, legislation, communication tools and databases to enhance culture, heritage and language recognition.

- 2.2 **The current objectives of the Working Group are to:**

- Implement activities outlined in *Strategy 2: Relationships, links and connections*, and in *Strategy 4: Culture, heritage and language recognition*, as per the UNGEGN Strategic Plan 2021–2029;
- Support Member States in declaring, promoting, celebrating and recognizing the importance of the unique connections between culture, heritage, language and geographical names, e.g. and convene webinars, side events and other awareness-raising activities as appropriate and resources allow;
- Mobilise resources to support the implementation of the Working Group's aims and objectives;
- Connect and coordinate among the various sub activities, including focus groups or task teams as they emerge and evolve.

2.3 **The Working Group's mandates** are to implement the objectives listed above in 2.2, thus supporting the aims listed in 2.1. Most recently, at the 2023 session, UNGEGN took several decisions relating to geographical names for cultural heritage and the Working Group's mandates:

#### 2.3.1 Recommendation 2 World Geographical Names Database:

The Economic and Social Council decides that the appropriate working groups of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, namely, the Working Groups on Geographical Names Data Management, on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage and on Romanization Systems, shall work to populate the World Geographical Names Database in order to ensure that toponyms are accurately reflected across all languages, including those with non-Roman alphabets or scripts, to strengthen relationships, links and connections in geographical names standardization

#### 2.3.2 Decision 3/2023/15 Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity, including Indigenous, minority and regional languages and multilingual issues

- a) Took note of the reports and appreciated the wide range of topics shared, including map products, regulations, best practice for Indigenous naming, derogatory names, world heritage sites, Indigenous and minority language names, commercial and commemorative naming, legislation, policies and best practices;
- b) Supported the continuation of the sharing of national experiences and engagement, especially noting the increased attention by the Group of Experts on the importance of all cultural heritage matters;
- c) Acknowledged the collective increased awareness of the Group of Experts of the emotional and spiritual aspects of cultural heritage in geographical naming, which offer improved connection, identity and belonging, contributing to equitable recognition of Indigenous geographical names.

#### 2.3.3 Decision 3/2023/17 World Geographical Names Database

Welcomed the offers of assistance in terms of data and support and in that regard urged greater mobilization of resources to support the integration of other toponymic datasets in the Database, including those pertaining to culture, heritage and identity.

### 3. Alignment with the UNGEGN Strategic Plan 2021–2029

- 3.1 As noted above in sections 1.3, 1.4, 2.1 and 2.2, the UNGEGN Strategic Plan 2021–2029 describes the Working Group’s planned activities and deliverables. At the point in time when this Work Plan was proposed by the Working Group and adopted by UNGEGN, 6 thematic focal points or groups were identified, namely (1) Geographical names in relation to minorities and indigenous peoples; (2) Legislation, policies & best practices relating to geographical names; (3) Commercial and commemorative naming, including urban naming; (4) Crowd-sourcing for collecting stories behind the names; (5) The names of unwritten languages; and (6) Naming within tourism and branding.
- 3.1. Given the circumstances that led to the move to revitalize the working group, with new members joining who were not part of the group before 2024/2025, there was a need to review and adapt the Working Group’s Work Plan, in particular with reference to the 6 Focus Groups identified in the Strategic Plan. The revitalized Working Group is reevaluating its capacity and capabilities in light of the time remaining of the Strategic Plan’s implementation period. Following the 2025 Session, the Working Group aims to finalise an updated Work Plan that incorporates older action items where possible under a more streamlined structure. The Working Group also recognises its role in supporting the implementation of the other Strategies of the Strategic Plan, including aspects of Strategy 2: Relationships, links and connections.

## 4 Governance, Membership, Reporting, Work Plan(s), and Structure

### 4.1 Governance

The Working Group will be led by at least two Member State Convenors, who shall guide the work of the Working Group and serve as its representatives to the UNGEGN Bureau. The Convenors will play a pivotal role in coordinating the work of focus group leaders, and in connecting the operational activities of the Working Group to the broader strategic direction and work of UNGEGN, encompassing the dual responsibility of conveying updates on progress of, and soliciting guidance between the leadership of UNGEGN and the Convenors. Convenors are expected to serve four-year terms, with consideration given to regional geographic representation.

The UNGEGN Bureau or UNGEGN Sessions may review and evaluate the work of the Working Group from time to time, may propose revisions of the Terms of Reference based on the work the Working Group has completed, and may propose any new items for the Working Group to consider.

### 4.2 Membership.

Members will be expert representatives from Member State NNAs, NGIAs, or other agencies or academic institutes relating to geographical names who have expertise in the area of geographical names as cultural heritage. To ensure broad expertise and effectiveness, relevant subject matter experts from the United Nations System, international organisations, academia, civil society, geographical name societies, and other expert geographic bodies may be invited to participate in the Working Group and its sub activities, including Focus Groups.

### 4.3 Work Plan(s).

All work should be anchored to Work Plan. It is intended that a Work Plan should cover the forthcoming 2-year intersessional period in-between sessions. This Work Plan shall be developed by the Working Group and agreed by the UNGEGN Bureau.

#### **4.4 Reporting.**

The Working Group will report under the relevant agenda items at the biannual sessions of UNGEGN.

#### **4.5 Structure.**

The Working Group may establish additional Focus Groups or other sub groups to work on particular aspects of its Work Plan, should the need arise. All Focus Groups must have defined program of work, deliverables, delivery milestones and leadership. All Focus Groups must report progress and delivery of work program to the Convenors and Working Group as appropriate.

### **5 Secretariat**

5.1 UNSD will serve as the permanent Secretariat of the Working Group. In cooperation with the Convenors, the Secretariat will coordinate and assist with the organisation and preparation of the agenda for the meetings of the Working Group, issue notices, and support with any other activities deemed necessary. The convenors will coordinate, monitor and report on the activities of the Working Group to the UNGEGN Bureau and UNGEGN, supported by the Secretariat.

5.2 The Secretariat will act as the repository for the outputs of the Working Group, with the Working Group's webpage<sup>3</sup> acting as the primary resource for key documents.

### **6 Methods of Work**

3.2. The Working Group shall work through electronic exchanges and regular, quarterly virtual meetings in an open, inclusive and transparent manner.

*(April 2025)*

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<sup>3</sup> [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/working\\_groups/wg9.cshtml](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/working_groups/wg9.cshtml)