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

**2025 session**

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**Item 7 (a) of the provisional agenda \***

**Effective work programmes: Measures taken and proposed  
for the implementation of resolutions and recommendations**

**Recommendations for constructing an inclusive and  
sustainable geographical names authority**

**Summary \*\***

Establishing an inclusive and sustainable geographical names authority requires a comprehensive legal and administrative framework that balances cultural heritage preservation with effective evidence-based standardization. The report provides key recommendations for constructing such authorities based on best practices and principles of multicultural governance..

The cornerstone recommendation is establishing either a central geographical names authority or a federal system, with a multidisciplinary composition including academics, language experts, Indigenous representatives and cultural heritage specialists. That authority should have a clear mandate for standardization, dispute resolution and cultural preservation and operate with full transparency and accountability through regular public reporting and consultation.

The legal framework should establish inclusive criteria for naming decisions, incorporating provisions for dual or multiple naming practices that recognize Indigenous and minority languages. Special attention should be given to historically sensitive names, requiring careful documentation of previous names while addressing contemporary cultural and social needs.

Formal conflict resolution mechanisms, including a specialized mediation committee, a structured appeals process and provisions for binding arbitration, are essential. Those mechanisms should ensure fair and timely resolution of naming disputes while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

Community engagement must be embedded in the process through structured consultation mechanisms, transparent decision-making and active incorporation of Indigenous and minority knowledge. That would ensure that names reflect local identities and values while preserving cultural heritage.

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\* GEGN.2/2025/1

\*\* Prepared by Peder Gammeltoft. Norway, Norwegian Language Collections, University of Bergen

Regular review and adaptation processes are crucial for maintaining relevance. That includes periodic reviews of laws and policies, continuous database maintenance and public education initiatives about the significance of geographical names.

The recommendations provide a foundation for developing geographical names authorities that can effectively balance standardization requirements with cultural heritage preservation, thereby supporting sustainable and inclusive naming practices for the future.

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## Introduction

An inclusive and sustainable approach to geographical names requires a comprehensive evidence-based legal and administrative framework that respects cultural heritage, linguistic diversity, and local community input. While example laws are discussed in another paper (GEGN.2/2025/9/CRP.9), this report provides recommendations for establishing a geographical names authority and constructing a governance and management framework that promotes inclusivity, consistency, and conflict resolution, ensuring that geographical names serve as accurate, fair representations of national identity and cultural heritage. Drawing on best practices and the principles of multicultural governance, these recommendations outline the key components for a well-functioning, future-oriented geographical names authority.

### 1. Establishment of an Umbrella Geographical Names Authority

To effectively manage and regulate geographical names, an umbrella geographical names authority should be established (GEGN I/4), regardless of a centralized or regionalized/federal state structure. This entity would be empowered to make final decisions on naming disputes, oversee standardization efforts, and ensure that naming practices reflect both national and regional identities. Key recommendations include:

- Composition: The authority should include representatives from academia (linguistic and toponymic experts), the national language council, indigenous groups (cf. GEGN VIII/1, GEGN IX/5), cultural heritage experts (cf. GEGN IX/4), historians, and public administration officials to ensure a balanced, multidisciplinary perspective.
- Mandate: The authority's mandate would include the standardization of names, the promotion of inclusivity in naming practices (GEGN VIII/1), and the authority to arbitrate disputes. Specific tasks would involve:
  - Approving official geographical names, alternatively recommending official geographical names for authorization at governmental level,
  - Continuous monitoring of implementation of geographical names to ensure consequent and effective standardization for official use,
  - Conducting regular reviews and updates of geographical names to reflect changes in societal values and demographics,
  - Collaborating with local authorities on regional naming matters,
  - Engaging in public education about the cultural significance of naming.
- Transparency and Accountability: To foster public trust, the authority should operate transparently, publishing decisions, guidelines, and criteria used in naming decisions (cf. GEGN VII/9). Regular reporting and public consultation should be integral to its operations.

## 2. Clear Legal Framework with Inclusive Criteria

A clear legal framework for geographical names is essential for consistent and equitable practices (GEGN I/4). The law should outline specific criteria and procedures for the naming, renaming, and dual naming of geographical features and locations. This would reduce ambiguity and ensure a balanced approach that respects cultural and linguistic diversity (GEGN IV/2). Key legal principles include:

- Inclusive Criteria for Standardization: Establish clear, inclusive criteria for determining the prioritization of geographical names, such as historical significance, local linguistic demographics, cultural heritage value, and community preference (GEGN II/36). This would provide a structured process for selecting names that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the area to be standardized according to criteria and policies set up.
- Dual Naming and Language Recognition: The naming authority should incorporate provisions for dual or multiple naming practices, allowing for the simultaneous recognition of indigenous, local, and national languages (GEGN IX/5). Guidelines should specify the language order based on factors like regional demographics and cultural significance. For example, in predominantly indigenous regions, indigenous names could appear first, followed by the national language equivalent.
- Recognizing the Historical aspect of Renaming: Geographical names are saturated with significance for the users. Use of culturally or socially sensitive or inappropriate geographical names, reflecting a colonial past, social suppression or other, may call for name change or renaming to reflect the cultural and social composition of society. For this, geographical names authorities must set up provisions for keeping records of previous names in cases of name change or renaming, in order to keep the knowledge of earlier namescapes, however painful or inappropriate.
- Naming in Newly Developed or Redesignated Areas: The authority should address new areas or features to ensure that culturally and linguistically appropriate names are chosen in consultation with local communities.

## 3. Formal Mechanisms for Conflict Resolution

A robust conflict resolution framework would mitigate potential disputes and ensure fair and timely resolutions. The name authority should, based on the law, establish clear pathways for mediation, appeal, and arbitration, specifying which entities are authorized to mediate and how decisions should be escalated if necessary. Key recommendations include:

- Mediation Committee: Form a specialized mediation committee within the geographical names authority that includes representatives from relevant stakeholder groups. This committee would handle initial mediation in cases of conflict, aiming for consensus-based resolutions.
- Appeals Process: Allow an appeals process for unresolved disputes, with structured steps and deadlines to prevent protracted conflicts. Appeals could be handled by a higher-level, impartial committee or a tribunal dedicated to cultural and administrative matters.
- Binding Arbitration: When disputes cannot be resolved through mediation or appeals, the law should allow for binding arbitration by the geographical names authority or a designated, independent body. Binding decisions would provide finality to disputes and minimize the risk of ongoing contention.

## 4. Community Engagement and Consultation

Involving local communities in the geographical naming process is vital for ensuring that names reflect the identities and values of those who reside in the area (GEGN VIII/1). A well-defined consultation process should be embedded within the law to ensure community voices are central in naming decisions. Recommendations for community engagement include:

- Local Consultation Mechanisms: Establish guidelines for gathering community input through surveys, public forums, and workshops, particularly in areas undergoing new developments or renaming initiatives. This ensures that local communities have a say in naming decisions that directly impact them.

- Transparency in Decision-Making: Publish naming proposals, along with public input and rationale for final decisions, to ensure that the process is transparent and accountable. Accessible, public records of consultation outcomes would help reinforce community trust.
- Incorporating Indigenous and Minority Knowledge: Engage with indigenous and minority communities to incorporate their knowledge, histories, and linguistic preferences into naming decisions. This would not only honor their contributions but also preserve cultural heritage and increase visibility for indigenous and minority names.

## **5. Regular Reviews and Adaptation to Changes in Naming Practices**

To ensure the law, the authority's work remain relevant and reflect changing social and cultural dynamics, the geographical names authority, or an external, specially designated body, should conduct periodic reviews of its work, policies and legal framework, as well as oversee implementation of geographical names standard-ization remains consequent and in line with established policies. This will allow the authority to adapt to emerging cultural values, new administrative needs, and advances in linguistic representation. Suggested practices include:

- Periodic Legal and Policy Reviews: Conduct a formal review of the geographical names law and related policies every 5 to 10 years. This review would consider public feedback, examine changing linguistic and demographic trends, and incorporate lessons learned from past naming decisions.
- Yearly/Bi-Yearly Standardization Reviews: Oversee that geographical name standardization takes place in line with given regulations and established policies. This review will help maintain a consistent implementation of geographical names regulations in national standardization.
- Updating Naming Databases and Public Resources: Develop and maintain a national database of geographical names, accessible to the public, that reflects the most current naming conventions (GEGN VII/9). The database should be regularly updated to ensure that all official maps, documents, and signage are accurate and culturally inclusive. The database should also be continuously monitored for consistency in standardization implementation.
- Educational Initiatives and Awareness Campaigns: Launch public education campaigns on the significance of geographical names, focusing on the value of cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. This would promote broader public understanding and support for inclusive naming practices.

## **6. Conclusion**

Constructing an inclusive and sustainable geographical names authority within a legal framework is essential for promoting cultural heritage, supporting linguistic diversity, and fostering community involvement in the geographical naming process. By establishing a central authority, clarifying legal criteria, embedding community engagement, and creating effective conflict resolution mechanisms, nations can develop a naming system that reflects and respects the diversity of their people. Periodic review and adaptation will ensure that the authority carries out its work relevantly and in responsive to evolving societal needs, thus creating a sustainable foundation for geographical naming practices in the years to come.

As nations navigate increasingly complex multicultural landscapes, geographical names authorities must evolve from purely administrative entities into facilitators of cultural dialogue. Through thoughtful naming practices that acknowledge diverse perspectives, these authorities can contribute significantly to social cohesion, reconciliation efforts, and the preservation of linguistic diversity for future generations. The recommendations outlined in this report provide a foundation for this evolution, encouraging an approach to geographical naming that is both technically sound and culturally sensitive.

Digital transformation presents both challenges and opportunities for geographical names authorities. The proliferation of digital mapping platforms necessitates greater coordination between official naming bodies and technology providers to ensure accurate representation of standardized names. Developing robust data management systems and dissemination methods for geographical

names will enable seamless integration with global mapping services and location-based applications. Furthermore, the economic benefits of standardized geographical naming should not be overlooked. Consistent naming conventions facilitate accurate navigation, enhance tourism experiences, improve emergency response systems, and streamline administrative processes. This standardization contributes to operational efficiency across governmental and private sectors while reducing potential confusion in international communications and mapping.

The implementation of these recommendations requires considerable coordination across governmental levels and stakeholder groups. A well-structured geographical names authority serves as more than a regulatory body; it functions as a crucial custodian of cultural heritage and national identity. Through standardized naming practices, nations preserve historical contexts while acknowledging contemporary social realities, creating a balanced approach that honors both tradition and progress.

### **Relevant resolutions**

GEGN I/4: National Standardization (1967).

GEGN II/36: Problems of Minority languages (1972).

GEGN VI/2: Acceleration of Work on Standardization of Geographical Names (1982.)

GEGN VII/9: Standardization of geographical names utilizing the Internet (1998).

GEGN VIII/1: Promotion of Minority Group and Indigenous Geographical Names (2002).

GEGN IX/4: Geographical Names as Intangible Cultural Heritage (2007).

GEGN IX/5: Promotion of the Recording and Use of Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names (2007).

### **Points for discussion**

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Consider best practices for establishing geographical names authorities with multidisciplinary composition that balance standardization requirements with cultural heritage preservation.
- (2) Discuss frameworks for resolving naming conflicts through structured mediation, appeals processes, and arbitration mechanisms that ensure fair representation of diverse stakeholders.
- (3) Explore strategies for meaningful community engagement in geographical naming processes, particularly for indigenous and minority communities, to create inclusive and culturally appropriate standardization practices.
- (4) Examine approaches for regular review and adaptation of naming practices to ensure authorities remain responsive to evolving societal needs, including periodic policy reviews and maintenance of comprehensive geographical names databases.