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Geographical Names
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**Promotion and capacity-building: Toponymic training
and education**

**Report of the Working Group on Funding and Training Courses
in Toponymy**

Submitted by the Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in
Toponymy

Summary **

The Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy, established in 2023, has focused on developing educational opportunities while addressing critical funding challenges. The Working Group successfully organized a toponymy training course in Bali, Indonesia, together with Indonesian partners, in June 2023. A survey is under way to identify geographical names standardization issues on which national names authorities would wish to receive training. The Working Group also coordinated an online webinar on geographical names governance in collaboration with the Pan-American Institute of Geography and History in October 2024. Efforts are under way to organize a toponymy training course in Africa for 2025.

However, the Working Group faces significant funding challenges that have an impact its ability to fulfil its mandate. Member States' contributions to the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names have steadily decreased in recent years, limiting the Organization's capacity to support experts from developing countries in attending sessions in New York. That reduction in funding also constrains the Working Group's ability to organize training courses in developing nations.

Those financial constraints pose a significant challenge to the Group's mission of building capacity in geographical names standardization across all regions, in particular in developing countries where such expertise is crucial for sustainable development and cultural heritage preservation.

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** The full report was prepared by Peder Gammeltoft, Norway, Norwegian Language Collections, University of Bergen.

Introduction

This report presents the activities, challenges, and future directions of the Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy (WGFTC), established in 2023 under the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). The report is structured in three main parts: Part I addresses Toponymic Training, Part II that examines the Funding Aspects of the Working Group's operations and part III detailing coming meeting activities of the Working Group. This comprehensive structure allows for a thorough examination of both the educational initiatives and the financial framework necessary to support them, providing a clear overview of the Working Group's progress and the obstacles it faces in fulfilling its mandate.

Part I: Toponymic Training

1. Regular Training Matters

The Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy has carried out one major toponymic training session, since its reorganization in 2023, namely a training course in Bali, Indonesia, which took place from June 19-23, 2023. This initiative was conducted through a productive partnership with Indonesia's Geospatial Information Agency (BIG) and centered on the theme *Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage*. The Bali training course drew an impressive gathering of 78 participants representing seven countries, with substantial attendance from Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This training initiative successfully fulfilled a long-standing goal originally outlined in the UNGEGN Asia South-East Division Work Plan (2019-2022), which had been previously postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The training concluded with a formal assessment, after which participants received e-certificates acknowledging their completion of the course.

The program was comprehensive, spanning five days and covering essential aspects of toponymy, including standardization methodologies, data collection techniques, and approaches to managing toponyms as cultural heritage. Participants engaged in 32 hours of lectures and collaborative group discussions, enhanced by 12 hours of hands-on fieldwork at significant cultural heritage sites, including Pura Tirta Empul and the 11th-century Goa Gajah Cave. The course benefited from the expertise of seven experienced trainers: Peder Gammeltoft (Norway), Cecille Blake (USA), Ade Komara Mulyana (Indonesia), Tjeerd Tichelaar (Netherlands), Ni Komang Aniek Purniti (Indonesia), Harry Ferdiansyah (Indonesia), and Jasper Hogerwerf (Netherlands). Their diverse backgrounds contributed to a rich learning environment that addressed multiple aspects of toponymic practices.

Looking toward future educational initiatives, the Working Group has begun planning in 2024 a Toponymic Training Course targeted for Africa in 2025 or 2026. While these plans remain in the early developmental stages, ongoing discussions are focusing on securing an appropriate venue in West Africa and determining optimal timing. The envisioned course would follow a Monday-to-Friday format, incorporating both classroom instruction and practical fieldwork components. However, progress on these plans has been hampered by persistent financial constraints, resulting in the absence of finalized arrangements.

In addition to in-person training efforts, the Working Group has an educational outreach through digital platforms. In October 2024, the Working Group collaborated with the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) to coordinate an online webinar addressing geographical names governance. This webinar, titled *Nombres Geográficos: Estandarización - Administración - Gobernanza*, represented an important step in expanding the reach of toponymic education through accessible digital formats.

2. Training Needs Assessment Survey

Recognizing the importance of tailoring educational offerings to meet the actual needs of practicing professionals, the Working Group conducted a comprehensive Training Needs Assessment Survey between December 5, 2024, and March 3, 2025. This survey (see document GEGN.2/2025/153/CRP.153)

gathered valuable insights from 31 professionals actively engaged in geographical names management across multiple continents, with the resulting data processed between March 3-7, 2025.

The survey findings revealed a significant educational gap in toponymy, with 65% of respondents reporting no formal training in geographical names management despite working in the field – a deficit consistent across Africa, South America, Europe, and Asia. This gap is particularly concerning given the technical complexity of the discipline, which requires specialized knowledge in database administration, standardization protocols, and cultural heritage. Demographically, the survey showed balanced regional representation, with mid-career professionals forming the largest experience group, and backgrounds predominantly in mapping, cartography, and geography, highlighting the field's multidisciplinary nature while emphasizing its cartographic foundations. Engagement with UNGEGN was robust among surveyed organizations, with significant participation in meetings in New York, division activities, bulletin contributions, and working groups, with only two respondents reporting no involvement with UNGEGN activities.

Based on these findings, the Working Group has developed a framework for UNGEGN training program development that focuses on three key areas: prioritization of content based on identified needs, technological implementation to support diverse learning styles, and resource optimization to maximize educational impact within existing constraints. The proposed strategy recommends an integrated educational ecosystem that combines self-paced online learning with interactive webinar components, creating a cohesive learning environment where online course modules provide foundational knowledge while scheduled webinars serve as interactive opportunities for deeper engagement.

Each priority subject would be structured as a comprehensive course with progressive modules building toward specific learning milestones. Implementation would benefit from a unified platform with seamless transitions between modules and webinar sessions, including downloadable materials for offline study to accommodate varying internet connectivity challenges across member states. Webinar sessions would be offered at various times to accommodate different time zones, with recordings available for those unable to attend live sessions. To address the preference for in-person training while acknowledging financial constraints, the strategy recommends coordinating training sessions with scheduled international meetings in related fields (such as ICA/IGA and ICOS) to maximize participation while minimizing additional expenses.

Part II: Funding Aspects

The Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy confronts significant financial challenges that substantially impact its ability to fulfill its mandate effectively. In recent years, some member states' contributions to the United Nations have steadily declined. In addition, a very insecure international climate is reducing national and stakeholder commitment to sponsoring UNGEGN activities. This has resulted in severe limitations on the organization's capacity to support experts from developing countries and will have an effect, at least in a near time perspective, on organizing essential training activities in regions where toponymic expertise is most needed.

These financial constraints pose a significant challenge to UNGEGN's mission of building capacity in geographical names standardization across all regions, particularly in developing countries where such expertise is crucial for sustainable development and cultural heritage preservation. The situation has created a growing gap between the Working Group's objectives and its ability to implement them effectively.

To address these challenges, the Working Group has been actively identifying funding opportunities to support the participation of experts from developing countries in the 2025 UNGEGN Session. As part of this initiative, a sponsorship opportunity was announced for the upcoming session scheduled for April 28 - May 2, 2025, in New York. Experts anticipating funding difficulties were invited to submit applications to the UNGEGN secretariat by January 31, 2025. These applications were to be reviewed by a special UNGEGN funding committee tasked with identifying potential funding sources and selecting successful candidates.

Unfortunately, despite these proactive efforts, the financial outlook has not improved. The United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD) continues to face significant financial constraints that limit its ability to provide support. Additionally, approaches to potential external stakeholders have not yielded positive results. Consequently, none of the applicants who sought funding support for the 2025 session have been granted assistance, further limiting participation from experts in developing nations.

At the 2023 UNGEGN meeting, the convenor of the Working Group called for the establishment of a Trust Fund, which, if successfully implemented, could potentially enhance digital training frameworks while selectively supporting in-person training where most beneficial. This Trust Fund would address the significant preference for in-person training revealed in the survey while acknowledging the financial realities facing both the UN system and member states. By directing Trust Fund resources toward high-impact regional workshops, UNGEGN could complement digital learning approaches with strategic face-to-face instruction in areas of greatest need.

Part III: Business Modalities of the Working Group

The next meeting of the Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy is scheduled to take place during the 2025 UNGEGN Session in New York. This gathering will provide an important forum for discussing ongoing funding challenges and developing strategies to address the financial constraints that currently limit the scope and impact of UNGEGN's educational initiatives in toponymy.

As a means of enhancing the Working Group's business and working modalities, the Convenor has developed a Terms of Reference to help guide and structure its activities. This is provided to the Group of Experts as a background document to inform and raise awareness of the Working Group's activities. In this regard, the Working Group seeks to increase its membership and participation and urges members of the Group of Experts to participate in its work.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Address the educational gap in toponymy identified in the survey, where 65% of professionals lack formal training, by implementing the proposed online/webinar hybrid learning model.
- (2) Consider establishing a Trust Fund to support training activities and expert participation from developing nations given current financial constraints.
- (3) Evaluate regional training initiatives and explore partnerships to maximize impact within existing resource limitations.
- (4) Note the Terms of Reference and urge members of the Group of Experts to participate in the Working Group's work