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English

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

Training needs assessment for geographical names management: survey results report **

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

Summary:

This survey instigated by the Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy gathered insights from 31 professionals involved in geographical names management across multiple continents. The results reveal key training needs, professional backgrounds, and current management practices in this specialized field.

The most sought-after training areas include geographical names database management (25 respondents), best practices in sustainable management (21), and standardization principles (19). Cultural heritage aspects and collection methodologies were also significant interests (16 each). Notably, only about one-third of respondents (11) had previously received formal training in geographical names management. For training delivery, respondents preferred in-person courses (21), followed by webinars (18) and online courses via the UNGEGN webpage (17), indicating a desire for both traditional and digital learning options.

Geographically, respondents were distributed across Africa (8), South America (8), Europe (6), and Asia (6), with minimal representation from North America (1). Experience levels varied, with 6-10 years being most common (12), followed by 15+ years (9). Professional backgrounds were predominantly in Mapping/Cartography (17) and Geography (12), with smaller representations from Administration, Linguistics, and other disciplines. For names management, Geographic Information Systems were the most common tool (22), with paper-based systems (15) and database management systems (14) also widely used. Most organizations (19) reported having sustainable structures for names management, with legal frameworks being the primary regulatory mechanism (18). The majority actively participate in UNGEGN activities, particularly meetings in New York (17) and Division activities (16).

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* GEGN.2/2025/1.
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Introduction

To assess the training needs among UNGEGN participants and stake-holders, the Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy has carried out a survey, published in UNGEGN Bulletin no. 68 and circulated to UNGEGN participants by the secretariat.

The survey comprised single choice, multiple-choice and free-text questions covering training needs, management practices, organizational structures, and UNGEGN participation. It was designed to allow respondents to select multiple options where applicable (such as for training needs, management methods, and educational background) while requiring single responses for demographic information and organizational status.

The analysis presented in this report is based on 31 complete responses received from professionals actively engaged in geographical names management across five continents. The survey was conducted between 5. December 2024 and 3. March 2025. The data was processed 3.–7. March 2025.

1. Training Needs Assessment in Geographical Names Management (Part I)

Current Situation and Training Gaps

The field of geographical names management currently faces a significant skills deficit, as revealed by this survey of 31 professionals. An overwhelming majority (65%) of respondents reported having never received formal training in the geographical names management domain, despite most respondents having considerable work experience in this field. This training deficiency spans across continents, with participants from Africa, South America, Europe, and Asia all expressing similar concerns.

The gap is particularly notable given the technical complexity of geographical names management, which encompasses database administration, standardization protocols, and cultural heritage considerations, etc. Organizations primarily rely on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and/or databases for managing geographical names, yet many professionals lack the requisite training to fully leverage these tools. This discrepancy between technological adoption and professional development represents a critical challenge that must be addressed to ensure effective geographical names management worldwide.

Priority Training Requirements

Analysis of the survey responses indicates clear priorities for professional development in geographical names management. Database management emerged as the foremost training need, with 25 respondents identifying it as essential to their work. This reflects the increasingly digital nature of geographical names management and the growing importance of database expertise. Sustainable management practices ranked second (21 respondents), underscoring a shift toward long-term planning and resource efficiency in the field. Standardization principles and methodologies followed closely (19 respondents), highlighting the ongoing efforts to establish consistent naming conventions across regions. Cultural heritage aspects and collection methodologies tied for fourth place (16 respondents each), demonstrating the dual importance of both preserving toponymic heritage and employing effective data gathering techniques. Less frequently mentioned but still significant areas include establishing standardization frameworks (13 respondents), linguistic dimensions of standardization (12 respondents), and minority language rights (9 respondents). This prioritization provides valuable guidance for developing targeted training programs that address the most pressing needs in the field.

Optimal Training Delivery Approaches

The survey results offer clear direction regarding preferred methods for delivering geographical names training. Traditional in-person training courses emerged as the leading preference (21 respondents), suggesting that direct interaction and hands-on experience remain highly valued despite technological advances. However, digital delivery methods followed closely, with webinars (18 respondents) and courses available through the UNGEGN webpage (17 respondents) demonstrating substantial support.

This nearly equal distribution among delivery preferences indicates that a multifaceted approach would best serve the community's diverse needs.

Given the global distribution of professionals across multiple continents and the varying levels of experience within the field, implementing a hybrid training model would be most effective. Such an approach would optimally combine intensive in-person workshops for practical skills development with accessible online resources for ongoing learning. Additionally, considering that most respondents work in cartography, geography, or administration, training content should be tailored to complement these disciplinary backgrounds while addressing the specific technical requirements of geographical names management.

2. Demographics and Organizational Context of Survey (Part II)

Regional Distribution and Experience Profiles

The survey reveals a diverse global representation within the geographical names management community, with participation spanning multiple continents. African and South American professionals constitute the largest groups (8 respondents each), followed by European and Asian practitioners (6 respondents each), with minimal representation from North America (1 respondent). This distribution indicates that geographical names management is a global concern with particularly strong engagement in developing regions.

The experience levels of these professionals present an interesting pattern, with mid-career practitioners dominating the field. The largest cohort (12 respondents) reports 6-10 years of experience, while 9 respondents have extensive expertise exceeding 15 years. The remaining respondents are divided between newcomers with 0-5 years of experience (6 respondents) and established professionals with 11-15 years in the field (4 respondents). This experience distribution suggests a field with good succession planning, where knowledge transfer between veterans and newer entrants could potentially address some of the training gaps identified in Part I of the survey. The concentration of professionals in the 6-10 year bracket may indicate a period of expansion in geographical names management approximately a decade ago, resulting in this current cohort of mid-career specialists.

Professional Backgrounds and Management Approaches

The educational and vocational backgrounds of geographical names professionals reveal a field dominated by specific disciplines. Mapping and cartography emerge as the predominant background (17 respondents), followed by geography (12 respondents), reflecting the spatial nature of toponymic work. Administrative backgrounds (4 respondents) and linguistics (3 respondents) appear as secondary disciplines, with various other fields including archaeology, architecture, computer science, and history represented in smaller numbers. This distribution highlights the multidisciplinary nature of geographical names management while emphasizing its strong roots in cartographic and geographic traditions.

In terms of practical implementation, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) emerge as the leading tool for names management (22 respondents), though traditional paper-based systems remain surprisingly prevalent (15 respondents). Database management systems also show significant adoption (14 respondents). The continued reliance on paper-based systems alongside digital tools suggests a field in technological transition, with organizations at different stages of digital maturity. This technological spectrum correlates with the identified training needs, particularly the strong interest in database management skills highlighted in Part I of the survey.

Organizational Infrastructure and UNGEGN Engagement

The survey provides valuable insights into the structural foundations supporting geographical names management. Most organizations (19 respondents) report having sustainable and stable structures for geographical names management, though a significant minority (9 respondents) lack such frameworks. This indicates room for organizational development in approximately 30% of the participating institutions. Regarding regulatory frameworks, legal instruments such as laws, acts, or bills are the most

common governance mechanisms (18 respondents), followed by departmental or organizational policies (11 respondents) and governmental or departmental orders (10 respondents). Notably, three respondents report having no regulations in place. These findings demonstrate varied approaches to formalizing geographical names management, with legal frameworks predominating.

International engagement through the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) appears robust, with most organizations actively participating in UNGEGN meetings in New York (17 respondents), division activities (16 respondents), and bulletin contributions (13 respondents). Working group activities also show strong engagement (12 respondents), while only two respondents report no UNGEGN involvement. This high level of international participation suggests a well-connected global community of practice that could potentially leverage these connections to address the training needs and organizational challenges identified elsewhere in the survey.

3. Strategic Framework for UNGEGN Training Program Development

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names faces both an opportunity and a challenge in developing training programs that address identified needs while working within resource constraints. Based on recent survey results, a strategic and innovative approach to training design is required to maximize impact and accessibility. This balanced approach respects budget constraints while still addressing the training preferences expressed by survey respondents, ultimately building a more robust and standardized global approach to geographical names management.

Prioritization and Integrated Approach

The survey clearly identifies geographical names database management, sustainable management practices, and standardization principles as top training priorities. These subjects should form the core of initial curriculum development. Rather than treating delivery methods as separate approaches, UNGEGN should implement an integrated educational ecosystem that combines self-paced online learning with interactive webinar components. This integration creates a cohesive learning environment where online course modules provide the foundational knowledge base, while scheduled webinars serve as interactive anchors throughout the learning journey. Each priority subject area would be structured as a comprehensive course with multiple modules that build toward specific learning milestones where webinars are strategically positioned.

The training architecture follows a progressive model where introductory content is delivered through asynchronous materials, building toward webinar sessions addressing more complex concepts requiring direct instruction and discussion. These webinars should not merely repeat online content but extend it through expert-led demonstrations and collaborative problem-solving. For example, a database management course might include online modules covering database structures, followed by a webinar where experts demonstrate practical implementation techniques.

Traditional in-person training courses emerged as the leading preference (21 respondents), suggesting that direct interaction and hands-on experience remain highly valued despite technological advances. However, in-person training, while most preferred by survey respondents, presents significant financial challenges. A strategic approach would be to develop regional training hubs, reducing travel costs while still providing face-to-face instruction. These sessions could be coordinated with scheduled international meetings and conferences within geography (e.g. ICA/IGA) and linguistics (e.g. ICOS) to maximize participation while minimizing additional expenses. An alternative option would be to hold in-person training in conjunction with UNGEGN meetings, but living costs in New York would be directly inhibitive for course participation.

Technology and Implementation

The implementation requires a unified platform where webinar sessions are embedded as required components within the online course structure. The system should allow seamless transitions between modules and webinar sessions, with integrated progress tracking. Webinar recordings automatically

become part of the course materials, creating a continuously expanding resource library that enhances the value of the training program over time.

To accommodate varying internet connectivity challenges across member states, technical specifications should include downloadable materials for offline study. A scheduling strategy offering webinar sessions at various times would accommodate different time zones, with recordings available for those unable to attend live sessions.

Resource Optimization and Trust Fund

The integrated digital approach directly addresses the nearly equal preference for in-person, web-based courses and webinars indicated in the survey while streamlining resource allocation. This model is particularly relevant considering the call by the convenor of the Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy at the 2023 UNGEGN meeting for the establishment of a Trust Fund.

If successfully implemented, this Trust Fund would enhance the digital training framework while selectively supporting in-person training where most beneficial. The fund would address the significant preference for in-person training revealed in the survey while acknowledging financial realities facing both the UN system and member states. By directing Trust Fund resources toward high-impact regional workshops, UNGEGN could complement the integrated digital approach with strategic face-to-face instruction.

Assessment and Sustainability

The integrated approach enables comprehensive assessment through knowledge checks in online modules and evaluation of application skills during webinar participation. A certification system recognizing completion would incentivize full participation and provide tangible evidence of expertise development.

This balanced training strategy respects budget constraints while addressing the learning preferences expressed by survey respondents. It creates a sustainable model that can evolve over time as additional resources become available through the Trust Fund. By beginning with core digital implementation and expanding toward selective in-person components, UNGEGN can build capacity systematically across all priority areas.

The ultimate goal should be developing a global community of practice in geographical names management with standardized approaches and shared expertise. This integrated training framework provides the foundation for such a community while maximizing accessibility and impact within existing resource constraints. As the program grows, it can expand to encompass all identified training needs, creating a comprehensive approach to toponymic education worldwide.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

(1) Express its views on developing tailored training programs to address the significant training gap of, where the majority of respondents in this survey reported no prior training in geographical names management.

(2) Consider approaches for delivering training through multiple complementary formats, a) including in-person courses, b) webinars, and c) resources via the UNGEGN webpage.

(3) Discuss potential consideration of mentorship programs for addressing the varying stages of organizational development across regions, from well-established systems with comprehensive legal frameworks to emerging structures with limited resources.
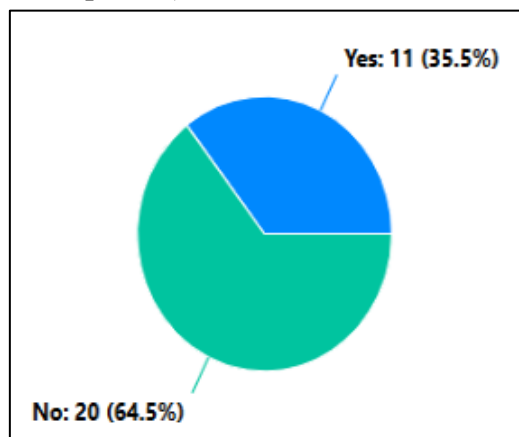
Appendix: Statistical overview of survey results

PART I: TRAINING NEEDS

**Ia: What kind of training in management of geographical names do you feel a
need for? (Multiple choice, 132 responses)**
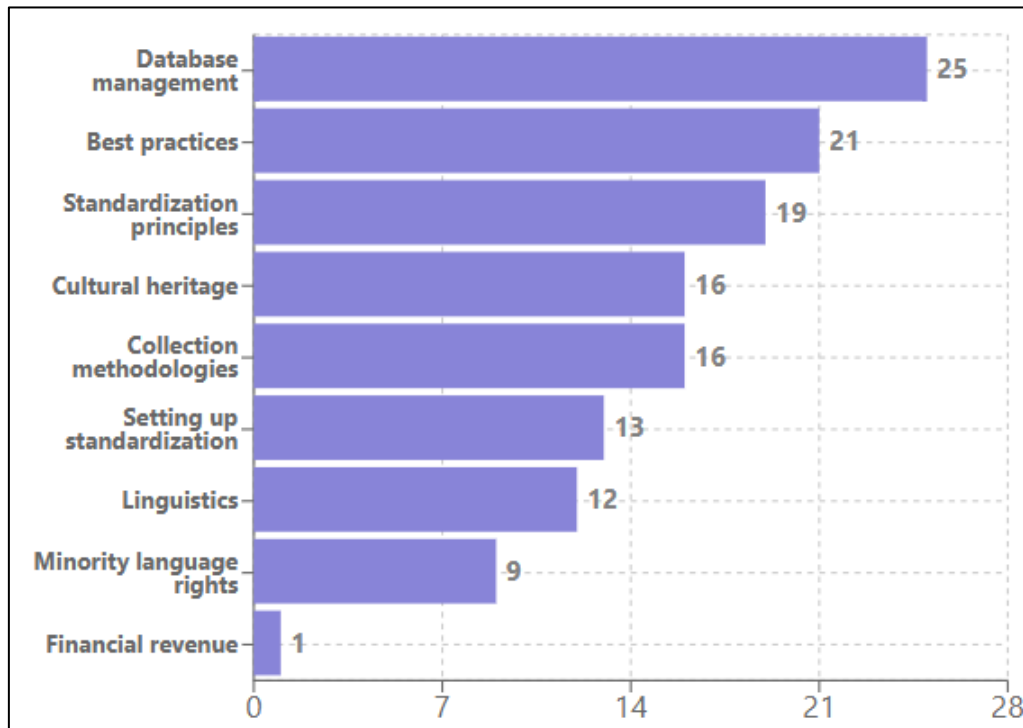
**Ib: Have you previously received geographical names training?
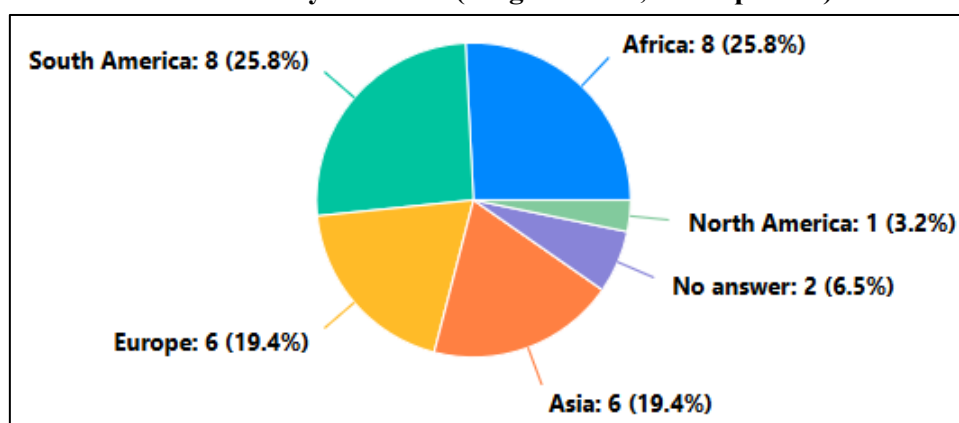(Single choice, 31 responses)**

Ic: How would you like to receive geographical names training?
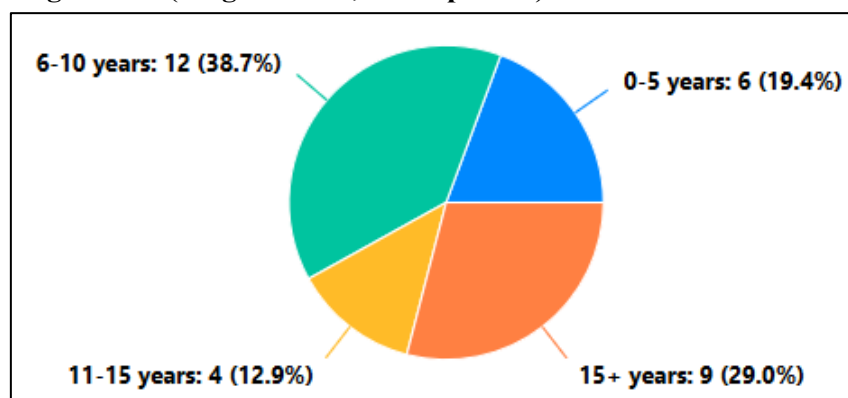**(Multiple choice, 56 responses)**

In-person training courses: 21 (37.5%)
Webinars: 18 (32.1%)
Courses available via UNGEGN webpage: 17 (30.4%)
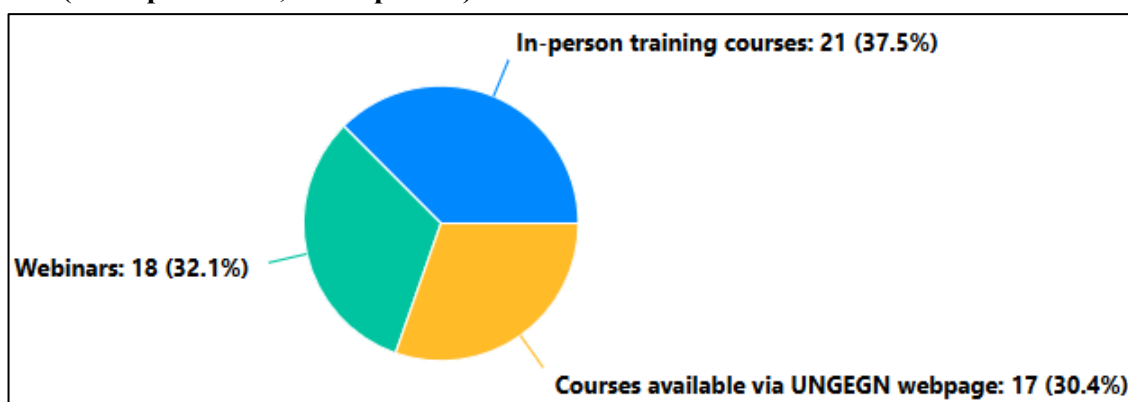
PART II: YOU AND YOUR WORK IN GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES MANAGEMENT

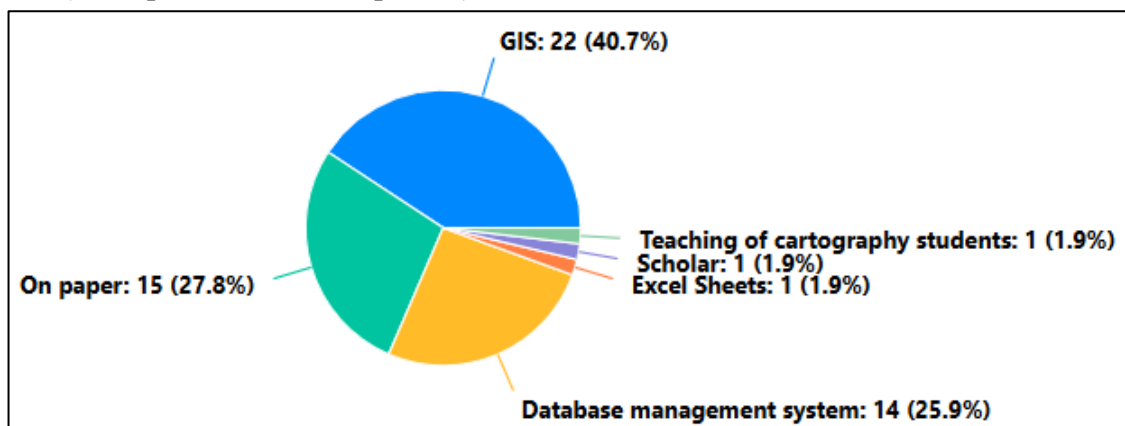**IIa: Which continent are you from? (Single choice, 29 responses)**

South America: 8 (25.8%)
Africa: 8 (25.8%)
North America: 1 (3.2%)
No answer: 2 (6.5%)
Europe: 6 (19.4%)
Asia: 6 (19.4%)

IIb: How many years have you worked with geographical names management? (Single choice, 31 responses)

6-10 years: 12 (38.7%)
0-5 years: 6 (19.4%)
11-15 years: 4 (12.9%)
15+ years: 9 (29.0%)

IIc: What educational or vocational background do you have?
    (Multiple choice, 45 responses)

Mapping/Cartography: 17 (42.5%)
Computer science: 1 (2.5%)
Communication and IT: 1 (2.5%)
Architecture: 1 (2.5%)
Archaeology: 1 (2.5%)
Linguistics: 3 (7.5%)
Administration: 4 (10.0%)
Geography: 12 (30.0%)
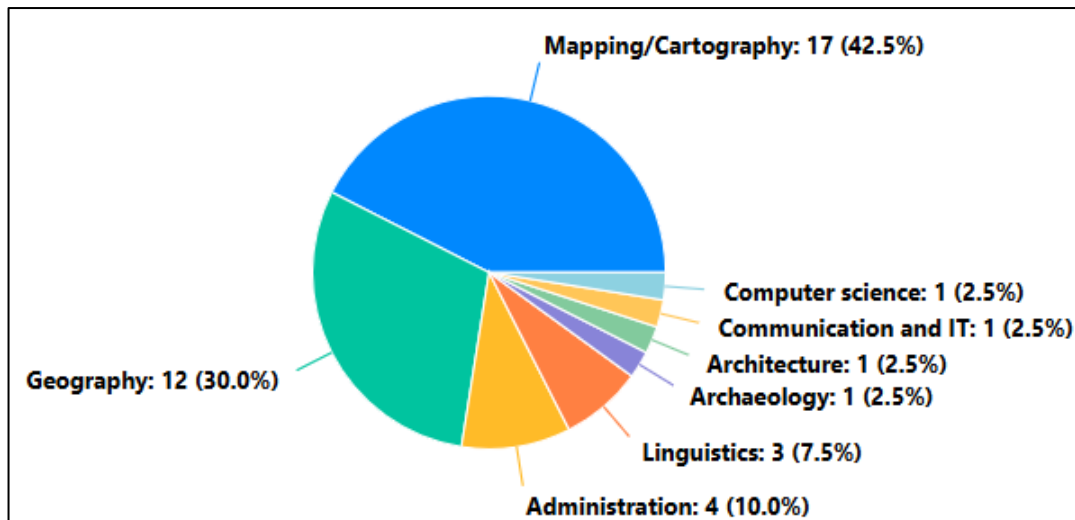
IId: How do you manage geographical names in your organization?
    (Multiple choice, 54 responses)

GIS: 22 (40.7%)
Teaching of cartography students: 1 (1.9%)
Scholar: 1 (1.9%)
Excel Sheets: 1 (1.9%)
On paper: 15 (27.8%)
Database management system: 14 (25.9%)

IIe: Does your organization have a sustainable and stable organisation for geographical names management?
(Converted open text choice, 31 responses)
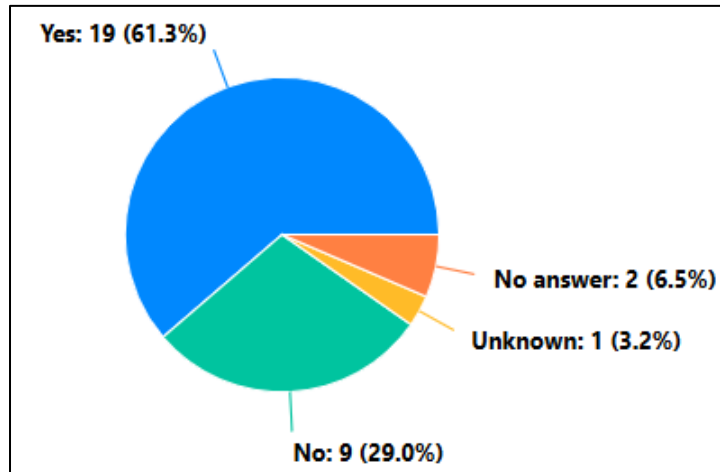
IIf: Do you have regulations in place for geographical names management?
(Multiple choice, 42 responses)
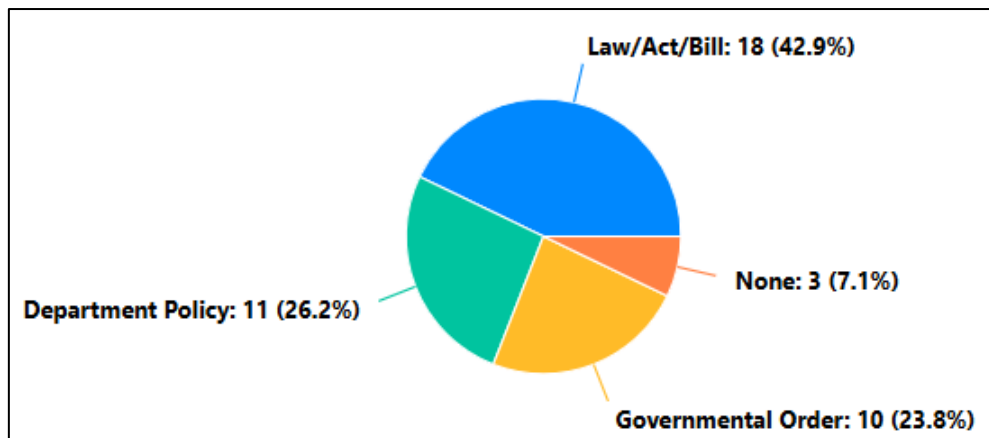
IIg: Does your organization regularly attend UNGEGN?
(Multiple choice, 60 responses)