United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
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Technical expertise: geographical names data management

Background document
Available in English only

Towards a Governance Structure for the World Geographical Names Database
Prepared by the UNGEGN Secretariat

Towards a Governance Structure for the World Geographical Names Database

The World Geographical Names Database (WGND) is a key initiative under the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), providing a publicly available platform for UNGEGN's approved names. The database is designed to provide authoritative and standardized geographical names at the global level. This document outlines the governance structure that ensures the efficient and transparent management of the WGND.

Governance Framework

The governance of the WGND is proposed to be focused within the UNGEGN Working Group on Geographical Names Data Management, overseen the UNGEGN Bureau and Secretariat, with additional and thematic input from UNGEGN Working Groups (lead by their Convenors/Coordinators) as necessary, and is supported by member state engagement.

Oversight Bodies

The UNGEGN Core Bureau[1] provides overall strategic oversight of the WGND. Its key responsibilities include:

- Approving major updates and modifications to the database.

- Ensuring compliance with UN standards and mandates.

The UNGEGN Working Group on Geographical Names Data Management would provide expert guidance, with the input of other Working Groups, as required, on:

- Review and input on geographic data (of both data from the UN system and Member States).

- Standardization methodologies.

- Setting policies and strategic direction, in conjunction with the UNGEGN Bureau.

- Conflict resolution regarding naming disputes.

The UNGEGN Secretariat, hosted within the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), is responsible for:

- Day-to-day management and coordination of the WGND.

- Ensuring compliance with UN data governance policies.

- Handling queries and liaising with stakeholders.

- Implementing UUIDs.

The UNGEGN Secretariat is supported with the WGND with the Geospatial Information Section of the Office of Information and Communication Technology.

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[1] Composed of the Chair, Vice Chairs and Rapporteur

Data Management and Standardization

The WGND follows UNGEGN's guidelines for standardization, ensuring that:

- Geographical names are recorded in their official and standardized forms.

- Transliteration rules are applied consistently.

- Data is updated regularly through member state contributions.

Stakeholder Engagement

The WGND could potentially expand to cover various thematic areas. This situation is further compounded due to the variety of institutions across the United Nations System and Member States that have responsibility, or could feed into or provide relevant data beyond countries and cities. These include:

- UN Member States and national naming authorities.

- United Nations system (e.g., UNESCO).

- International organizations (e.g. EuroGeographics).

- Academic institutions and the public for data validation and research collaboration.

- Other institutions maintaining geographical names.

Issue Resolution Mechanism

A structured approach is adopted for handling naming issues:

- Issues first reviewed by the UNGEGN Secretariat, supported by the Geospatial Information Section within the Office of Information and Communications Technology (OICT).

- Options for resolution are referred to the Member State raising the issue, with the oversight of the UNGEGN Bureau.

- Consensus-based decisions are sought in alignment with UN principles.

Review and Amendments

This governance document is to be reviewed as appropriate, expected to be every four years, by the Working Group on Geographical Names Data Management and updated as needed to reflect evolving best practices and technological advancements.