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## United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names 2025 session

New York, 28 April–2 May 2025

Item 5 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

**Technical expertise: names collection, office treatment, features  
beyond a single sovereignty and international cooperation**

### **Dynamic interplay of use, meaning and origin in geographical names standardization**

#### **Summary\*\***

As our global society becomes increasingly interconnected, the standardization of geographical names faces complex challenges in balancing modern societal requirements in cultural preservation. The report provides an examination of the dynamic interplay among three fundamental elements of geographical names – use, meaning and origin – and their implications for evidence-based standardization practices.

The relationship between those elements forms a complex system of continuous influence and evolution. Each element shapes and transforms the others through patterns of interaction that naming authorities must understand in order to manage standardization processes effectively. Historical origins inform initial meanings and usage patterns, while contemporary usage can transform meanings and create distance from historical origins. Similarly, cultural significance drives both historical research and modern application. Modern digital technologies, international commerce and global communications create unprecedented demand for standardized geographical names. Simultaneously, there is growing recognition of geographical names as repositories of historical, cultural and cosmological knowledge. That complexity requires sophisticated approaches to standardization that can serve both practical needs and cultural preservation goals.

The implementation of evidence-based standardization must draw from an expanded range of sources beyond traditional written records. While archival documents remain crucial, geographical names authorities now recognize the equal importance of oral histories, traditional knowledge systems and community memory. That broadened understanding of valid evidence requires new methodological

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\* [GEGN.2/2025/1](#).

\*\* The full report was prepared by Peder Gammeltoft (Norway), Norwegian Language Collections, University of Bergen. The report will be available at [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/4th\\_session\\_2025/](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/4th_session_2025/), in the language of submission only, as document GEGN.2/2025/7/CRP.7.



approaches for documenting and verifying naming information from diverse sources. Indigenous knowledge systems present opportunities and challenges. Traditional knowledge often preserves crucial information about place names through oral transmission, ceremonial practices and cultural memory. Standardization authorities must develop appropriate protocols for gathering and validating that information while respecting cultural sensitivities and Indigenous rights to knowledge management.

Looking ahead, geographical names standardization must continue to adapt to changing technological capabilities while strengthening its commitment to cultural heritage preservation. That includes developing more sophisticated approaches to data management, enhancing international collaboration and creating more inclusive standardization processes. Success requires sustained commitment from naming authorities to developing systems that can effectively manage complexity while serving diverse user needs.

The future of geographical names standardization lies in creating flexible yet robust systems that can accommodate both technological advancement and cultural preservation needs. That requires ongoing dialogue and collaboration among naming authorities, technical experts, cultural knowledge holders and other stakeholders to develop approaches in geographical names standardization management to implement methods for recording the use, meaning and origin of geographical names.

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