

10 March 2025

English

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

2025 session

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 8 (b) of the provisional agenda *

**Culture, heritage and language recognition: Indigenous, minority
and regional languages and multilingual issues.**

Focus Group on Indigenous geographical names

Submitted by Canada**

Summary:

Under the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, the focus group on Indigenous geographical names, led by Canada, aims to support the international recognition and promotion of the significance of geographical names that originate from Indigenous languages. It also aims to support Member States in establishing, updating or improving their operational and standardization practices related to Indigenous geographical naming.

Representatives of interested Member State participated in the first official meeting of the focus group at a side event during the 2023 session of the Group of Experts, on 3 May 2023. Participants introduced themselves, outlined their interests and identified next steps. Since then, the membership has expanded and efforts have been underway to revitalize activities. The focus group met on 26 November, 2024, and is exploring areas of work for 2025. That work could include developing terms of reference, establishing an a web presence linked to existing information on Indigenous geographical names; exploring Member State experiences; and potentially, collecting information on Indigenous geographical names and languages through surveys, including a survey related to the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Member States that wish to participate and provide input, guidance or support to the focus group are invited to email their expressions of interest to the following address: geonames-toponymes@nrcan-rncan.gc.ca.

* GEGN.2/2025/1

** Prepared by Nicole Halseth, Kisik Shirt, Steve Westley, Canada, Natural Resources Canada

Background and Context

The *UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029* identifies several cultural and heritage priorities within Strategy 4: Culture, heritage and language recognition. It calls for the formation of “several formalized, structured and active Focus Groups,” including one for “Geographical names in relation to minorities and indigenous people” under the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage (p.24).¹

At a side event during the UNGEGN Session on 3 May 2023, Canada convened the first meeting of the Focus Group and proposed to direct the work primarily on Indigenous geographical names. Additionally, for the UNGEGN Session in 2023, Canada submitted a report with background and progress of the Focus Group under the title: “Focus group on Indigenous and minority language geographical names.”² Both names: *Focus Group on Indigenous Geographical Names*; and, *Focus group on Indigenous and minority language geographical names*, have been used to refer to the activities of this Focus Group.

Indigenous geographical names are rich in meaning: they impart traditional knowledge of the land, its geography and its natural resources. They also communicate Indigenous worldviews, stories and teachings. Indigenous geographical names can help all peoples understand the deep histories of where they live and can be tools for monitoring the changes of a place through time.

Supporting the promotion and official recognition of Indigenous geographical names also supports the revitalization and promotion of Indigenous languages as a vital part of cultural heritage. According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Indigenous Peoples speak “more than 4,000 of the world’s languages,” many of which are under threat to “become extinct or seriously endangered.”³ Countries and communities around the world are now focused on drawing attention to and addressing this critical issue, including through the use of Indigenous geographical names.

Alignment with broader UN activities

In colonial histories and continuing in the present day, Indigenous geographical names have often been ignored, erased, renamed or replaced, along with the cultures and languages of the people. Official recognition and restoration are now necessary, and efforts in various nations are underway to this end, in collaboration with other international activities. This includes efforts related to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (the Declaration) and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, as well as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Where possible, the efforts of the Focus Group align with these and other United Nations (UN) activities to support coordinated action, while ensuring actions taken are appropriately adapted to the context of geographical names. For example,

¹ [UNSD — United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names](#)

² [GEGN.2/2023/83/CRP.83, Report](#)

³ [United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Backgrounder](#).

the most recent *UNGEGN Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names (Revised)*, includes references to ‘Indigenous’ with a lower case ‘i’: ‘indigenous.’⁴ On 15 December 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a report on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, containing one draft resolution of the same name ([A/77/460](#)). The resolution “adopts the use of capital letters in official documents when referring to ‘Indigenous Peoples’, as well as Indigenous persons, Indigenous children and Indigenous women, among others.”⁵ This discussion on terminology is ongoing for the Focus Group.

Focus Group Activities

The current focus of this group is to support the international promotion and recognition of the significance of Indigenous geographical names, as well as to support Member States in establishing, updating or improving their operational and standardization practices related to Indigenous geographical names. As the group is in the process of revitalizing activities for 2024-2025 and beyond, the scope and activities of the group may change following the 10 March 2025 report submission deadline.

The Focus Group convened meetings on 3 May 2023, and virtually on 26 November 2024 and 3 March 2025. Activities are ongoing, and this present report addresses activities in the intersessional period up to submission of the report on 10 March 2025.

Current activities are oriented towards progress under the *UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work*, as well as preparing guiding documents for the operation of the group. A Terms of Reference is being developed and will be made available online when approved by Focus Group members. The document will include common definitions for key terms, the objectives and functions of the group, as well as its general governance structure to guide future activities.

Focus Group members determined that one of their main priorities in the short term is to make existing UNGEGN materials related to Indigenous or minority language geographical names more widely accessible by posting them on a new UNGEGN webpage. These resources have been compiled thanks to the generous contributions of members. Resources include, for example, relevant UNGEGN Bulletin documents since 2015, as well as Conference and Session documents since 2000. These resources will be made available on the UNGEGN website under a new section, which is also under development by a smaller team of Focus Group members, in collaboration with the UNGEGN Secretariat. Once the webpage is live, the resource document, Terms of Reference, and other documents or materials determined by the Focus Group will be posted as needed.

The Focus Group is also exploring other opportunities related to its mandate, as they become available. For example, in January 2025, the Focus Group engaged the Global Task Force for Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages regarding a global survey developed by the Task Force to monitor progress under the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL). The Focus Group

⁴ [Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names](#)

⁵ [General Assembly Adopts Annual Resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | United Nations For Indigenous Peoples](#)

submitted questions to be considered for inclusion in this survey, specifically relating to Activity 5.2 of the IDIL Global Action Plan, which targets the use of Indigenous languages on official signage, under Ad Hoc Group 3 – ‘Recognition, status, and implementation of policy for the Indigenous languages.’ Finally, exploring and discussing Member State experiences related to Indigenous and minority language geographical names, and associated challenges, opportunities and good practices, remains a key topic of interest for future exploration.

At the virtual meeting of the Focus Group on 3 March 2025, the upcoming UNGEGN session (April 28-May 2) and the associated report of the Focus Group were discussed, as well as updates on key activities including the webpage. The Focus Group has applied to host a side event on the margins of the UNGEGN session to meet in person and continue discussions with members.

Looking ahead, the Focus Group looks forward to building on the progress to date in support of Indigenous and minority language geographical names and the *UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029*. It will continue to explore opportunities as they arise and will work to coordinate efforts with other initiatives and organizations, including under the UN, as needed.

Related Links:

- [UNSD — United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names](#)
- [UNESCO Atlas of world's languages in danger](#)

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Take note of the present report and progress of the Focus Group on Indigenous Geographical Names in the intersessional period.
- (2) Express its views on priorities and topics of interest related to Indigenous and minority language geographical names.
- (3) Encourage Member States/National Names Authorities to join the Focus Group.