UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Advancing geographical names standardization through inclusive, culturally-informed and evidence-based solutions to support sustainable development

2025 Session | 28 April – 2 May 2025 | @UNSD_GEGN, #2025UNGEGN

UNESCO — Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'éducation, la science et la culture

uniTwin

Chaire UNESCO en toponymie inclusive "Dénommer le Monde"

UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE

Panel discussion 1 Monday 28th April 2025
"Advancing geographical names standardization through inclusive,
culturally-informed and evidence-based solutions to support sustainable development"

How to promote "minority" toponymies through inclusive place naming?

*Plea for vernacular participatory toponymic diagnostics
during addressing and digital mapping operations*

Frédéric Giraut, Université de Genève, Chaire Unesco en Toponymie inclusive
On an academic basis, without committing Unesco

Why inclusivity in toponymy?

International commitments

➤ Indirectly with **SDGs 5, 11 and 16**,

➤ Directly with ***European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*** (1992) and the ***United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*** (2007)

Minority toponymies invisibility = Loss of knowledge, memory, heritage and creativity

Which toponymies should be included or considered?

The **under-visiblised or under-considered ones**

We use the **concept of Minority toponymies** encompassing:

➢ **Indigenous place names**, especially in postcolonial context;

➢ Original, ancient and vernacular place names in **minority and regional languages**;

➢ **Vernacular neotoponyms** produced by local communities and immigrants, especially in **informal settlements**;

➢ Claimed personalities or event names for a **postcolonial and gender rebalancing in street naming**.

What has been done?

Some progress …

➢Development of **multilingual signage practices**

➢Increasing initiatives to **restore indigenous place names**

➢Growing initiatives in **decolonizing and feminising streetscapes**

… but setbacks, recessions, risks and delays

- ➢ Numerous cases of **toponymic cleansing at large scale**: conquest, external hegemony leading to negation of presences, cultures, and memories
- ➢ **Backtracking on regional autonomies in place naming** and multliligual signage: loss of autonomy, hegemony of the majority language and references
- ➢ **Top down street addressing** ignoring vernacular place naming, participative process and creativity
- ➢ **Homogenisation and hegemony through a) translation** from national or regional languages and references, including in multilingual signage systems b) **imposition of the generic descriptor** in place names from the hegemonic language
- ➢ **Jurisdictional homogenical approach to toponymy**: one territory = one sovereignty = one language=one memory, which prevents the recognition of vernacular practices and knowledges
- ➢ Confusing the functional rigour of standardisation for official nomenclature with the **denial of toponymic plurality**

What could be done? or When and How including?

The digital turn: opportunities for inclusive toponymy

1) The digital cartographic revolution is redistributing toponymic maps away from informational sovereignty: private (Google Maps, Here, TomTom …) and collaborative (mainly OSM) mapping plateforms are now used in all current navigation software and for infovision

> the possibility of **promoting vernacular knowledge and making it more visible, at least in alternative place-name repositories such as OSM allows**

2) Street Addressing policies promoted worldwide by the Universal Postal Union and World Bank, are required by both, new services and geolocation demand

> the possibility of **vernacular and memorial toponymic inventories,** and the further development of a **multilingual approach to promote invisible memories**

First Recommendations

- Organising and **promoting exploratory participatory toponymic diagnoses (or inventories)** based on vernacular evidence, then systematically **during addressing and mapping operations**, following the example of archaeological or environmental diagnoses that may exist for development operations.

- Supplementing official toponymic databases (nomenclature) with **vernacular and minorities databases or inventories or repositories** and related set of proposals for future or alternative place naming, and potentially leading to inclusive signage and mapping.

- Drawing up a **specific charter** and developing **specific sections of former charters and declarations** (European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, etc.) **on principle of toponymic non-hegemony and inclusive toponymic rights** in relation to issues of minority and vernacular cultures, languages, presences and memory in public space.