



United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names Contribution to the 2021 High Level Political Forum

“Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”.

1. For nearly 60 years, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) has been promoting the recording of locally-used names reflecting the languages and traditions of a country. The Group’s goal is for every country to have a fully functioning and globally-aligned structure and policy framework, based on common principles for national standardization of authorized geographical names that identify location and respect the associated culture and heritage, and to have these names easily accessible for national and international use. UNGEGN’s cooperative framework consisting of its Bureau, 24 geographical/linguistic divisions, nine topical working groups and liaison representatives, promotes geographical names standardization through its resolutions, sessions, technical seminars, publications, website and training activities.
2. While access to accurate and timely geographical names data and efficient and effective data management practices and procedures are fundamental to policy formulation, project and programme development, and implementation leading to sustainable development. The importance and benefits of geographical names standardization and romanization is not well known and understood by others in related disciplines. In addition, there is a lack of resources to assist Member States that have low levels of geographical names standardization. The Bureau of the Group of Experts is therefore using the opportunity of the High-Level Political Forum to highlight country case studies on the importance of standardized geographical names in management of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Cases studies were provided by experts from Austria, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia.

CASE 1

Harmonizing names of features crossed by Austria’s border as an action urged by the Covid-19 crisis

The Challenge

In the context of the spread of the Covid-19 virus and the first lockdown in spring 2020, the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior [Bundesministerium für Inneres] passed a decree ruling travel restrictions across Austrian borders listing all border crossings concerned, also the smallest (just hiking paths) in the high mountains, by the Austrian name as well as by their name in the neighboring country. The decree had obviously been elaborated in a hurry and contained not only mistakes in the spelling of names in languages

other than German, but also, e.g., in finding the correct corresponding names for the same feature. Its author(s) seems to have used several sources, not only the official Austrian topographical map published by the Federal Office of Surveying and Metrology [Bundesamt für Eich- und Vermessungswesen, BEV].

A comparison between the names in the decree and the Austrian topographical map revealed that most mistakes did not originate from this map, but that also Austria's official topographical map could contribute to an easier understanding, not only related to border crossings, but to all kinds of features cut by the border (mountain peaks, mountain ranges, forests, water bodies etc.) by (1) always representing the standardized names of the feature in both countries, if a feature bears two names; (2) clearly referring corresponding names (translated or derived from each other) to the same feature; (3) considering to harmonize type fonts and type sizes between corresponding names.

Solution

Departing from the experience that in a crisis situation like in spring 2020 reliable standardized names have to be found quickly in an easily accessible and reliable source and that this may also be of great benefit in local emergency situations, the Austrian Board on Geographical Names [Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kartographische Ortsnamenkunde, AKO] offered the BEV to check and harmonize the names along all Austrian borders with countries using official languages other than German in cooperation with place-names authorities in these other countries. This concerns the borders to Italy (430 km), Slovenia (330 km), Hungary (356 km), Slovakia (107 km), and Czechia (466 km), in total 1,689 km. The BEV gratefully accepted this offer and will implement the findings of this project on its maps as soon as they are available. As a pilot study the Austrian border section with Slovenia has been taken under investigation and yielded already first results. Other border sections will follow.

Results

The case demonstrates that even the names of under normal circumstances unimportant features can become essential overnight and that it would have been an advantage to apply to them the principles of place-name standardization in advance. It also demonstrates the importance and benefits of cooperation between national names boards and mapping agencies as well as between national names boards of neighboring countries.

Peter Jordan
Honorary Chair, Austrian Board on Geographical Names
Austria

CASE 2

Ensuring Continuity – Indonesia adapts procedures for geographical names standardization procedures during COVID-19

The Challenge

To preserve the culture, history, and local wisdom embedded in a place name, geographical names standardization is inevitable. Amid the COVID19 pandemic, due to the physical and activity limitations, names standardization faces greater challenges. Nevertheless, considering geographic names has a tight correlation with the Sustainable Development Goals achievement -since many of its goals depend on

geospatial data- the continuity of standardization is a must. Geographical names standardization's agility is being tested in the current situation.

Solution

BIG (*Badan Informasi Geospasial* - Geospatial Information Agency of Indonesia) exploring every possibility to maintain the continuity of geographical name standardization. One significant leap was to proceed with the bill regarding the governmental regulation in standardization on geographical names. The regulation was billed in 2019 and its enactment delivered in a timely manner during the pandemic. The regulation has a bold impact on the standardization of geographical names. First, it ensures that the standardization is performed continuously and annually reported to the President in the form of a gazetteer. Second, the regulation assures that the process of standardization is inclusive. It borrows the term "no one left behind," which means that every entity in the country can contribute to the process. Governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and even individuals can put their effort to help standardize the place name. Finally, the regulation ensures all the data of geographical name is appropriately managed via the utilization of SINAR (*Sistem Informasi Nama Rupabumi* - Geographical Name Information System). The System covers all aspects of geographical name standardization, from data collection (via android apps), verification (via web-based apps) through the publication of gazetteer (printed and via web). All the processes run seamlessly from end-to-end, secure, fully digital, and the most important is easy to use.

The exploration extended to the method of verification. In the normal situation before the pandemic, the verification process is performed through (physical) meetings. All the related parties gather, verify and discuss the geographical name brought to the forum. However, with physical distancing, this process cannot be executed. Therefore, BIG adapted and overcome the limitation through an available and practical solution. The rise of online meeting applications during the pandemic led BIG to experiment with the platform. Standardization in Indonesia is divided into three stages (district, province, and central verification), therefore the adaptation on the virtual meeting platform had to follow the three stages.

Results

Consequently, there is a compromise for the "new" verification process. Since the stages cannot be reduced, it affects either the duration of verification or the quantity of the geographical names verified. Therefore, if the verification process's duration is maintained as usual, then the number of geographical names will be decreased and vice versa. In general, the comparison of output quantity between regular and "new normal" verification is 5:1 (the standard process will gain five times more verified names than that via online verification).

Finally, in times of uncertainty, the government agency needs to continuously improve and adapt to the situation. The government needs to use all the possible solutions and optimize all avenues to ensure names standardization continues. In this case, as the NNA (National Name Authority) of Indonesia, BIG employs government regulation as the legal base to continue geographical name standardization and experiment with several practical solutions to maintain the verification run undisturbed. As a result, for the first time over decades, Indonesia has successfully published its national gazetteer in 2020 as tangible proof that the pandemic stops at nothing as long as the agility and spirit of adaptation exist.

Harry Ferdiansyah
BIG, Indonesia

CASE 3

The impact of the use of geographical names in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the face of COVID-19

The Challenge

The National Committee for Geographical Names in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is making efforts to spread the Romanization of geographical names in the Kingdom, but it is still suffering until the present time from the failure of the various governmental institutions in the Kingdom to understand the idea of Romanization of geographical names, especially when presenting the geographical names of administrative regions, governorates, cities, and neighborhoods in a language other than Arabic.

The Kingdom's government was overly concerned about the spread of infection not only among Al Qatīf population, who tend to engage in many social gatherings, but also villages adjacent to the province through workplaces, friends, and relatives. The kingdom has taken a courageous step by the help of geographical maps and place name data bases to isolate the entire province to contain the spread of the coronavirus outside Al Qatīf and its environs.

Solution

Travel between provinces was banned, and some cities and regions with cases of the virus were virtually closed, in addition of prohibiting movements among parts of cities using police force. These measures, supported by geographical maps and place name data bases.

Interactive maps and geographic information systems programs on which the geographical names appear in addition to smart applications, including the (Tawakalna) were launched in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to support pandemic precautionary and preventive measures. These applications detect the network of potential infected people before they occurred, and work to break it, by monitoring the infected person through digital geographical names maps in the operations centers. The applications developed by the National Committee on Geographical Names on iOS and Android helped in knowing some of the remote and difficult locations that are difficult to find on other maps, as well as knowing their coordinates and romanizations.

Results

The National Committee for Geographical Names in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has become a hub for all to answer the community and state official inquiries about the locations of geographical places, their pronunciation, and their physical and human geographical characteristic. The general closure policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has led to the widespread dependence of citizens on digital services on the Internet in general, and the widespread culture of use, query, and remote education. In the past world, we noticed an increase in the number of views for the geographical names' explorer site for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the number of explorer application downloads increased during the year 2020.

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