



## UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Strengthening relationships, links and connections in geographical names  
standardization and for sustainable development and pandemic recovery

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### United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names Contribution to the 2024 High Level Political Forum on sustainable development

*“Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda and eradicating poverty in times of multiple crises: the effective delivery of sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions.”*

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#### *Introduction*

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1. “The writing of geographical names on maps and other documents has long been a source of difficulty and confusion and an obstacle to smooth progress and understanding in many economic, social and scientific activities, both national and international.” For example, place names having different names in different languages, the use of the same name for different populated places in the same country, different methods of transliterating from one alphabet to another and variation in the meanings of common geographic terms. (E/CONF.53/3). Lack of standardized geographical names makes the work of map makers, statisticians, census takers and other users of maps difficult, leading to undue and harmful delay and mistakes, unnecessary research and the wasting of both time and money. Confusion is caused in the interpretation of legal and administrative documents dealing with boundaries and areas of jurisdiction. The problem of geographical names standardization becomes more complicated, particularly for countries where multiple languages are spoken.

2. In more recent decades, standardization objectives have extended beyond the practical need to identify location for the purposes of communication and navigation. Acknowledgement and recognition of culture and heritage through geographical names is important for nation building and to treat all people equitably. The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) has embraced societal expectations of inclusion and diversity in geographical naming. These less tangible ideologies recognize ‘sense of place’ and ‘sense of belonging/identity’. By restoring and celebrating them the Group of Experts seeks to achieve equitable acknowledgement for minority language and indigenous groups, as well as marginalized communities. The Group of Experts acknowledges the importance to its standardization goals of people’s connection to the landscape and the positive impact that restoration, recognition, revitalization, and protection have on surfacing ancestral, traditional and contemporary stories told from their perspectives.

3. Therefore, geographical names standardization is the prescription by a national names authority of one or more particular names, together with their precise written form, for application to a specific geographical feature, as well as the conditions for their use. National geographical names standardization is the fixing by each country of the writing of the geographical names of that country in the official administrative language or languages of that country. International geographical names standardization is the process by which nationally standardized names (oral and written) of any country are acknowledged by all other countries.

4. The Group of Experts was created with the aim to emphasize the importance of the standardization of geographical names at the national and international levels and to demonstrate the benefits to be derived from such standardization and to develop procedures and establish mechanisms for standardization in response to national requirements and particular requests (E/2001/INF/3). The Group of Experts 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 preserve the associated culture and heritage, and to have these names easily accessible for national and international use.

5. UNGEGN's cooperative framework consisting of its Bureau, 24 geographical/linguistic divisions, six topical working group, four task teams and liaison representatives, promotes geographical names standardization through its resolutions, sessions, technical seminars, publications, website and training activities.

6. The successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and achieving a more resilient world requires strong global solidarity, scaled-up international and regional cooperation, strengthened data collection and analysis systems, and the forging of innovative partnerships with multiple stakeholders to support national efforts. Geographical names are a fundamental spatial data theme that underpin data collection, monitoring and analysis, and therefore are necessary for managing and monitoring all seventeen SDG's. The importance and benefits of geographical names standardization including romanization is not well known and understood by others in related disciplines. The Bureau of the Group of Experts welcomes the opportunity of the High-Level Political Forum to share the work being done by Member States in supporting the achievement of the SDGs through the use of standardized geographical names.

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*Impacts of multiple crises on the implementation of SDGs 1, 2, 13, 16 and 17 from the vantage point of your intergovernmental / expert body.*

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1. The absence of comprehensive and integrated systems that includes the geographical names for streets, neighborhoods, squares and public facilities, makes communication among people, public service institutions, civil society and business, and the delivery of services very difficult. Therefore, the absence of standardized naming services represents a social and economic challenge, and therefore naming urban landscapes, developing the regulatory and legislative environment for them, and linking these names in addition to geographical names to services, must become a key infrastructure to resolve these challenges, particularly in large cities impacted by rapid urban development.

2. The existence of geographical names and names of urban landmarks such as neighborhoods, suburbs, streets, parks and squares are an integral part of the legal identity of individuals, as these names are part of their addresses in their personal or legal capacity.

3. At the social level, the presence of names for urban landmarks supports the provision of public services such as water, electricity, post, municipal, telecommunications, health, recreation, environmental and emergency services, and the provision of security services to maintain security and stability for communities. The presence of standardized urban landmark names also supports the efforts of health and environmental stakeholders in combating and eliminating the spread of infectious diseases. Information is generated, presented and interpreted based on named areas, places or features that people can identify. For

example, health demographics of COVID-19 cases can be represented on a map of an area, helping to assess impact, severity, infections, need and priority for response.

4. At the economic level, standardized geographical names facilitate the safe preservation and protection of land and property assets for their owners, and thus represent clear support for the economic system and increase the chances of economic stability, as the preservation of property rights for real estate records requires locating them within urban and rural areas with a clear spatial identity and guarantee for real estate.

5. The availability of geographical names and urban landmark names, means businesses will undoubtedly make significant progress, where merchants will be able to recognize and expand their customers' locations. Thus, it will be easy to enhance opportunities to increase local and international trade exchange between merchants and consumers, and as the world is witnessing an amazing and rapid development in the ICT sector, the clarity of these names and their root in the titles that endorse products from a region will be a major reason for the growth of e-commerce.

*Based on [GEGN.2/2023/94/CRP.94](#), Prepared by Ali bin Hassan Bakhit, Assistant Undersecretary for Spatial Development, Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*

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*Three key areas where sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions for achieving the SDGs are being effectively delivered, especially related to the cluster of SDGs under review in 2024, considering the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the Goals and targets.*

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1. In recognition of the 2030 Agenda and to strengthen its contribution to the broader UN global agenda, in 2018 the Group of Experts amended its Provisional Agenda to include the item “Social and economic benefits, supporting sustainable development, measures taken and proposed for the implementation of resolutions and evaluation of the work of the Group of Experts”. In addition, the Group’s theme of its biennial sessions is based on that of the High-Level Political Forum. Therefore, the country success stories that will follow are based on the theme "Strengthening relationships, links and connections in geographical names standardization and for sustainable development and pandemic recovery".

### *The use of Geographical Names in response to an Earthquake in West Java Province, Indonesia, November 2022*

2. On 21 November 2022 at 13:21:10 (UTC+7:00), a 5.6-magnitude earthquake hit Cianjur Regency, West Java, Indonesia. Official records stated that 602 people died and, 916 people were severely injured and 59,889 houses were damaged. The earthquake also affected most public facilities, including 701 educational facilities, 18 health facilities, 281 houses of worship, and 18 government buildings. The earthquake also triggered landslides near the epicenter, particularly in Cugenang District's Cijedil, Galudra, and Sukamulya Villages.

3. The West Java Province had been actively creating their geographical names database and had verified 88,430 out of 104,365 collected geographical names. Specifically, in Cianjur Regency, there are 31,835 data collected, and 27,731 of them have been verified. Most data collected in Cianjur Regency are geographical names of houses of worship, residence, transportation, and educational facilities, with more than 4,000 data.

4. During the emergency response phase, the Geospatial Information Agency (Badan Informasi Geospasial - BIG), as the National Names Authority and the National Mapping Agency of Indonesia, provided geospatial data and information to the public, so emergency-response teams could use them to conduct search and rescue missions and implement response plans. Geographical names data consisting of village names, administrative areas, and public facilities were used to evacuate victims during search and rescue operations carried out by professional emergency-response teams and local authorities. These data were also utilized to speed up the logistics distribution and reporting process, as well as spatially analyze the affected areas. Furthermore, the Communication and Information Technology Office of West Java Province extracted geographical names representing public open space or open fields from the SINAR database to identify prospective emergency shelter locations.

5. In addition, the West Java Provincial Government and the Cianjur Regency Government are working together to create a digital platform utilizing geographical names data, to meet the massive and measurable logistical needs. This platform, called Pisodapur (Pusat Informasi dan Koordinasi Gempa Cianjur - Coordination and Information Centre of Cianjur Earthquake), is dedicated to disseminating information to the public about earthquake-related casualties, damaged homes, affected areas, the latest news on earthquake-related information, and donation reports.

6. In order to facilitate the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of the disaster, geographical name data was superimposed onto the affected landslide zones. The geographical name data was used to determine the types of features that were impacted by the earthquake. The results indicated that the geographical names of tourism, arts, culture, and transportation in Cijedil Village were the most affected by the landslides, while the geographical names of houses of worship and transportation in Sukamulya Village were the most impacted. Further investigation revealed that there are certain geographical names that have associations with the potential natural disasters. In Cianjur Regency, specifically in Warungkondang District, there is a village named Cieundeur. Cieundeur is from Sunda language. “Ci” means water and “endeur” means to vibrate or shake.

7. Standardizing geographical names is important not only for effective governance but also for managing disasters. Geographical names can serve as primary or supporting information during different stages of a disaster, aiding in evaluation and analysis. The collection and standardization of geographical names by all stakeholders have enabled their effective use in disaster management. Additionally, studying the stories, histories, and reasons behind these names reveals their potential for alerting individuals to impending earthquake disasters and aiding in mitigation efforts.

*Extracted from [GEGN.2/2023/44/CRP.44](#), prepared by Harry Ferdiansyah, Tika Dwi Saputri, Aji Putra Perdana and Arifah Trisnawati of the Geospatial Information Agency, Elis Rosmakania of government of Cianjur Regency and Siti Ratnasih of the provincial government of West Java.*

8. A central tenet of UNGEGN’s operations is forging and maintaining liaison relations with relevant organizations. This principle/objective is included in the Group of Experts [Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029](#), at Strategy 2, Relationships, links and connections. The objective is to strengthen UNGEGN’s existing collaborations vis-à-vis other United Nations organs activities and programmes. The following cases were taken from New Zealand and Indonesia, which shares the work being done to ‘enable meaningful connections between people, places and language through four goals: naming places, outreach, using official names and improving capability and processes’ (New Zealand’s Geographic Board vision statement).

### *Strengthening relationships, links and connections in New Zealand's geographical naming*

9. All liaison, networking or collaboration with clients, customers, contractors, stakeholders, peers, public, government agencies, local authorities, private organizations, etc. is hugely important for New Zealand's national naming authority, the New Zealand Geographic Board. Collaborations and relations allow the authority to gather on-the-ground information, views and reactions, and strengthens the legitimacy of their decisions. Engaging effectively contributes to the development of effective policies, assists them in providing robust advice, and helps to deliver improved outcomes.

10. To successfully implement its mandate, the Authority works closely with the Minister of Land Information, Central Government agencies (the Māori Language Commission, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, Ministry of Education, Transport Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade etc.), and local government. Conducting public consultation with local communities is essential to securing robust, enduring, consistent, accurate and standardized geographic naming, taking into account the public's view is critical to informed decision making. Maintaining relations with international groups such as the Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names is necessary to address undersea feature names in cases of maritime safety, exploration and to ensure that their maritime names are accepted for use internationally. In addition, strengthening relationships with third parties using geographic names in their products, whether commercially or open source, is crucial to ensure authoritative naming information is used.

11. This example from New Zealand shows that creating and maintaining relationships is at the core of the national and international geographical names standardization process.

*Extracted from UNGEGN Bulletin no. 65, August 2023, article prepared by Wendy Shaw, Secretary/Hēkeretari, New Zealand Geographic Board Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa*

### *Indonesia - Building Bonds with Academia*

12. Indonesia comprises more than 17,000 islands and the government is therefore challenged to collect geographical names across the entire nation while preserving the historical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and customary diversity tied to each geographical name. In response to this challenge, the National Names Authority (NNA), known as Badan Informasi Geospasial (BIG), collaborates with educational institutions to introduce students to the importance of geographical names. This collaboration aimed to establish a strategic partnership in the standardization of geographical names.

13. Collaborative initiatives featured workshops and public lectures with technical institutes and universities, thus establishing a solid partnership between BIG and academics in the geographical names activities. This yielded positive results, such as increasing awareness among academics about the importance of geographical names and preserving valuable local wisdom related to toponymy. Furthermore, nurturing a geospatially inclined generation from an early stage is expected to stimulate innovative strategic partnerships that consistently enhance and excel the field of toponymy. This partnership represents a long-term investment in human resources, driving the development and growth of the geospatial field while preserving Indonesia's diverse linguistic and cultural heritage. Through such collaborations, Indonesia is poised to make significant strides in toponymy, ensuring accurate documentation of geographical names and fostering a deeper appreciation for their multifaceted significance.

*Extracted from UNGEGN Bulletin no. 65, August 2023, article prepared by Harry Ferdiansyah, Kiki Nur Putra and Faqih Rohmatulloh, from the Toponym Sub Division, Geospatial Information Agency, Indonesia*

***China innovatively uses television programming to promote geographical names awareness and strengthen its culture and heritage***

14. The Ministry of Civil Affairs and the China Media Group jointly produced and broadcast the television programme, China Geographical Names Competition in 2019. Geographical names are an essential part of Chinese traditional culture and a living fossil of history and culture. The programme was created to protect the heritage of toponymic culture and build a new pattern of toponymic culture promotion. The programme innovatively introduced topics including “travelling around China with place names”, “magic mirror of place names” and “viewing place names on maps”, revealing the rules of geographical naming and renaming, interpreting the cultural connotations of place names, relating historical developments and changes, and carrying on the splendid culture of Chinese geographical names. The programme in its third season, promoted the popularization of place names by interpreting the methods of naming places, the spelling specifications of place names, and the requirements for the use of place names.

15. There has been a total of 12 issues, with two consecutive issues every Saturday and Sunday, on the Chinese International Channel (CCTV-4). The Geographical Names Competition has received extensive attention, claiming a total television viewership of more than 1.1 billion for three seasons. It has reached over 3 billion people cross-media on the whole network and has been reported by over 3,000 media outlets. It has been rated first as a special cultural variety show and has won the 26th Starlight Awards for variety TV show, and the first prize of the China Media Group 2021 for international communication literary and artistic works.

*Extracted from [GEGN.2/2023/7/CRP.7](#), prepared by the UNGEGN China Division*

16. All four cases, from Indonesia, New Zealand and China show the importance of standardized geographical names in disaster response and recovery, the importance of creating and nurturing partnerships and relations and importantly, in preserving and protecting culture and heritage to promote peaceful and cohesive communities.

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***Three examples of specific actions, policies and measures that are most urgently needed to effectively deliver sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions to eradicate poverty and reinforce the 2030 Agenda, building on interlinkages and transformative pathways for achieving the SDGs.***

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1. Deliver technical expertise and advice to interested parties in Member States to support geographical names standardization, including romanization systems, collection and storage of quality geographical names data and gazetteer management as well as data interoperability.
2. Encourage exchange of knowledge, good practices and experience among Member States, aided by Divisions and Working Groups, to facilitate development of legislation and policies on geographical names standardization at the national level.
3. Develop funding strategies to enable UNGEGN to assist Member States in achieving national geographical names standardization and to contribute in building technical capabilities, by such

activities as developing guidelines, legislation, communication tools and databases to enhance culture, heritage and language recognition.

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*Follow-up actions and measures being undertaken by your intergovernmental / expert body to support implementation of the Political Declaration of the SDG Summit.*

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1. [The UNGEGN World Geographical Names \(WGN\) Database](#) is a repository of the short and full names of countries (193 UN Member States and two non-Member States observers), their capitals, and major cities (with population over 100,000) in a multilingual, multi-scriptural and geo-referenced format. Authoritative city [endonyms](#) are provided mainly by national name authorities and sound files are being added to assist users with pronunciation and meaning. To date, the Database contains geographical names, (endonyms, and [exonyms](#)) of features detailing over 2,700 country names, some 6,100 names for 3,362 cities, with more than 970 audio files.
2. The WGN Database has been under redevelopment, utilizing modern web technologies, adhering to the prevailing technological guidelines of the United Nations, alignment with the principles of the Secretary-General's Data Strategy and in compliance with (ST/AI/189). The WGN Database now includes functionality that can manage the temporal dimension of geographical names, enabling the cataloguing of toponymic changes to geographies over time. This extends the previous iteration of the Database, which only allowed for the dissemination of current geographical names. The redeveloped WGN Database now provides Member States, the Secretariat, agencies and programmes within the UN System and the public with the opportunity to disseminate and use, in both human- and machine-readable formats, authoritative geographical names in the six official languages of the United Nations, via a visually appealing online user interface. Work is ongoing in defining a unique identifier for cities within the database, which would be similar to the M49 classification codes for countries and also cleaning and updating the records.
3. Through linking geographical names with SDG indicators, it is possible to analyse progress towards the SDGs at the regional or national level. This can help countries identify areas that require further attention and prioritise interventions accordingly. In this regard, while the SDGs are global in nature, their achievement largely depends on local action. Three SDG indicators directly necessitate reporting of SDG indicators at the city level: SDG 11.2.19, SDG 11.6.110, and SDG 11.7.111; yet almost all indicators are relevant at the local city level, underscoring the importance of the Group of Experts' work in this area.
4. UNGEGN remains committed to [strengthening relationships, links and connections](#) with members within the UN System, civil society, academia and the private sector to advance the standardization of geographical names in support of accelerating progress towards achieve the SDG's. This was reaffirmed at its 2023 session with the recommendation to support cooperation with United Nations Maps to operationalize the work and knowledge of the Group of Experts through the delivery of various mandates of the United Nations system. The Group of Experts also welcomed the resolution of the Pan-American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) at its 24<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, which raised the status of the Geographic Names working group to the "José Joaquín Hungría Morell" committee on Geographic Names, within the Cartographic Commission of PAIGH. This committee is mandated to coordinate work and strengthen capacities on geographical names management in the Americas, and to represent PAIGH on the UNGEGN Latin America Division. For 2024 PAIGH will be collaborating with the UNGEGN [Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy](#) to host virtual workshops and an in person seminar.

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## *Recommendations and key messages for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2024 HLPF*

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1. Member States are encouraged to promote the collection, management and standardization of their national geographical names and in so doing support the implementation of the UNGEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029, and call for their contribution to populate the World Geographical Names Database in order to ensure that geographical names are accurately reflected across all languages, including those with non-Roman alphabets or scripts, to strengthen relationships, links and connections in geographical names standardization.
2. Calls for the organization of an appropriate framework to support the strengthening or creation of national names authorities as well as a Group of Experts trust fund.
3. The recognition that the collective increased awareness of the emotional and spiritual aspects of cultural heritage in geographical naming, offer improved connection, identity and belonging, contributing to equitable recognition of Indigenous geographical names, peoples and cultures.
4. Recognition that strengthening relationships, links and connections between the Group of Experts and other actors related to geographical names, including national naming authorities, bodies of the United Nations, scientific, technical and academic groups, and private map-makers or map users, would increase the capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.