

3 March 2025

English

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

**2025 session**

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 8 (a) of the provisional agenda \*

**Culture, heritage and language recognition: Geographical names  
as culture, heritage and identity**

**Addressing culturally and socially sensitive geographical names:  
a framework for standardization**

Submitted by Norway

Summary \*\*

The standardization of geographical names increasingly requires careful consideration of cultural sensitivity and social justice implications. In the report, four key categories of sensitive names are examined: culturally sensitive names, socially sensitive names, offensive names and culturally derogatory names. Evidence-based methods for their standardization are proposed.

In the proposed framework, emphasis is laid on systematic documentation and research, incorporating both traditional archival sources and oral histories. That approach recognizes that many culturally significant place names have been preserved through oral tradition rather than written documentation. The methodology requires standardized protocols for gathering and validating historical information, thereby ensuring consistency across geographical contexts.

Stakeholder engagement represents a crucial component, extending beyond simple consultation to meaningful participation in decision-making processes. In the framework, emphasis is laid on establishing formal consultation mechanisms that respect traditional decision-making processes while incorporating modern participatory approaches. That includes regular community meetings, formal hearings and ongoing dialogue channels.

The implementation guidelines establish clear protocols for handling sensitive names, including comprehensive documentation systems that maintain temporal records of all geographical names, including those that are modified or replaced. That preservation of naming history serves academic research purposes and maintains cultural continuity. Digital archives track name changes, including the rationale for modifications and the historical context, ensuring that the information remains accessible for future reference.

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\* GEGN.2/2025/1

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Key recommendations include:

- Adopting systematic approaches to identifying and addressing sensitive geographical names
- Implementing standardized consultation processes with affected communities
- Developing clear criteria for the evaluation and modification of problematic names
- Establishing monitoring and reporting mechanisms
- Sharing best practices through United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names working groups.

The success of geographical names standardization depends on balancing contemporary sensitivities with historical preservation while ensuring comprehensive documentation of both current and historical names. That approach supports both social progress and cultural preservation, serving as a bridge between past understanding and future development.

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## **1. Introduction and definitions**

The standardization of geographical names continues to be a critical aspect of national and international spatial data infrastructure. However, increasing awareness of cultural sensitivity and social justice has highlighted the need for systematic approaches to address problematic geographical names. This paper examines four key categories of sensitive geographical names and proposes evidence-based methods for their standardization.

The standardization of sensitive geographical names represents a critical intersection of cultural heritage preservation, historical documentation, and contemporary social justice considerations. This paper recognizes that geographical names are not merely administrative designations but embodiments of historical narratives, cultural identities, and community relationships to place. The comprehensive framework presented herein emphasizes the dual imperative of addressing problematic naming conventions while maintaining thorough temporal documentation of historical context. This balanced approach ensures that as communities address offensive or culturally insensitive geographical names, the historical record is preserved rather than erased.

Through systematic research methodologies, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and robust documentation practices, naming authorities can navigate the complex terrain of standardization while respecting both cultural sensitivity and historical continuity. The success of these efforts ultimately depends on developing standardized protocols that can be consistently applied across diverse geographical and cultural contexts while remaining adaptable to local needs and circumstances.

To effectively address these complex issues, clear categorization of sensitive geographical names is essential. The following definitions provide a structured framework for identifying and evaluating different types of problematic geographical names, creating a foundation for the systematic approach detailed throughout this paper. Each category requires distinct considerations and methodologies, though all benefit from the core principles of thorough documentation, community engagement, and balanced decision-making processes. Categories of sensitive geographical names are:

- Culturally Sensitive Geographical Names: Recent developments in geographical names standardization have highlighted the importance of names that carry

significant cultural, historical, or spiritual meaning for specific communities, particularly indigenous peoples. These names often represent geographical entities like sacred sites, traditional territories, or places of ceremonial importance that may or may not have been subject to historical alterations through colonization processes. The preservation and restoration of such names are crucial for maintaining cultural heritage and supporting the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities.

- Socially Sensitive Geographical Names: The social dimensions of geographical names reflect complex power relations and historical contexts that may conflict with contemporary values and social progress. These include places named after controversial historical figures or names that perpetuate outdated social hierarchies. The treatment of such names requires careful consideration of both historical context and current social implications.
- Offensive Geographical Names: The presence of explicitly offensive language in geographical names remains a significant concern in many countries. Such names may contain racial slurs, ethnic epithets, or derogatory terms related to gender, sexuality, or disability. The elimination and avoidance of these types of geographical names is essential for promoting social cohesion and ensuring respect for all members of society.
- Culturally Derogatory Geographical Names: Geographical names that specifically demean or show disrespect to cultural groups through misappropriation, mockery, or historically prejudiced characterizations require particular attention. These names often reflect historical biases and require systematic approaches for identification and modification.

## **2. Evidence-Based Framework for Standardization**

This paper proposes a comprehensive framework for addressing sensitive geographical names through evidence-based methods. Addressing sensitive geographical names requires a multifaceted, systematic approach grounded in rigorous research and community engagement. Systematic documentation and research form the foundation of this methodology, beginning with comprehensive historical investigation of the origin of each geographical name, usage, and evolution over time. This research must incorporate both traditional archival sources and oral histories, recognizing that many culturally significant place names have been preserved through oral tradition rather than written documentation. Researchers should employ standardized protocols for gathering and validating historical information, ensuring consistency and reliability across different geographical contexts.

Stakeholder engagement represents a crucial methodological component, extending beyond simple consultation to meaningful participation in the decision-making process. This engagement process begins with identifying all relevant stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, local residents, cultural groups, and other affected parties. The methodology emphasizes the establishment of formal consultation mechanisms that respect traditional decision-making processes while incorporating modern participatory approaches. These mechanisms should include regular community meetings, formal hearings, and ongoing dialogue channels that ensure continuous communication throughout the standardization process.

The evaluation of geographical names requires standardized criteria developed through consensus-building among experts and stakeholders. These criteria should assess multiple dimensions of each name, including its historical significance, cultural importance, current social impact, and practical considerations for usage. The evaluation framework must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate different cultural contexts while maintaining consistent standards across jurisdictions. This includes developing clear metrics for

assessing the sensitivity of names and establishing thresholds for determining when modification or replacement is warranted.

Cultural impact assessment forms an integral part of the methodology, requiring careful analysis of how geographical names affect community identity, social cohesion, and cultural preservation. This assessment should employ both qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys, interviews, and community mapping exercises. Researchers must document the cultural significance of existing names while also evaluating the potential impacts of any proposed changes. This process should include analysis of historical trauma associated with certain names and assessment of how name changes might contribute to cultural healing and reconciliation.

The methodology emphasizes the importance of digital documentation and database development, utilizing modern geographical information systems (GIS) and data management tools. These systems should integrate traditional knowledge with contemporary spatial data, creating comprehensive records that preserve both the historical and cultural aspects of geographical names. The database structure must accommodate multiple naming conventions, historical variations, and cultural annotations while maintaining accessibility for various users.

Implementation procedures also form a critical component of the methodology, requiring clear protocols for initiating, reviewing, and executing name changes. These procedures must balance the need for thorough consideration with practical timeframes for decision-making. The methodology includes developing detailed guidelines for submission of name change proposals, establishment of review committees, and processes for public notification and comment. Special attention should be paid to ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the implementation process.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms complete the methodological framework, providing tools for assessing the effectiveness of naming decisions and their impact on communities over time. This includes developing indicators for measuring community satisfaction, cultural preservation, and practical functionality of geographical names. Regular review cycles should be established to evaluate the ongoing appropriateness of geographical names, and the effectiveness of the standardization process itself.

This methodological framework provides a structured approach to addressing sensitive geographical names while ensuring respect for cultural heritage, social justice, and practical functionality. It emphasizes the importance of evidence-based decision-making while recognizing the complex cultural and social dimensions of geographical naming practices. Through careful application of these methodological principles, naming authorities can work toward more inclusive and culturally appropriate geographical names standardization. The success of this methodology depends on its consistent application across different geographical and cultural contexts while maintaining sensitivity to local conditions. It requires ongoing refinement based on practical experience and emerging best practices in geographical names standardization. The methodology should be periodically reviewed and updated to incorporate new insights and address evolving social and cultural considerations in geographical naming practices.

### **3. Implementation Guidelines**

Implementation of geographical names standardization requires a carefully structured approach that balances administrative efficiency with cultural sensitivity and social responsibility. The successful execution of guidelines such as these begins with the establishment of clear legislative and regulatory frameworks at national, regional, and local levels (cf. GEGN.2/2025/9/CRP.9). These frameworks must explicitly define the authority and scope of naming bodies while ensuring sufficient flexibility to accommodate diverse

cultural contexts and community needs. Legislation should clearly outline the procedures for name changes, establishing transparent processes that protect both cultural heritage and public interest.

Policy development forms the cornerstone of effective implementation, requiring careful attention to both procedural and substantive aspects of geographical names standardization. Naming authorities should develop comprehensive policies that address all aspects of the naming process, from initial proposal submission to final implementation and documentation (GEGN.2/2025/11/CRP.11). These policies should establish clear criteria for evaluating names, specific procedures for community consultation, and detailed requirements for documentation and record-keeping. The policy framework must also include provisions for handling disputes and appeals, ensuring that all stakeholders have access to fair and transparent review processes.

Operational procedures require detailed attention to practical implementation challenges. Naming authorities should establish clear workflows that define responsibilities, timelines, and decision-making processes. These procedures should include specific protocols for conducting historical research, gathering community input, and evaluating proposed names against established criteria. The implementation process must include mechanisms for coordinating between different government agencies, ensuring that geographical name changes are properly reflected in official maps, documents, and databases.

Community engagement represents a critical aspect of implementation, requiring structured approaches to consultation and participation. Naming authorities must establish formal mechanisms for community input, including public hearings, written submissions, and ongoing dialogue with affected communities. These engagement processes should be designed to ensure meaningful participation from all stakeholders, with particular attention to indigenous communities and other groups with special cultural or historical connections to specific places. Implementation guidelines must specify methods for documenting community input and incorporating it into decision-making processes.

Technical implementation requires careful attention to data management and information systems. Naming authorities should develop and maintain comprehensive databases that track both current and historical names, including relevant cultural and historical information. These systems should be designed to facilitate easy updating and modification while maintaining historical records. Implementation guidelines should specify requirements for data formats, metadata standards, and integration with other governmental information systems. Resource allocation represents a crucial aspect of implementation, requiring careful planning and budgeting. Governments must ensure adequate staffing, funding, and technical resources to support all aspects of the standardization process. Implementation guidelines should include provisions for training staff, maintaining technical systems, and supporting community engagement activities. Resource allocation plans should also consider the costs associated with the physical implementation of name changes, including updating signs, maps, and other official documents.

Monitoring and evaluation procedures should, at the outset, be integrated into the implementation process. Naming authorities should establish clear metrics for measuring the success of naming initiatives, including both quantitative and qualitative indicators. These metrics must assess multiple aspects of the standardization process, including procedural efficiency, community satisfaction, and cultural appropriateness of naming decisions. Regular evaluation cycles should also be established to review the effectiveness of implementation procedures and identify areas for improvement.

Communication strategies form an essential component of successful implementation. Naming authorities must develop comprehensive plans for communicating with

stakeholders throughout the standardization process. These plans should include provisions for public notification of proposed changes, dissemination of decisions, and ongoing education about the importance of culturally appropriate geographical names. Communication strategies should utilize multiple channels to ensure broad reach across different community segments.

Emergency and special circumstances procedures must also be considered in implementation guidelines. Naming authorities should establish specific protocols for handling urgent name changes, particularly in cases where existing names are deemed highly offensive or harmful to community well-being. These procedures should balance the need for expedited action with requirements for proper documentation and community consultation. Implementation guidelines should also address coordination with international standards and practices. Naming authorities must ensure that their procedures align with relevant international conventions and best practices while maintaining sensitivity to local cultural contexts. This includes establishing mechanisms for sharing information and coordinating with international naming authorities and organizations. The implementation of these guidelines requires ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and adaptation. Naming authorities should regularly review and update their implementation procedures based on practical experience and emerging best practices. This process should include regular consultation with stakeholders to identify challenges and opportunities for enhancement of the standardization process.

The successful implementation of this framework requires comprehensive policy development that begins with the creation of clear legislative frameworks at all governance levels (GEGN.2/2025/9/CRP.9). These frameworks must establish legal foundations while providing sufficient flexibility to accommodate diverse cultural contexts. Alongside legislation, naming authorities must develop standardized procedures that ensure consistency and transparency throughout the standardization process (GEGN.2/2025/11/CRP.11). Detailed implementation guidelines provide practical direction for naming officials, addressing all aspects from research methodologies to stakeholder consultation processes.

Equally essential to successful implementation is the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Regular assessment of effectiveness allows naming authorities to identify both successes and areas requiring improvement, ensuring the framework remains responsive to emerging challenges. Comprehensive documentation of outcomes provides valuable data for future decision-making while maintaining historical records of naming changes. Measurement of community satisfaction through structured feedback mechanisms ensures that standardization efforts meet the needs of affected populations, particularly those with strong cultural connections to specific places. Through continuous improvement of processes based on evaluation findings, naming authorities can refine their approaches over time, adapting to evolving social contexts while maintaining the core principles of cultural respect and historical preservation.

#### **4. Keeping track of past naming**

The implementation of systematic approaches to identifying and addressing sensitive geographical names requires careful consideration of multiple stakeholder perspectives. Naming authorities should develop clear methodologies for evaluating the sensitivity of existing names while documenting their historical usage and significance. This process must include robust consultation mechanisms that engage all affected communities, particularly indigenous peoples and local cultural groups who may have longstanding connections to specific places. The evaluation process should consider both the potential benefits and drawbacks of name changes, including impacts on cultural heritage, social cohesion, and practical considerations for local communities.

There is particular concern regarding the wholesale deletion of existing names without proper documentation and temporal context. Any process of name modification or replacement must include mechanisms for preserving historical naming information,<sup>1</sup> including the cultural and social contexts that influenced naming decisions over time. This temporal overview of names provides crucial historical context and helps maintain connections to cultural heritage, even when names are modified to address contemporary sensitivities. Naming authorities should establish clear protocols for maintaining these historical records, ensuring they remain accessible while clearly distinguishing between current and historical usage.

The establishment of clear criteria for evaluation and modification of problematic names must be balanced with respect for historical documentation. These criteria should include specific provisions for maintaining historical records and ensuring that name changes are accompanied by comprehensive documentation of previous names and their significance. This approach allows communities to address problematic names while preserving important historical and cultural information for future generations. However painful a geographical name is to a community; knowledge of its past existence will prove essential for historical research and statistics – and for the avoidance of history repeating itself.

Monitoring and reporting mechanisms should be established to track both the implementation of name changes and their impact on communities over time. These mechanisms should include specific provisions for documenting the effectiveness of name changes, community responses, and any unintended consequences that may arise. Regular reporting should address both successful outcomes and challenges encountered in the standardization process, providing valuable insights for future naming decisions.

International cooperation and information sharing represent crucial aspects of effective geographical names standardization. Naming authorities should actively participate in international forums and working groups, sharing experiences and best practices while learning from other jurisdictions. This cooperation should include specific attention to methods for maintaining historical naming records and managing temporal changes in geographical names. The development of technological solutions for managing geographical names must include robust capabilities for maintaining historical records and temporal data. Database systems should be designed to track name changes over time, including relevant cultural and historical information. These systems should allow users to access both current and historical naming information while clearly distinguishing between different temporal periods.

## **5. Conclusion**

The standardization of geographical names must evolve beyond simple administrative functions to encompass a complex interplay of cultural heritage, social justice, and historical documentation. The framework presented in this paper demonstrates that effective standardization requires a carefully balanced approach that addresses contemporary sensitivities while preserving crucial historical context. Through systematic examination of culturally sensitive, socially sensitive, offensive, and culturally derogatory geographical names, key challenges and opportunities in the standardization process have been identified.

An evidence-based methodology outlined provides a robust foundation for addressing these challenges, emphasizing the critical importance of comprehensive documentation and meaningful stakeholder engagement. The preservation of temporal naming records emerges

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<sup>1</sup> The issues of a lack of documentation, or insufficient use of/access to sources is highlighted in the issues discussed in GEGN.2/2025/60/CRP.60 in relation to the use of circular evidence in standardization.

as a crucial element, ensuring that while we address contemporary sensitivities, we do not erase the historical context that informs our understanding of place and community.

Implementation guidelines demonstrate the practical complexities of balancing administrative efficiency with cultural sensitivity and historical preservation. The success of geographical names standardization depends heavily on well-structured procedures that maintain transparency while ensuring comprehensive documentation of both current and historical names. The establishment of digital archives and temporal records serves not only academic purposes but also helps maintain cultural continuity and understanding across generations.

This paper emphasizes the need for careful consideration of multiple stakeholder perspectives while maintaining robust historical documentation. The concern over deletion of existing names without proper temporal context highlights the importance of preserving historical naming information even as we move forward with necessary changes. This temporal preservation ensures that future generations can understand the evolution of place names and the social contexts that influenced their development and modification.

In geographical names standardization, the balance between addressing contemporary sensitivities and preserving historical context will remain a central challenge in the years to come. The framework presented here provides a foundation for meeting this challenge while ensuring that standardization processes serve both the current and future needs of communities worldwide. The success of these efforts will ultimately depend on continued commitment to evidence-based approaches, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and careful preservation of historical context. By maintaining this balance, geographical names standardization can contribute to both social progress and cultural preservation, serving as a bridge between past understanding and future development.

These conclusions underscore the dynamic nature of geographical names standardization and the importance of maintaining flexible yet robust systems for managing place names in an evolving social context. The path forward requires careful attention to both contemporary needs and historical preservation, ensuring that as we address sensitive naming issues, we maintain the rich temporal context that informs our understanding of place and community.

### **Relevant Resolutions**

GEGN I/4: National Standardization (1967).

GEGN VII/9: Standardization of geographical names utilizing the Internet (1998).

GEGN VIII/1: Promotion of Minority Group and Indigenous Geographical Names (2002).

GEGN IX/4: Geographical Names as Intangible Cultural Heritage (2007).

GEGN IX/5: Promotion of the Recording and Use of Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names (2007).

GEGN X/3: Criteria for establishing and evaluating the nature of geographical names as cultural heritage (2012).

### **Reports referred to**

GEGN.2/2025/9/CRP.9. (2025). Example laws on geographical names standardization and cultural heritage protection.

GEGN.2/2025/11/CRP.11. (2025). Recommendations for constructing an inclusive and sustainable geographical names authority.



GEGN.2/2025/60/CRP.60. (2025). Documentary evidence in geographical names management: pitfalls of circular reference and institutional self-documentation.

## **Points for discussion**

**The Group of Experts is invited to:**

- (1) Examine the proposed framework for identifying and addressing culturally and socially sensitive geographical names.
- (2) Consider standardized protocols for meaningful stakeholder engagement, especially with indigenous communities and cultural groups.
- (3) Discuss implementation strategies for establishing digital archives that preserve both current, traditional and historical naming information.
- (4) Explore methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of geographical name standardization processes, including metrics for community satisfaction, cultural preservation, and practical functionality.