

10 March 2025

English

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

2025 session

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 4(a) of the provisional agenda *

Reports: Divisions of the Group of Experts

Report of the Pacific South-West Division

Submitted by the Pacific South-West Division **

* GEGN.2/2025/1

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Summary

Very little progress has been made towards connecting Pacific Island Member States within the Pacific South-West Division. The current membership is Australia, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu (10 countries). There are likely to be numerous reasons for non-participation, such as other higher priorities, limited capacity, insufficient resources, unable to meet costs, impacts from natural disasters, etc. However, the value of the Division in sharing its unique and interesting geographical naming, remains important.

This Pacific South-West Division report explores other possible ways to activate and support the Division, examines how UNGEGN might assist with Pacific Island nations' participation, possibly through training workshops, and discusses the interim Chair arrangements.

Background

In 2012, the Pacific South-West Division was recommended to be formed at the 27th session and 10th conference of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. This was the result of splitting up the Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division into two separate Divisions: the Asia South-East Division and the Pacific South-West Division. See the 2012 Report of the Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division which explains the rationale for the split: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/10th-uncsgn-docs/econf/E_CONF.101_9_Report%20of%20ASEPSW%20Division.pdf.

Notably, the decision was due to the long distance between the two regions and therefore most of the Pacific South-West countries not being able to attend the annual meeting.

UNGEGN also intended that existing projects, such as the Regional Gazetteer and Map, would remain active as joint projects between the two Divisions. Australia finalised the Regional Gazetteer and Map, and they were initially posted on the Place Names Working Group website: <https://www.icsm.gov.au/what-we-do/place-names/place-names-working-group>. However, they are now no longer available online. It is suggested that the responsibility for the Regional Gazetteer and Map be moved to the Asia South-East Division since the majority of the geographical names and mapping covers that Division. A possible outcome might be to update the products and/or republish for discovery.

In 2020, Australia (Susan Birtles) and New Zealand (Wendy Shaw) took on the joint roles of Interim Co-Chairs with the intention of connecting with and understanding the situation of, other Member States, and to re-initiate Divisional activities for the Pacific South-West nations. Efforts were made to engage with Pacific Island nations, with relevant contact leads from Foreign Affairs agencies, academics and UNGEGN itself. However, despite best efforts, no progress has been made.

The last report from this Division was presented to the 2021 session of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). It explained the Division's formation, membership, background and purpose. Refer to https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/documents/GEGN.2_2021_7_CR_P7_4b_PSW_Division.pdf.

Australia and New Zealand

Australia and New Zealand engage regularly during the year, discussing matters of mutual interest and benefit for standardised geographical naming. Their liaison does not fall under the Division. Rather, their liaison has been through the Place Names Working Group (PNWG)¹ which operates under the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping (ICSM)², which is a standing committee of the Australian and New Zealand Spatial Information Council (ANZLIC)³. Activities of PNWG are shared in the Australian government report under Agenda item 4(b) of UNGEGN's 2025 session.

Current situation in the Pacific

Pacific Island nations are diverse and unique, from culture to environment to tourism to economy. They are remote and isolated. But their geographical naming is rich in Polynesian history stemming from early navigation, discovery, migration, resources and exploration. This is evidenced in the language similarities in geographical names across many Pacific Island nations.

The impact of climate change or weather events such as hurricanes or natural events such as earthquakes and tsunamis, are devastating for these small Pacific Island nations. In those extreme situations, they frequently require international aid, including from the United Nations. So, the original founding objectives of UNGEGN still apply in respect to offering effective assistance to countries through the Division by encouraging standardized and consistent geographical naming. This in turn makes it easier to 'locate' or 'navigate' to where the needs are located and where aid can be given.

The future of the Division

The 'Points for discussion' below cover the current co-Chair arrangements and other potential country membership. Discussion points also explore how UNGEGN might proceed with how best to support these nations with their geographical naming. Implications for activating the Division would mean they'd have access to the benefits that standardized geographical naming brings. UNGEGN is asked to consider and discuss these 'Points for discussion' and to make a Recommendation or a Decision for the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to endorse.

Points for discussion

1. Explore whether other Pacific South-West countries are interested in taking the lead of the Division or consider removing this inactive Division.
2. If continuing, consider extending the membership of the Division, for example to French Polynesia, French Tahiti, French New Caledonia, NZ Cook Islands, British Pitcairn Islands, Tuvalu, NZ Tokelau, USA Mariana Islands, etc. because they are also located within the Pacific South-West.
3. Consider Australia's and New Zealand's membership in the Division given that they play an important role in the Pacific, supporting and advising the other nations.

¹ <https://www.icsm.gov.au/what-we-do/place-names-working-group>

² <https://www.icsm.gov.au/about>

³ <https://www.anzlic.gov.au/>

4. Request that the UNGEGN Secretariat approach UNESCO's Pacific Global Taskforce for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL), to seek how they might assist UNGEGN to assist the Division, based on IDILs direct dealings with Pacific Island Member States.
5. Support the UNGEGN Working Group on Funding and Training Courses in Toponymy for Pacific Island nations, arranging comprehensive in-person training workshops, or potentially virtual to save costs. The course would cover all fundamentals of good practice geographical naming.
6. Request UNGEGN to provide financial support for one or two Pacific Island nations to attend UNGEGN sessions. Pacific Island nations could be encouraged to submit reports to UNGEGN sessions, even if unable to attend in person. These are some suggested topics for their reports to meet evidence-based practice:
 - Changing coastlines due to climate change and the associated loss of coastal geographical names
 - The December 2024 Vanuatu earthquake – what was the part that geographical names played in spatial location, recovery and rebuild?
 - Migration stories of geographical names across the Pacific – the variations across languages in isolated Pacific Islands
 - Resource-related geographical names across the Pacific that offer insights into food, fresh water and sustainable living.
7. Suggest that the responsibility for the *Regional Gazetteer and Map* is transferred to the Asia South-East Division.
8. UNGEGN to consider making a Recommendation or a Decision at this UNGEGN Session, based on the above and relevant bulleted discussion points, to be submitted to ECOSOC for endorsement/support/ratification.