

## **Towards the establishment of the authoritative Geographical Names Database for South Africa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC) was established by the South African Geographical Names Council Act, 1998 (Act No.118 of 1998), as the body responsible for standardizing geographical names in South Africa. The SAGNC is responsible to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology.

According to Section 6(2)(b) of the South African Geographical Names Council Act the Department of Arts and Culture should establish and maintain a research section and necessary infrastructure, incorporating a computerized database, a library, reference material and document archives.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The naming of geographical features is a world phenomenon, that is as old as mankind. People have always attached a label or name to their immediate environment in order to assign meaning and give recognition. The significance of geographical names lies not only to mere name changing but also to knowledge systems that go with a geographical feature or landscape. A large majority of pre-colonial names carried with them particular meanings: the kind of meanings the indigenous communities attached to their own identities, their relations to immediate environment, both built and natural environments, their relationships with their neighbours.

Imperialism with its concomitant colonial subjugation wrought havoc, not only in terms of military conquest, but also intellectual conquest. Colonialism “conquered” and “subjugated” knowledge systems that informed the history of indigenous communities. One of the ways in which these knowledge systems were subjugated was through the marginalisation of pre-colonial geographical names in favour of new colonial names that were institutionalised and formed part of the dominant political discourse that defined and characterized South Africa’s social, political and heritage landscapes. Such colonial reconfiguring impacted and still impacts on human psyche. It perpetuated and confirmed colonial stereotypes that propagated that there was no creative thinking prior to westernization in Africa in general and South Africa in particular. Hence the urgent need to transform the national heritage landscape through re-naming. South Africa’s geographical features that were stripped off of their original identities have to reclaim such identities. The process of re-naming is an exciting and a challenging one and forms an integral part of the African Renaissance project.

South Africa has had a naming authority since 1939, known as the National Place Names Committee (NPNC). It advised the then Minister of the Interior on proposed new names or on applications for changes of names. However, the NPNC had a narrow mandate in that naming was restricted to post offices, railways, towns, and stopping places for railway buses, and it excluded cadastral names. In addition to the narrow scope, other problems were around:

- Non-representativity,
- Europeanisation of African place names,
- Misspelling of African place names,
- Imposition of European names and
- Erasing of the original African names and their histories.

In 1995 the Minister established a Working Forum on Geographical Names whose brief was to advise on the reconstitution of the NPNC in accordance with the recommendations of the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage, and according to international standards. The Working Forum prepared a report as well as the draft South African Names Commission Bill. The Forum took into account relevant United Nations resolutions and recommendations on the standardisation of geographical names, the principles and procedures of the NPNC, international practices, and the recommendations of the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage. All interested experts and other persons and institutions were invited to submit comments and suggestions. Recommendations and comments received were included in the report in 1996.

The Forum recommended that the NPNC should be reconstituted to represent all stakeholders and that it should be given a wider mandate. It also recommended that legislation should be drafted to regulate its activities. The Act that authorises the establishment of South African Geographical Names Council (Act No. 118 of 1998) was approved in 1998.

The Council has jurisdiction over all names of geographical features and entities falling within the territories over which the South African government has sovereignty or jurisdiction acquired by treaty.

### **SOUTH AFRICAN GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES DATABASE**

According to section 6(2)(b) of the South African Geographical Names Act the Department of Arts and Culture should establish and maintain a research section and the necessary infrastructure, incorporating a computerised database, a library, reference material and document archives.

The Department of Arts and Culture acquired three databases which all had a problem of duplication of certain names, names that were spelt wrongly, names that were insulting to certain sections of our population, and corrupted names:

- (i) HSRC Place names database

- (ii) Surveys & Mapping
- (iii) US Gazetteer of South Africa

The Department has used these three databases as a reference to create a new authoritative database for the South African Geographical Names Council to avoid duplication and coordinate the process of naming in the whole country. The new authoritative database, which became operational from 16 September 2002, has a web-enabled geo-reference viewer that provides the functionality to plot latitudes and longitudes on a map, and to view the places with the exact location. This has enabled the Department to deliver on the following:

- the management and monitoring of national place names;
- capturing new place names on the national place names database;
- monitor and facilitate progress with regard to applications;
- to retrieve this information easily for the SAGNC and DAC use;
- improve coordination and reduce duplication in naming;
- spatial representation of national place name database;
- facilitation of management information reports;
- remote updating of dataset and on-line approval;
- access to other databases;
- survey to latitude/longitude coordination conversion;
- automatic feedback/reporting to applicants; and
- automatic updating of South African Geographical Names Gazetteer.

### **WHAT DOES THIS (WEB-ENABLED GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES DATABASE) MEAN TO THE DEPARTMENT?**

The Department inherited a backlog of more than 57 000 names. This is what has been identified so far with the help of the Chief Directorate Mapping and Surveys. In various fora, the disturbing question has been how are we going to deal with the backlog as well as other challenges with regard to naming. Since the operationalisation of the South African Geographical Names Act of 1998, the Department has been working very hard to respond to these challenges and the result has been the establishment of the South African Geographical Names Database.

### **WHAT DOES THIS (WEB-ENABLED GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES DATABASE) MEAN TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC?**

Our “office” is open for 24 hours a day. People/applicants have access to our database at all times. The processing of applications is done at a greater speed and thus accelerate service delivery. This has an impact in facilitating delivery on housing and post offices, because for any human settlement and post offices to be established there has to be a name approved by the Minister.

### **CONCLUSION**

I would like to encourage delegates to visit our website (<http://sagnc.dac.gov.za>) to explore our newly established database system.