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Terminology in the standardization of geographical names

Feature types for global gazetteers

Submitted by Australia**

Summary***

Gazetteers may list names of geographic locations representing a wide range of physical or administrative feature types. To understand these names, it is necessary to specify what type of feature is being referred to. This leads to a range of issues around support for multiple languages, specific domains of use for a gazetteer and how finely feature types are differentiated. When integrating data from multiple sources, classifications of different feature types increase the complexity of any interpretation or searching process. Most data about human and natural processes is geographically referenced, usually by some form of identifier such as a town, administrative area, address etc. Interpreting these references is a significant and pressing need if information is to be better used to support decisions; and gazetteers are the source of the information needed to interpret these references.

In partnership with the United Nations Office of Information and Communications Technology and the Australian Agency for International Development, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization has been working with the Committee for Geographic Names of Australasia and the Indonesian National Geospatial Information Agency (Badan Informasi Geospasial) to pilot a gazetteer framework, which can be used as global best practice and as a globally accessible persistent infrastructure. The framework, which allows users to discover the meanings of toponyms or identifiers found in geographically referenced datasets, is being developed through a project entitled the United Nations Spatial

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*** The full report is available in the language of submission only from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/ungegnConf10.html>.



Data Infrastructure Gazetteer Framework for Social Protection in Indonesia. The project plan and research overview are provided in another paper submitted to the Conference and further details can be located at www.csiro.au/gazetteer.

In the course of developing a prototype gazetteer framework for implementation in Indonesia, the research team has encountered a number of issues which should prove to be of interest for members of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. This paper deals with the conundrum of feature types — in particular the issues associated with mapping multiple and varied feature types in a linked gazetteer structure. Examples of existing feature catalogues are provided, along with descriptions of the benefits and drawbacks of current classification methods of feature types. The research team proposes to members of the Group of Experts the development of a special committee on feature types (perhaps as a subcommittee of the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, or the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology), which will bring benefits by feeding input from toponymic experts into the larger United Nations Spatial Data Infrastructure initiative being driven by the United Nations Geographic Information Working Group. The proposed benefits of the development of a list of feature types and classifications are extensive and include the ability for naming authorities to identify areas for increasing the scope of their gazetteer data collection methods (as discussed in the report submitted by Australia to the upcoming conference entitled “Four faces of toponymic gazetteers”).
