

Kenya case study: Lessons learnt in field collection of geographical names

Charles M. K. MWANGI*

Survey of Kenya, as the National Mapping Organization is legally mandated to maintain and update the national topographical database that is achieved through appropriate synthesis of collection, processing, analysis and archival of geospatial data.

Data collection is therefore a vital component in the fulfilment of the mandate. Data collection involves verification of new topographical features extracted from imagery interpretation and recording the assigned names of these features that include newly emergent towns and new administrative units resulting from subdivisions due to population increases of the hitherto localities. Also the existing geographical names are evaluated with respect to accuracy in spelling, orthography and usage with adjustments being made in conformity to the guidelines of Kenya's Standing Committee on Geographical Names (SCGN).

Kenya has published two editions of the National Standards Name Gazetteer and is currently embarking on a new and redesigned third edition that will be compatible with digital data processing systems and requirements.

This presentation discusses some critical lessons and challenges experienced by the field teams undertaking collection of Geographical Names considering that Kenya is multi-lingual and many topographical features including rivers, mountain or hill ranges extend through areas occupied by people with different dialects.

From these engagements, it has been realized that consensus and public sensitization are significant contributors to success of national standardization of Geographical Names programmes.

Background

The responsibility of approving, publishing and regulating the use of standardized geographical names in Kenya is bestowed on the Standing Committee on Geographical Names (SCGN) whose Chair is the Director of Surveys in accordance with the Survey Act of the Laws of Kenya. This responsibility is operationalized through guidelines in

* Principal Cartographer, Survey of Kenya, Ministry of Lands, Kenya

the Survey Manual that outline the regulations and procedures for collection of names in the field; and preparation of names lists to be forwarded to SCGN for approval and recommendation to the Minister for publishing.

Kenya, through Survey of Kenya, is a regular participant in sessions and workshops organized by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). It has embarked on a nationwide sensitization exercise to the local administration officials and communities on the significance of Geographical Names.

To date, Kenya has published two editions of the Standard Names Gazetteer of Geographical Names and is currently working on the preparation of a digital third edition. The first edition was published in 1964 contains 26,000 names while the second edition published in 1978 contained 30,000 names. These geographical names are those displayed in the official basic maps of Kenya at the scales of 1:50,000 and 1:100,000. The first edition contained several exonyms because the country had just gained independence. During the preparation of the second edition, efforts were made to change the exotic names to conform to the endonyms that reflect the respective local communities' cultural and historical heritage as a result of petitions from the local communities. Also, amendments were made to correct names which were spelt wrongly. However, not all exonyms were changed to endonyms nor were all originally misspelt names corrected by the time the second edition was produced. There are several reasons why these could not be achieved. Due to the current situation on the ground and the fact that the local populace is more enlightened on the impact of Toponyms, the new digital third edition has been planned to contain names that can be displayed on maps at scales as large as 1:2,500.

Challenges

Firstly, Kenya is a multilingual society composed of a population with diverse languages and differing alphabets. These diverse language groups coexist or live in adjoining areas that share the same topographical features including mountains, hill ranges, rivers, and large geographical area units. A feature therefore might have different names from the different languages and if data recording is not done with due consideration, then the name assigned might not be acceptable to all concerned leading to contestation.

Secondly, the purpose of field verification and field completion (collection of geographical names) is to revise medium and large scale topographical maps. Since these individual sheets cover small extent of ground area, most often, some features extend through many sheets which are occupied by people with variant dialects. Features that extend through these areas might be named differently within the jurisdictions of the respective populations.

Thirdly, most of these language communities did not have a written script before the advent of education, hence recording of names was based on phonetics of the names by transcription. The guidelines of SCGN stipulate that all names should be transcribed as close as possible with the Swahili orthography. The main problem with this arrangement is that though some of the local languages are close to Swahili, their alphabets differ therefore the transcribed names are deformed etymologically.

Lessons learnt

It was observed that to conduct data successfully, there is need for data collection authorities to organize sensitization forums with a view of raising awareness and consensus building amongst the affected multi-lingual local communities. This is critical in areas where a feature might have multiple names, depending on the number of varying dialects, and therefore a need to agree on what name(s) to standardize. The guiding principle is that the recorded name(s) should have the blessing of all stakeholder communities.

Other than sensitizing the stakeholders, it is also important to train the data collectors on the conduct of fieldwork to ensure that;

- Transcription and Romanization using Swahili alphabet for all the dialects is done in such a way that etymology of the name is not lost.
- All relevant data concerning a name is collected to facilitate provision of adequate details for evaluation and recommendations to the approving committees.
- The extents of linear and areal features are determined correctly by georeferencing.
- they identify the authentic sources of the field data to avoid disputes.

Preparation of a new digital standard names gazetteer

During data collection, the field teams have visited many areas in various parts of the country. There is evidently a need to upgrade the current gazetteer to not only show names in maps at the scale of 1:50,000 but also step up to scales as large as 1:2,500. This because many people have been settled in what were formally large scale farms resulting in many small sized administrative units. Efforts are being made to design a representation that will ensure that dissemination is scale extendable by applying Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in concurrence with map production.