

Codes to history

Code for formerly used names of countries completes the trilogy of country codes

In 1979, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands split into two new countries, Kiribati (KI/KIR) and Tuvalu (TU/TUV). Anyone having had business with the former Gilbert and Ellice Islands might find it difficult to determine which of the two new entities would apply. Codes that give the background to the history to allow a code to situate an event in a context and thus define it accurately find multiple uses.



The type of problem described above explains why ISO 3166²⁾, whose codes are becoming more and more implemented in wide-ranging fields, needed a third part to keep it polyvalent, relevant and functional in all areas.

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A standard from the world of archivists, librarians and documentalists

Why do we need a code like ISO 3166-3, *Code for formerly used names of countries*? The reason stems in part from the fact that the country codes were developed within the framework of TC 46, *Documentation*, with its relatively strong group of delegates coming from the world of archivists, librarians and documentalists. For their purposes, naturally, coding of historical and even ancient names of countries can be as interesting as the current ones.

But it turned out to be very difficult to set the parameters for a suitable coding system. When should it begin? What should it cover? Should it start at the birth of Christ? Why not earlier? Realizing the enormity of the task, the aims were lowered, to 1815, to 1900, then to 1945.

And what does a country name cover in territorial terms? "Ghana" and "Mali" in ancient times covered areas quite different from those of to-day. "Sweden" for a certain period of time included the territories of Finland, Norway and most of the Baltic, for a shorter period it also covered occupied territories in Northern Germany. The present name "Italy", on the other hand, after 1815 represents the areas of 16 previous and differently named countries. One working document contained more than 500 entries merely for the 19th and 20th centuries...

As stated throughout the ISO 3166 standards, the country codes *represent the names of countries*, not the extension of their territories. This, of course, limited the task of the TC 46 Working Group 2, but did not quite satisfy the historians.

Need to be able to identify events that took place before a country's name change

The discussions proved intractable, to the point that the work item came perilously close to being purely and simply removed from the work programme. This caused the working group to focus its efforts on what was really the immediate aim of this type of standard. It was agreed that the users of the original codes from the 1974 ISO 3166 would have a need to continue to use the former codes, to be able to identify events that took place before a name change. This was important for a number of reasons. For instance, for insurance purposes, it was important to know that a ship was built in Rostock, in the former German Democratic Republic (DD/DDR) and not in the present Germany (DE/DEU). In 1979 Gilbert and Ellice Islands split into the new countries Kiribati (KI/KIR) and Tuvalu (TU/TUV). Anyone having had business with the former

1) The ISO 3166 family consists of the following parts: Part 1 ISO 3166: 1997, *Codes for the representation of names of countries and their subdivisions* – Part 1: *Country codes*; ISO 3166-2:1998, *Codes for the representation of names of countries and their subdivisions* – Part 2: *Country subdivision code*; ISO 3166-3:1999, *Codes for the representation of names of countries and their subdivisions* – Part 3: *Code for formerly used names of countries*

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Gilbert and Ellice Islands might find it difficult to determine which of the two new entities would apply. Files coded as “DD” and “GE” would need to be referred to the codes for the new country names.

“Benjamin” joins the country code family

The publication in 1999 of ISO 3166 Part 3, *Code for formerly used names of countries* concluded the trilogy of country-code-related standards, based on the original ISO 3166 country code standard of 1974, whose 5th edition was issued in October 1997. It contains code elements to represent the names of all recognized countries in the world and most of their outlying areas. Accounts of ISO 3166 have been given in the *ISO Bulletin* in March 1993 and July 1998.

The second part (ISO 3166-2) was published in December 1998 and was described in the *ISO Bulletin* of May 1999. It contains subdivision codes for all the countries listed in Part 1, i.e. the names of counties, provinces, states and other entities making up the administrative division of these countries.

The third part, the “Benjamin” in the country code family, is often referred to as the “historical” code. This may reflect the original intent of this standard but for the present version it may be regarded as a misnomer, as its historical perspective is very limited – it goes back only to 1974. But it is a handy term and could very well be more appropriate in the future, if the standard were to be extended backwards in time.

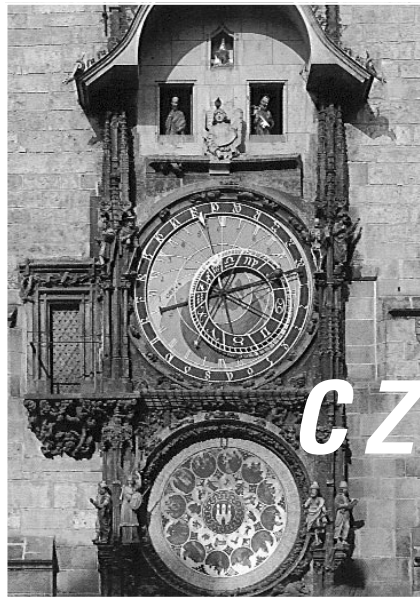
The search for a simple, universally-applicable solution

Recognizing that this was mostly a practical problem, a simple solution was found. It was not desirable to maintain the former codes in the main code list, as this would not identify them as non-current codes and would eventually exhaust the 2-letter codes. Instead, the

character of being a non-current code could be more easily understood if a different format was used. For this reason a 4-letter code format was agreed, unique in the “country code family”. Realizing that documents and files were often

This meant that the old “DD” became the historical code “DDDE”, the old “ZR” (Zaire) became “ZRCD” when the name changed to Democratic Republic of Congo, etc.

But this simple solution could not be applied in all cases. Besides Gilbert and Ellice Islands, there were other cases where one country split into two or more new countries, e.g. Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. The two letters added to the former code in these cases are “HH” (historic), which indicates that there is no single successor to the former country. The result: GEHH, CSHH and SUHH.



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physically marked with the old country code, these could be preserved by simply adding two letters to the 2-letter code concerned. And the resulting 4-letter code in many cases could be made meaningful by adding the two letters from the new code.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the creation of 15 new states. But only 13 of them are listed under the SUHH label. The reason is that two of the Soviet republics already had their separate codes: Belarus (BY/BLR) and Ukraine (UA/UKR). When the United Nations were founded in San Francisco in 1945, each member nation was allocated one voice in the General Assembly. In consequence, even the tiniest member country would have one vote. But this applied also to the huge Soviet Union and – in the East-West context – this was felt to be unfair and a potential cause for future political problems. In order to remedy this situation at least to some extent, Ukraine and (the then) Byelorussia were admitted as full voting members and thus

were given their own country codes in ISO 3166.

The disbandment of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia resulted in the introduction of four new country codes for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA/BIH), Croatia (HR/HRV), Macedonia (MK/MKD), and Slovenia (SI/SVN). The question has been asked why there is no “YUHH” code in ISO 3166 Part 2. The answer is that the “residual” Yugoslavia still exists under its original name, now comprising the two republics of Montenegro and Serbia and the autonomous provinces of Kosovo-Metohija and Vojvodina. As the name “Yugoslavia” is not a name removed from ISO 3166 since the first edition in 1974, the code “YU” will remain and no historical code will be allocated.

“A 4-letter code format was agreed, unique in the ‘country code family’”

(The system described above will work mainly for non-current 2-letter codes; former 3-letter codes will have to be replaced by a 4-letter code whose two first letters only – in some 70% of all cases – are the same as the 3-letter code. Examples: Upper Volta/Burkina Faso: HVO-HVBF, but Zaïre/Democratic Congo: ZAR-ZRCD.)

In comparison with the Country and Subdivision codes laid down in Parts 1 and 2 of ISO 3166, Part 3 with its non-current “historical” codes may be of less immediate interest. But it fills a gap and offers the possibility to identify, designate and codify country names formerly used in the context of ISO 3166. It is also open to a widening of its scope to provide codes for country names which were in use before 1974 and without the particular linkage to codes ISO created in that year and onwards. The 4-letter code format could be maintained, but with full freedom to allocate codes, with or without association with the names. But this is a huge task and there are no present plans to take it on.

What’s happening with the other Country Code family members?

Another offspring of the Country Code family is the Currency Code – *Codes for the representation of currencies and funds* (ISO 4217) first published in 1978 and whose 5th edition was issued in December 1995. Based on the 2-letter Country Code, this coding system adds a third character, preferably mnemonic, derived from the name of the currency (or fund).

The Country Code family was further extended in 1981 by the creation of UN/LOCODE (United Nations Code for ports and other locations), a coding system containing some 30 000 place names in the world, associated with trade and transport. UN/LOCODE is not an ISO Standard but its 5-letter code is based on ISO 3166-1, adding three letters representing the place name and followed by 1-3 characters quoted from ISO 3166-2 and representing the name of the subdivision where the place is located within the country concerned.

Present family situation

The present status of the “Country code family”, extended by the addition of the UN/LOCODE, can be described as follows:

The 2-letter country code (ISO 3166-1)

Example: **DE** **Germany**
 (country code, country name)

The 3-letter Currency code (ISO 4217)

Example: **DEM** **German Mark** (Deutsche Mark)
 (country code + currency name indicator)

The 4-letter “historic” code (ISO 3166-3)

Example: **DRDE German Democratic Republic, now Germany**
 (old country code, new country code)

The 4-6 character Subdivision code

Example: **DE-BY Bayern**
 (country code, hyphen, code for “land”)

The 5-letter UN/LOCODE

Example: **DE MUC München BY**
 (country code, name code, name, ISO 3166-2 subdivision code)

Of course, ISO 3166-1 contains also a (lesser used) 3-letter country code. Its use, however, may in certain cases cause confusion. For instance, the 2-letter country code

for Macedonia is MK and the 3-letter code is MKD. But MKD is also the currency code for the Macedonian Dinar...

The proof of the value of a standard lies in its being used

In conclusion, the ISO 3166 Country and Country Subdivision codes have proved their value and are increasingly used – take as an example the standard use of 2-letter ISO codes as the geographical top level domain identifier in the Internet. It is hoped that the Part 3 “historical” codes will also play a valuable – albeit more modest – rôle in the information technique environment.

The proof of the value of a standard is that it is used – otherwise it’s hardly worth the paper it is printed on. Whereas the other parts of ISO 3166 have justified their existence by being widely used and continuously updated, paradoxically the value of the Part 3, *Code for non-current country names* lies in its smallness, thus confirming the stability of the country coding system. After all, Part 3 contains only 26 country names that have been removed from the main country name list since 1974 and this bears witness to the fact that the country codes are very stable indeed. □