Guide to Gazetteers

What is a gazetteer?

A gazetteer is a file containing place names and coordinates. It can also contain administrative boundaries, indicating the different geographical levels of an area (e.g. country, district, wards and villages)

Why do I need a gazetteer?

If you are using the Joekit tool to convert spreadsheets to maps and your spreadsheet only contains place names but no geographical coordinates, Joekit will need a gazetteer to translate the place names into geographical coordinates that can be mapped.

How do I produce a gazetteer?

We advise you to contact the GIS team in the Manson Unit (medical.datafeedback@amsterdam.msf.org) for assistance in producing a gazetteer for your region of interest. However you can also use pre-existing gazetteers or make your own

Where can I find pre-existing gazetteers

You can find gazetteers online, often with huge amounts of data. This website has a large collection of gazetteers:
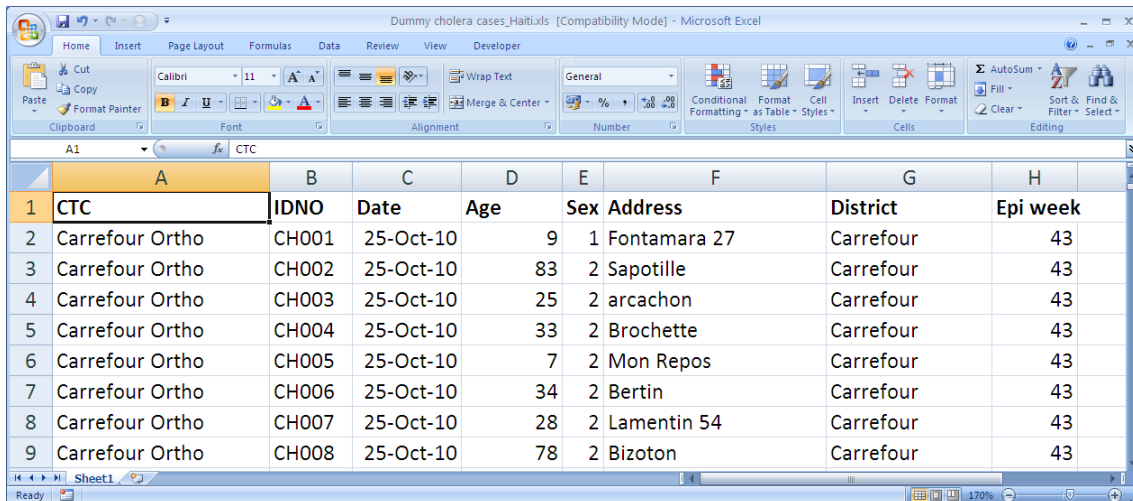
http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/namefiles.htm

http://www.diva-gis.org/Data

These files are in '.txt' format and there can be a lot of duplication (e.g. the same village name may appear in different locations in a country)

How can I make my own gazetteer?

Open Google Earth, and add "placemarks" for all of the locations of which you are aware in your spreadsheet. You may have to sit with your staff, look at paper maps, go to locations with a GPS receiver, consult Open Street Map (openstreetmap.org), or do searches with Google Earth to find some locations. The goal is to have one point or polygon area for each separate location in the spreadsheet.

Let's look at an example of making a map with a gazetteer:

MSF-OCA GIS Toolkit

Figure 1: Line list of cholera cases in Carrefour, Haiti

This spreadsheet contains anonymised information about the origin of patients in a Cholera Treatment Centre in Haiti (Figure 1), but no lat/long columns. Because there's no lat/long data, when we feed the spreadsheet into Joekit, no preview map appears.

Here is a gazetteer for that same file; a Google Earth map (KML) with zones drawn by a water and sanitation worker, who sat with her local staff and made this very handy map by sketching areas directly into Google Earth (Figure 2).
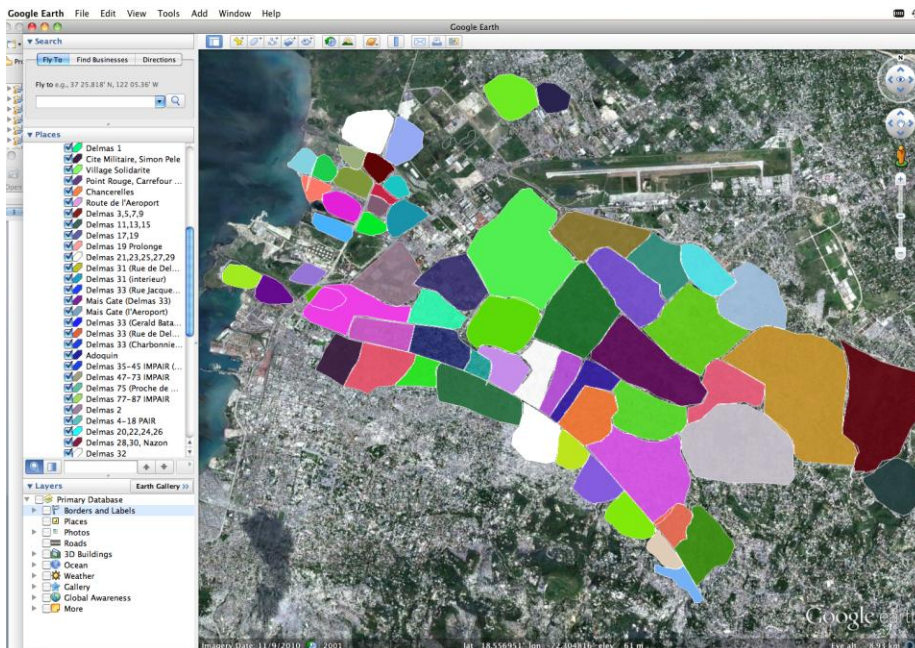

Figure 2: Polygons corresponding to quartiers in Demas 33, Haiti

The "address" column of the spreadsheet corresponds to the names of the areas in the spreadsheet. So every time there is a patient from a given neighbourhood, Joekit puts a dot somewhere in that neighbourhood polygon (*jitterdot*). It also works if the neighbourhood is only represented by a dot (variable sized dot).