
Short FAQ about ISO 3166

Q: What is the ISO 3166?

A: It is an international standard developed by ISO. ISO 3166 provides universally applicable coded representations of names of countries (both current and non-current), dependencies, and other areas of particular geopolitical interest, and their subdivisions.

The standard consists of three parts:

ISO 3166-1 (Part 1: Country codes),

ISO 3166-2 (Part 2: Country subdivisions code),

ISO 3166-3 (Part 3: Code for formerly used names of countries).

The edition (version) of a Part is identified by the year of publication. Therefore the full reference to the current (third) Edition of ISO 3166 Part 1 is: ISO 3166-1:2013.

The ISO codes only use the ASCII letters (A-Z) and numbers (0-9) and (in ISO 3166-2 only) hyphens (-).

Q: In what form are the codes defined?

A: ISO3166-1 uses two letter codes (alpha-2), three letter codes (alpha-3) and numerical codes.

ISO 3166-2 uses codes starting with an ISO 3166 alpha-2 code followed by a hyphen and one or more letters or numbers

ISO 3166-3 uses 4 letter codes. Often codes in ISO 3166-3 contain the original obsoleted (alpha-2) codes. .

The alpha-2 and 3 codes can have various classifications such as, Assigned by ISO 3166/MA, Unassigned, and Reserved in various ways: (Exceptionally, Transitionally, and indeterminately). For additional details, see also:

http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/country_codes/country_codes_glossary.htm.

The authoritative source for these terms is, of course, the Standard itself.

Q: What is the ISO list code list?

A: There isn't just a single list. However the term is (frequently) used colloquially to denote the list with the Country Code Assignments in Section 9 of ISO 3166-1.

People tend to use the term "ISO Code List" imprecisely. They often use the term to include the Reserved Codes.. In the same way and even more confusing is the use of the term "the ISO 3166-2 list" while *not* meaning Part 2 of the ISO 3166 standard at all, but referring instead to the list of the (alpha-2) codes in Part 1. Furthermore, when term "ISO 3166-2 list" is misused in this way it is often undefined whether they mean all possible codes, both the Assigned and the Reserved Codes, or just the Assigned Codes).

Q: What is the purpose of all these codes anyway?

A: To paraphrase from ISO 3166-1, the codes are intended to be used in any application requiring the expression of current country names in coded form. The term "Country Names" is defined in definition 3.4 "name of country, dependency, or other area of particular geopolitical interest". That is why we often see the term "Countries and territories" used as a reminder that it is not just about countries.

Q: What has statistics to do with these codes?

A: The list of countries in ISO 3166-1 (ISO 3166 Part 1) are based upon (but not limited to) the list in the "Standard Country or Area Code for Statistical Use" of the UN.