Anti-Racist Inclusive Language Overview

RACE

Race is defined as a group sharing outward physical characteristics and some commonalities of culture and history.

Because of this, race is often thought of as inherent and related to one's biological makeup. However, past research has identified that there's no one gene that is particular to one racial group and not the other. This concludes that racial categories are NOT biological, rather they are socially constructed categories.

ETHNICITY

Ethnicity is defined as markers acquired from the group with which one shares cultural, traditional and familial bonds.

Ethnicity is a broader term that people can use to describe themselves. It encompasses one's language, culture, nationality, religion etc. Typically, because it is self-ascribed, people can assign multiple ethnicities to themselves (e.g. Asian American, British Somali etc.)

Why is it important to talk about race?

It acknowledges and confronts systemic and historical injustices, discrimination, and disparities that have disproportionately affected racial groups. By addressing race, we can openly discuss and work to dismantle the racial biases, prejudice, and stereotypes that persist in society. It also allows us to recognize the unique experiences and challenges faced by different racial communities, fostering empathy, understanding, and the pursuit of social equity.

When we avoid conversations about race, we allow ourselves to be fooled into believing that racism does not exist. Avoiding conflict or uncomfortable conversations can create huge blind spots to the largest issues within our society.

Instead of **"Mission" to describe country of MSF operations**
Say **"Country Office" preferably, using the country name e.g. Sierra Leone Country Office. We can also collectively refer to a country's activities e.g. DRC projects.**
The term "mission" was used by faith-based groups to describe their charity work. This reinforces divisions within the team, colonialist attitudes and white savior mythologies. As professional aid workers, it is also important to acknowledge the authorities where we work, our patients and our engagement with local communities.

Instead of **"Mission" to describe a work contract**
Say **"Assignment"**
When used to describe work activities, the term "mission" reinforces notions of privileged white saviors proselytizing and saving colonial communities from ignorance and poverty. It is important to establish everyone has a professional work contract and that patients and communities are empowered to shape MSF's activities.

Instead of **"Field"**
Say **Specific work location e.g. Homa Bay, Kenya. Otherwise, use project site, coordination office, OC, MSF office.**
Avoid distinguishing between work locations—that is, between field, HQ, partner sections etc.—which only reinforces outdated hierarchical distinctions, and those biases which assume most legitimate decision-makers are based in the European OCs. The term "field" may also be perceived as reflecting colonial biases based on the type of work completed by staff in different locations, or as insensitive, focusing on the opportunities which provide international staff with experience in the humanitarian sector.

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Instead of **"Beneficiary"**
Say **"Patient"** or **"Community Member"**
Language which emphasizes the political and financial dynamics present in humanitarian emergencies helps to disempower community member(s) who are a key stakeholder in MSF's activities.

Instead of **"National staff", "Expat"** or **"International staff"**
Say **"Locally Hired Staff (LHS)"** or **"Locally Recruited Staff (LRS)** **"Internationally Mobile Staff (IMS)"**
New HR terminology aims to focus on the type of contract offered to staff and not outdated in-group / out-group divisions which emphasized the privilege of westerners living abroad. The Rewards Review reinforces minimum standards which are applicable to all staff, irrespective of contract type.

Instead of **Specifying staff by contract type**
Say **"Staff" or "Team Members"**
Unless there is an HR or financial reason to specify someone's contract, all staff should be referred to using identical collective, neutral language which promotes inclusion and equity.

Instead of **"Indigenous people"**
Try and use the specific name e.g. Inuit
Indigenous people is a generalizing term which fails to recognize the uniqueness of each self-identifying nation.

Instead of **"Vulnerable people", "Vulnerable women", "Vulnerable men"**
Say **People facing social exclusion, political exclusion, economic exclusion, Women/men who are in a vulnerable position because of …, Women/men made vulnerable by …**
When we talk about the social exclusion of people, we need to highlight that the problem is within the system and not use descriptors which suggest that "vulnerability" is inherent to them as individuals.

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Instead of **"The Global North"**
Say **High-income countries; Preferably specify countries.**
As with the term, "The Global South", this generalizes and oversimplifies the reality of a group of countries.

Instead of **"The Global South"** or **"Developing world"**
Say **Low-income and/or Middle-income countries; Countries with high rates of economic inequality; Preferably specify countries.**
These general terms can be quite tempting to use to describe a group of countries but are reductive and do not communicate the range of differences or nuance between them.

Our words matter.

Instead of **Sub-Saharan Africa**
Refer to **geographic regions of the African continent (eastern Africa, southern Africa, etc.). And if we are referring to a particular community or country, we can specifically name that.**
Outdated terminology should be replaced with the vocabulary currently being utilized. Older terms often reflect and reinforce colonial era rules, power dynamics and racist attitudes.

Instead of **"Local language"**, **"Local people"**, **"Local population"**, **"Local knowledge"**, **"Local staff"**
Name the **specific country, language, ethnic group or nationality.**
Local to where? Anyone can be local, depending on the context. Historically, the word "local" has carried power imbalances where "locals" were often referred to passive recipients of aid in opposition to "expats" who represent the power and decision-making. Using precise language fosters a deeper understanding of the unique identities, customs, and helps avoid the homogenization and oversimplification of cultures, promoting inclusivity and cultural sensitivity.

Instead of **"the voiceless"**
Say **"Marginalized communities", "Historically silenced", "Historically discriminated", "Underserved populations"**
Avoid expressions which suggest anyone is not capable of changing their own narrative and that they might only be passively receiving help. Emphasizing that attention has not been given to their stories, or resources provided to address their needs, is a very different message. Recognize the difference between "people without a voice" which links issues to individuals and "people who have been historically silenced" which emphasizes the underlying structural inequities and systemic barriers.

MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES

Best Practices to Promote an Anti-Racist Work Environment

Avoid assumptions about a person's racial or ethnic background and refrain from using racial stereotypes in interactions and decision-making.

Address racial microaggressions when they occur within the workplace, using these moments as opportunities for education and growth.
"Hi, what you said made me feel uncomfortable because of … Have you ever considered that…"
"Hey, you probably didn't mean to be disrespectful but what you said to Andrew was racist/biased/prejudiced because of….. . If you are interested, I use some great resources to learn more about this."

Whenever possible, collect disaggregated data that takes into consideration the INTERSECTIONALITY in people.
Gather data that is disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and other relevant factors to identify disparities and design targeted interventions.

Reflect on your power and privilege and how this plays out in interactions with other people.
Use your power and privilege to elevate others.
Champion and give other people credit when their ideas aren't fully recognized or acknowledged.
If you are frequently the first to speak in meetings, (or among the first), try to let other people speak before you.
"I think Martha was speaking before she was interrupted. I would like to hear what she has to say"
"I want to pause and acknowledge this great idea that ____ just brought up"

Insist on centering those who have been most marginalized and overlooked.
When taking a decision, ask:
- Who is this decision impacting the most and center that voice(s).
- Whose perspectives should be here but aren't?
  Am I the right person to lead this initiative? Or are there colleagues who are often overlooked yet just as well qualified to lead it?
- Could I better support this not from the front but instead by taking a learning and support role?

Think about the possibility that the decision you are making might be biased.
During key decision-making moments ask yourself:
"Where could bias be showing up in this decision?"

Commit yourself to actively learn and become informed.
Subscribe to: **Anti-Racism Daily**, a free daily newsletter to learn how to build a more inclusive community.

References:
OCA's Inclusive Language and Visual Glossary
MSF Global DEI Guide for Communications & Fundraising Content
MSF's Anti-Racism Lexicon
Words Matter – MSF's Anti-Racism TIC
Oxfam's Inclusive Language Guide
OCBA's Inclusive Language Guideline