



# Report on Dignified Storytelling Consultation #6: The Language of Dignified Storytelling

Facilitated by Altamont Group<sup>1</sup>  
May 26, 2021  
6pm GST / 10am EST

## CONSULTATION SUMMARY

### Consultation Participants & Objectives

Forty-five people joined the final Dignified Storytelling Consultation (of a six-part series) on May 26, 2021 to discuss how we use language and terminology to tell stories about global issues.

Consultation #6, “The Language of Dignified Storytelling,” sought participants’ perspectives on commonly used terms within development and humanitarian sectors. Sharing their experiences from working in communications, content creation, and academia, participants offered advice on language usage guidelines to help storytellers honour human dignity through the words we use.



*Consultation #6 participants pause for a quick screenshot before breaking into smaller discussion groups.*

Outcomes from Consultation #6 – along with the other discussions in the series – will help inform the Dignified Storytelling Handbook, which is being developed as part of the wider initiative with support from Dubai Cares, Expo 2020, and the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC).

### Discussion Summary

Following a brief reminder of language issues frequently encountered in “development speak,” including jargon, acronyms, abstraction, and harmful connotations, participants broke into three discussion rooms for more in-depth conversations around three guiding questions:

1. What are the language or terminology issues that you find troubling in your work?
2. What is our preferred terminology (and why) for: The people in the stories? Elements of the storytelling process? Commonly used development terms?
3. What guidelines can we suggest for language usage that is respectful and understandable?

Conversations in each room touched on questions of power – how those in power often shape the language used; how language can reinforce power imbalances; and how being the one to name something is an act of power. As a response, each group highlighted the importance of finding ways to shift that balance of power and agency to the people in the stories. Part of ‘passing the mic’ to people to tell the stories they want to tell entails listening to how they reference themselves and others in their communities.

<sup>1</sup> Altamont Group is a boutique advisory firm: [www.altamontgroup.ca](http://www.altamontgroup.ca). Special thanks to the Group Leaders for the Consultation: Daniel Dickinson (UNDGC), Nina Ford (GFC), and Ragy Saro (Expo2020 Dubai).



Participants also noted several complex challenges and questions around language usage that warrant ongoing exploration and continued discussion:

- How can conversations around language be extended to include the people we are working with?
- How do we encourage people to use their own words, but also help ensure those words connect appropriately with certain audiences?
- How can we balance traditional expectations around academic language with aims to pursue plain and understandable language use?
- How do we reach audiences across geographies and cultures, when many language or terminology preferences vary from locality to locality?

The table below summarizes some of the key perspectives shared during the Consultation around terminology and suggested guidelines for language use.

Topic	Key Points
<p><b>Thoughts on Terminologies</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several commonly used terms exacerbate power differences and serve as potentially harmful labels, taking away people’s agency and their dignity.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Examples of these harmful terms include: Third World, the Field, vulnerable, marginalized, underprivileged, beneficiaries, and references to empowering or giving voice to people.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Abbreviations/acronyms to refer to groups of people can be confusing and difficult to navigate. They are rarely universally used or appropriate across contexts and risk grouping diverse populations under an ill-fitting label.</li> <li>• The concept of coexisting is being replaced by emphasis on global solidarity, living and working together, social cohesion, and one humanity.</li> <li>• In some instances, the phrase “people we serve” can emphasise a humble and others-focused approach that is in line with many organizations’ mission and values.</li> <li>• The terminology selected by organizations says something about their end goals – whether justice-oriented or charity-focused.</li> <li>• Glossaries are important in setting the norms for the ways we use language. Three helpful resources to this end include:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ <a href="https://globalpressjournal.com/style-guide/">https://globalpressjournal.com/style-guide/</a></li> <li>◦ <a href="https://www.unaoc.org/resource/media-friendly-glossary-for-migration/">https://www.unaoc.org/resource/media-friendly-glossary-for-migration/</a></li> <li>◦ <a href="https://consciousstyleguide.com/">https://consciousstyleguide.com/</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Suggested Guidelines for Language Usage</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with self-questioning as we must reflectively consider our own assumptions, situations, and language use for the inherent power dynamics.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Questions to reflect on may include: Whose lead are we following? Who are we trying to please? Who is included in our conversations and planning?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Use human-first terms instead of leading or labelling people with a quality or situation.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ For example, “children living in a refugee camp” is preferable to “refugee children,” or “person with disabilities” is preferable to a “disabled person.”</li> </ul> </li> <li>• If safety is not at risk, call people by name.</li> <li>• Proactively ask contributors how they want to be identified and/or represent themselves. If it is not doing harms to others, use their words and terminologies.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a common goal, increase the agency and opportunities that people have to tell their own stories in the way they want to tell them.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Take steps to support increased creative control by the people in the stories with an openness to unexpected narratives.</li> <li>○ Work closely with individual and communities to promote active participation throughout the storytelling process, including sharing back language choices and content with contributors for their feedback.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Be as specific as possible when referring to groups of people to avoid stereotypes and to make language more accessible.</li> <li>• Generally, seek to get back to the basics, using plain language when possible and avoiding jargon.</li> <li>• Avoid words that perpetuate power imbalances.</li> <li>• While not shirking away from problems, seek to emphasize solutions and work towards shared goals.</li> <li>• Visual language, which can be especially powerful via social media, cannot be separated from language. Visual images need the same close examination for how they might magnify power dynamics through what images are used and how they are framed.</li> <li>• Redefining the wider lexicon can begin with individual choices. Rather than wait for organizational mandates, look for small ways to use language differently, building momentum for change.</li> </ul>
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While Consultation #6 is the final one of the series, Dignified Storytelling activities will continue through Expo 2020 Dubai – in part through a series of events aligned with Expo’s thematic weeks, including a one-day Dignified Storytelling Forum in December 2021. During the Forum, the Dignified Storytelling Handbook will be launched. Registration for the Forum and other Expo events – to be held both online and in-person – will begin in August 2021 on [www.dignifiedstorytelling.com](http://www.dignifiedstorytelling.com)

**Sign the Pledge!** All Consultation participants are warmly invited to sign the Dignified Storytelling Pledge, affirming each of us has the power to contribute to positive change and committing to tell stories characterised by deep respect, full transparency, and social responsibility: <https://dignifiedstorytelling.com/pledge/>



## Annex: Dignified Storytelling Consultation #6 Participant List

Sincere thanks to all Consultation #6 participants for the open and honest conversation during the breakout room discussion session:

1. Zeinab Ali, UNRCO
2. Khalifa Al Suwaidi, Dubai Cares
3. Joe Ansah, Save the Children
4. Ava Bahrami, APDIM-ESCAP
5. Beau Barberis
6. Gareth Benest, Media Specialist
7. Caryn Bladt, buildOn
8. Susannah Birkwood, WWF
9. Jane Body, Mama Hope
10. Mara Chan, The Luminos Fund
11. Carole Chapelier, New York University Abu Dhabi
12. Dana Del Vecchio, World Education
13. Tobias Denskus, Malmo University
14. Constance Dykhuizen, JP's Peace Love and Happiness Foundation
15. Mai Farouk, Save the Children
16. Rosalia Galan, UNAOC
17. Katharina Goetze, UNECA
18. Ingrid Guyon, Fotosynthesis
19. Zeina Habib, WFP
20. Kaylois Henry, UN Human Rights
21. Katja Hinz, IIEP-UNESCO
22. Natasha Hirst, Photographer
23. Shiela Kibuthu, Sanergy
24. Lunga Kupiso, African Union Commission
25. Alba Lopez, UNWTO
26. Judith Madigan, BRANDOUTLOUD
27. Raefah Makki, UNHCR
28. Nicolas Meulders, OHCHR
29. Shermin Mheidly, Dubai Cares
30. Thor Morales, PlusPeace & InsightShare
31. Alanna O'Donnell, Global Dignity
32. Gabriella Polletta, Golletta Productions
33. Brittney Potvin, Northern Council for Global Cooperation
34. Susannah Price, UN-Habitat
35. Neel Shukla, Four Seasons Ramesh Gallery
36. Maretta Silverman, The Luminos Fund
37. Michal Szymanski, UN DESA
38. Katelin Raw, VVOB
39. Claudia Rosel, IOM
40. Giulia Tarantino, CESIE
41. Tara Todras-Whitehill, Visual Storyteller & Consultant
42. Anna Uzarowska, Altamont Group
43. Quintina Valero, Quintina Valero Photography
44. Marloes van Luijk, WWF Netherlands

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Consultation #6 was facilitated by Sajida H. Shroff and Jamie Vinson of Altamont Group ([www.altamontgroup.ca](http://www.altamontgroup.ca)) with special thanks to Daniel Dickinson (UNDGC), Nina Ford (GFC), and Ragy Saro (Expo 2020 Dubai) for their support as Group Leaders.



All queries about Dignified Storytelling can be sent to [HQ@dignifiedstorytelling.com](mailto:HQ@dignifiedstorytelling.com)

To learn more about the initiative and sign up for future events, please visit the Dignified Storytelling website at: [www.dignifiedstorytelling.com](http://www.dignifiedstorytelling.com)