**Guidance on the use of language in humanitarian settings**

As communications and media experts, we have to consider the implications of our work on the safety and security of our staff and programs in the countries we work in. The meaning and usage of words can have a great impact, the unintended use of words such as ‘terrorist’ or ‘islamist’ can put our colleagues in danger.

**Remember CARE’s Communications and Advocacy Principles (CARE Communications Handbook):**

* Uphold the dignity of those affected.
* Focus on women and girls.
* Do no harm.
* Be grounded in CARE’s expertise and program experience.

**Some general guidance:[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Use neutral and factual language to describe incidents and situations.** Value-laden and controversial terms, or words with political and military connotation, should be avoided. For example, armed groups should not be labelled as ‘extremist’, ‘terrorist’ or ‘insurgent’ as this may imply a value or political statement and sometimes may have legal connotations, even if unintended. For example, the ‘liberation of Mosul’ has a very partial meaning whereas ‘retaking’ or the ‘fight for Mosul’ is more neutral. When using the term ‘war’, ensure to do so in a nuanced way and only use it to put weight behind certain messages and headline. Don’t overuse it, refer to ‘civil war/conflict’ instead.

**Respect the dignity of people who have been impacted**. This includes avoiding ‘victimising’ language like ‘pathetic’ to describe people and avoiding reducing people to a category, for example referring to people as IDPs (rather say people that are displaced internally or displaced within their own country). Where possible, use humanizing terms - families, communities, girls, boys, women and men – and avoid dehumanizing ones, like ‘populations’.

**Avoid humanitarian jargon**. When using humanitarian terminology, use examples to help provide clarity. Instead of using terms such as ‘non-food items’, use ‘household supplies’ or explain what these items are. Help the audience distinguish key humanitarian terms such as ‘internally displaced people’ and ‘refugees’ to ensure that these are not used interchangeably. Check [here](http://www.unhcr.org/who-we-help.html) for a definition of these terms. Avoid using the term ‘climate refugees’ as it is legally inaccurate.

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| **Issue** | **Appropriate** | **Inappropriate** |
| Groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, Taliban, Al Qaeda | Militant groups  Armed groups | Islamists  Extremists  Terrorists  Attackers  Rebel groups  Jihadists  ISIS/Daesh/ISIL  Boko Haram  Al Qaeda  Taliban |
| People affected by conflict | Survivors  Affected people | Victims |
| Conflict | War (*see guidance above*)  Civil war  Conflict  Violence  Armed conflict  Fighting  Military operations  Civil unrest | Sectarian conflict  Religious conflict  Fight/War against terror  Liberation  Insurgency  Rebellion  Revolution  Counter-insurgency  Terror/Terrorism |
| Population movements | Displacement  Forced displacement  Expulsion  Evacuation  Forced returns |  |
| Food crises – no famine officially declared | Food crisis  Hunger crisis  Food insecurity | Famine  Starvation |
| Famine – if officially declared by the UN | Famine  Starvation |  |
| Critical security incidents involving CARE staff (*unless otherwise specified*) | Abducted  Missing | Kidnapped |
| Violence against civilians | Killed  Dead  Injured  Casualties  Fatalities | Massacred  Slaughtered  Genocide (*use only if declared by UN*) |
| Cholera – if NOT officially declared by WHO | Water borne diseases  Acute watery diarrhea | Cholera |
| Gender based violence | Survivors | Victims |

1. adapted from UN OCHA’s standard language on conflict document [↑](#footnote-ref-1)