

A Comparison of Global Lists of People Groups

The Lord has graciously raised up several sets of global people group information. Each of these sets has a unique perspective and focus in helping advance the Kingdom of God. There are at least three widely used global people group data sets:

- International Mission Board / CPPI (www.peoplegroups.org)
- World Christian Database / WCD (www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/)
- Joshua Project / JP (www.joshuaproject.net)

These lists have various sources, definitions, philosophies, update mechanisms and publication cycles. There is significant value in having these multiple perspectives on the “ethne” of the world. Differences in the data help point out where more investigation is needed as well as identify potential errors.

The World Christian Database and SIL Ethnologue provided the foundation for the CPPI and Joshua Project lists. CPPI and Joshua Project have modified these sources with data from field staff and regional and national researchers, particularly for South Asia.

Patrick Johnstone stated that people group “list holders experience close and warm links with each other, sharing both new and corrective information while respecting our differing networks of providers and users. We value peer challenges, which would not be possible with a single listing. Monopolies are never good.”

While multiple data sets provide valuable perspectives on the Great Commission, they can also give rise to confusion and seeming contradictions. The below table is an attempt to outline some of the distinctives and uses of these three people group data sets. This is not an attempt to promote one list over another or suggest that one is “better” than another. Rather it is intended as a guide to show the unique purposes and value of each list.

Feature	CPPI	WCD	JP
“People group” defined as language groups and subdivisions of language groups (based upon cultural or dialect distinctives). An ethnolinguistic list.	mostly	yes	Yes outside South Asia
“People group” defined as ethnolinguistic outside South Asia, but defined as castes and tribes in South Asia, each usually speaking several languages.	partial		yes
Total number of people groups without reference to country boundaries. (e.g., the Kazakhs of Central Asia are counted only one time regardless of how many countries they live in)	7,100	6,800	9,800
Total number of people groups when country boundaries are considered. (e.g., the Kazakhs are counted seven times if they live in seven countries. This is traditionally the way people group counts have been provided.)	11,700	13,600	16,800
Indicates primary religion for each people group in each country	yes	yes	yes
Provides percentage for each major world religion, in each people group in each country.		yes	partial
Provides a measure of Christian Adherents in each people group in each country.		yes	yes
Provides a measure of Evangelicals (Ev) or Great Commission Christians (GCC) in each people in each country.	yes % Ev	yes GCC	yes % Ev

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Feature	CPPI	WCD	JP
Provides breakdown of each Christianity subdivisions (Protestant, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, etc.) in each people group	partial		partial
Provides indication of non-Christian religion subdivisions, such as Sunni, Shia, Theravada, etc.	partial	partial	partial
Provides World A, B, C categories for each people group		yes	
Provides a way to report on each people group in the world “across countries”, i.e. summed from all countries of residence.	yes	yes	yes
Provides ethnic / cultural code for each people group		yes	yes
Provides a way to cluster people groups together for strategic planning purposes, based on common ethnicity/linguistic factors.	yes	yes	yes
Provides “location within country” information for each people		partial	partial
Provides maps showing people group locations	partial		partial
Indicates primary language for each people in each country.	yes	yes	yes
Provides a way to show all languages spoken by each people group in each country, to the extent this information is available.			yes
Provides population controls for each country by comparing to UN country populations for the current year.		yes	yes
Provides an unengaged indicator for each people group	yes		partial
Provides resource availability info (Scripture, Jesus film, etc.)	yes	yes	yes
Provides language dialect information for people groups * WCD calls this “World Language Classification”	yes	via Dalby system*	yes
Provides measure of degree of discipleship for each people		yes	
Provides measure of number of agencies at work for each people		yes	
Provides easy way to summarize data by regions of the world	yes	yes	yes
Maintains data in relational database tables, with referential integrity enforced.	yes	yes	yes
Christian totals by country are reconciled with a full listing of denominations.		yes	

As the people group lists are evaluated, a person should consider how the list is to be used. Language-focused ministries (audio and video distribution, Gospel radio, etc.) are likely to need a list that focuses on language groupings such as the SIL Ethnologue. Church planting and discipleship ministries need a list that emphasizes ethnic / cultural and language distinctives. Also, the region of the world under consideration may influence the choice of a people group list.

These lists are gifts from the Lord to the global missions community. May the Lord continue to grant wisdom and discernment to all the efforts seeking to help clarify the remaining task of the Great Commission.