Decoding and recoding language using the Iceberg Exercise

The purpose of this worksheet is to outline a process for understanding what is coded into narratives we care about, and how to re-code them in ways that align with our values and agendas.

Background

Language is often thought to be transparent, common sense. However, the logic and worldview contained in one particular way of talking about an issue is not natural, but a series of choices for how to represent the world. These representations of the world are known as 'frames'. When we say language is 'coded', we are referring to the logic contained within the way an issue is framed. If we can deconstruct the logic in existing framings, we can make choices about how to challenge them.

Process

The basic way we do this is to 'decode' the existing framing piece by piece, and then 're-code' for our purposes.

We use the metaphor of an iceberg, as this focusses our minds on the fact that there are things that are on the surface of language, AND that beneath the surface there is a whole lot of vital information and choices being made which determine the core meaning. We decode using one iceberg, and re-code using a new one.

This is the way it flows:
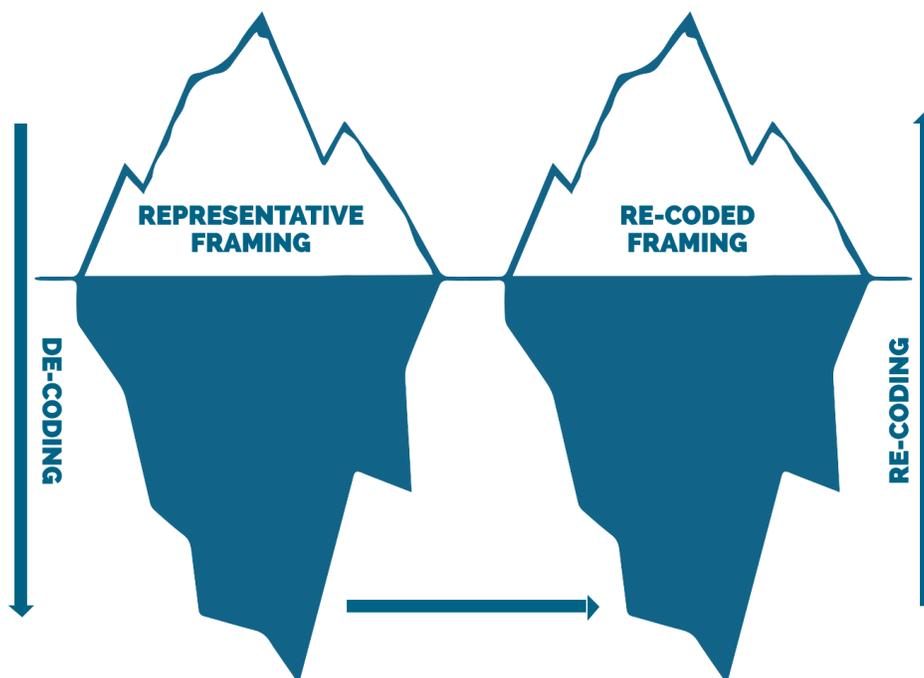
1. Select a short (max 2 sentences) statement that you think reflects the essential or representative logic of the narrative you want to engage.

2. Place that statement on the top of your first iceberg, like this:

The airport is for everyone. There will be more domestic and foreign visitors which will benefit the whole tourism industry and generate more and better jobs, helping Mexico's economy take-off.

Hidden assumptions

Imagery and metaphor

Subjects and objects

Verbs

3. To break the language down, we can start to look for some basic things in the content of the message:
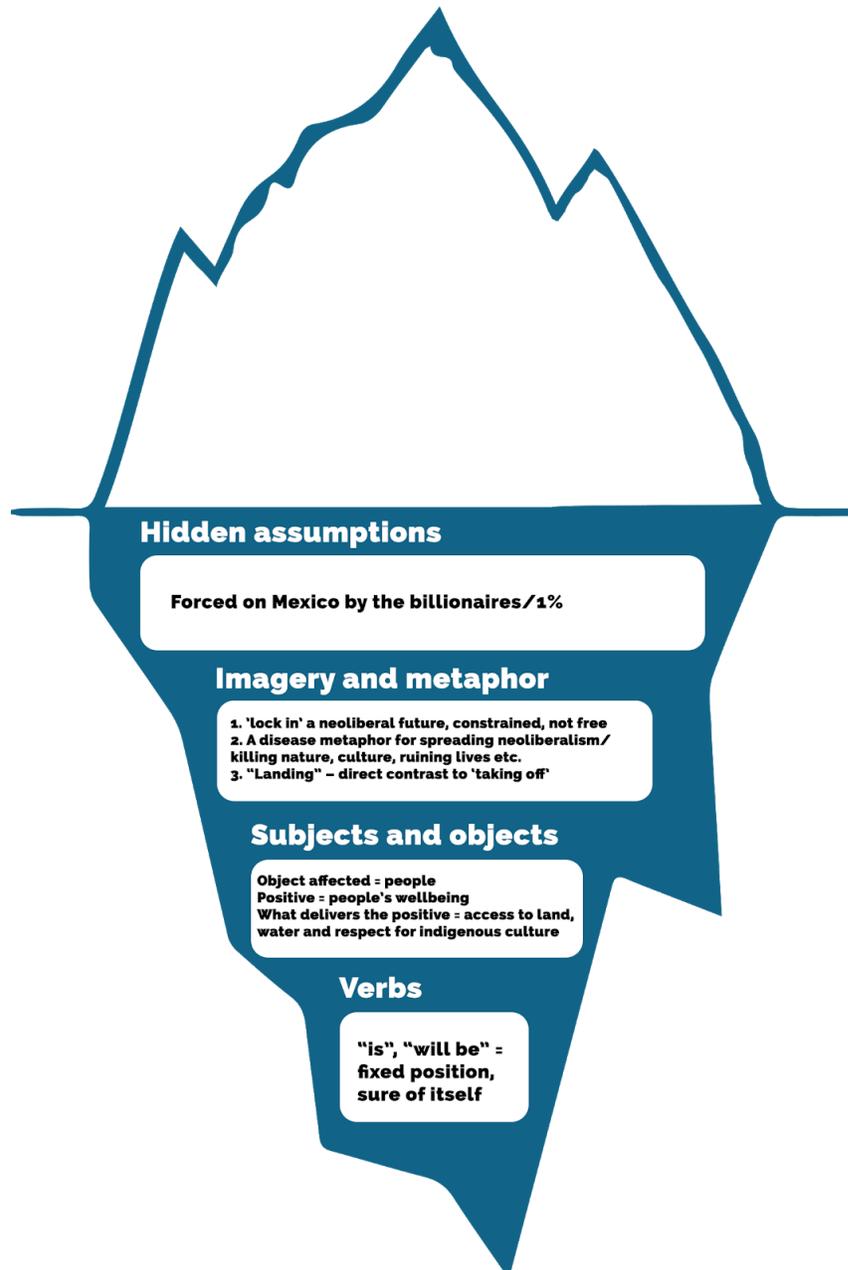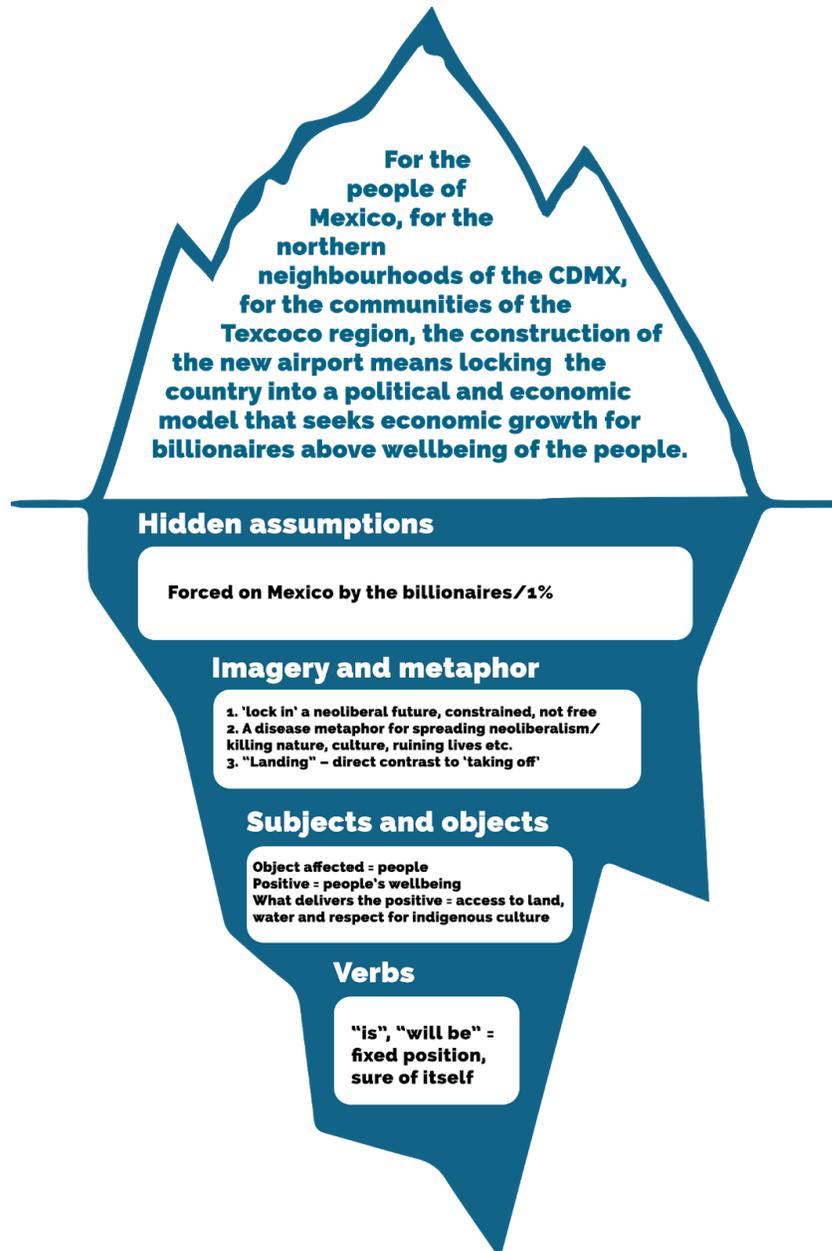
1. **Verbs** – what action is being represented? Is it static, dynamic, fast, slow, "serious", "playful", etc?
2. **"Hidden" assumptions** – what is represented as positive, and what is negative? How can we tell? (Hint: think about the role of adjectives)
3. **Imagery and metaphor** – what figurative language, artful comparisons, and very basic metaphors are present? What images does the language conjure in the mind?
4. **Subjects and objects** – who is the active agent, and who is passive? Who is doing the work, and who is being done to? Who has the power? If there are no agents, why?

The airport is for everyone. There will be more domestic and foreign visitors which will benefit the whole tourism industry and generate more and better jobs, helping Mexico's economy take-off.

Hidden assumptions

"For everyone" = assumes trickle-down economics

Imagery and metaphor

"take off" = flight metaphor suggesting economy currently 'grounded'; growth is a type of flight, freedom, open skies, all these good images

Subjects and objects

Object affected = industry // What is positive for the object = tourism, industry and jobs

Verbs

"is", "will be" = fixed position, sure of itself

4. Decide which components of the language can and should be changed, and put your preferred logic -i.e. the new components - in the 2nd iceberg. This is what you will build your new statement from:

Hidden assumptions

Forced on Mexico by the billionaires/1%

Imagery and metaphor

1. 'lock in' a neoliberal future, constrained, not free
2. A disease metaphor for spreading neoliberalism/ killing nature, culture, ruining lives etc.
3. "Landing" – direct contrast to 'taking off'

Subjects and objects

Object affected = people
Positive = people's wellbeing
What delivers the positive = access to land, water and respect for indigenous culture

Verbs

"is", "will be" = fixed position, sure of itself

5. Write a new sentence from the component pieces. Remember, there is no such things as a single, perfect statement. Different people will write things differently. The same intervention can have several versions of the statement, tailored to different audiences' needs. What's important is that you reflect the logic you intend to convey from within the iceberg. At this stage we're dealing in logic, not poetry. That comes next, with creative expression.

For the people of Mexico, for the northern neighbourhoods of the CDMX, for the communities of the Texcoco region, the construction of the new airport means locking the country into a political and economic model that seeks economic growth for billionaires above wellbeing of the people.

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Lock in metaphor - For the people of Mexico, for the northern neighbourhoods of the CDMX, for the communities of the Texcoco region, the construction of the new airport means locking the country into a political and economic model that seeks economic growth for billionaires above wellbeing of the people.

Disease metaphor – the new airport of Mexico city represents a disease for people living on the indigenous and common lands where it is being constructed, it will contaminate the water, cause floods and undermine people's wellbeing

Landing metaphor – People's water is under attack by the landing of the aerotropolis and the macro-project of NAICM. Billionaires like Carlos Slim and their political enablers like Pena are failing to respect the people's most basic rights to land, water and dignified life.

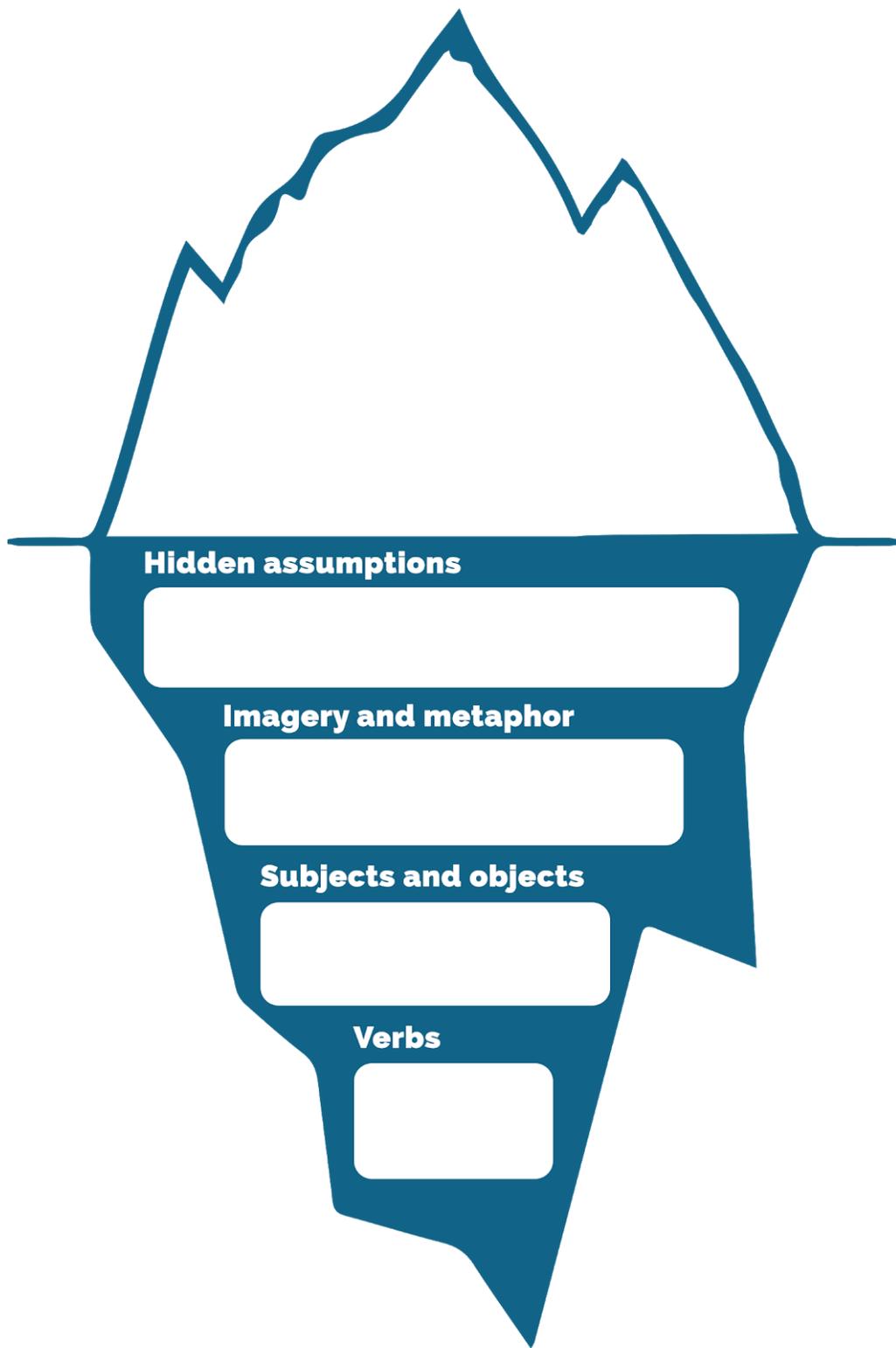7. Now let's try with some development framing.

Poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of comsumption and production and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and socil development are the overarching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable development.

Hidden assumptions

Imagery and metaphor

Subjects and objects

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