



Words Matter

ETH NADEL's unfinished guide to word choice
for teaching in international cooperation

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Introduction

WHY LANGUAGE?

Does language shape thoughts, perception, and practice, or is it our own beliefs and actions that determine the language we use?

In 2014, The Economist magazine published an article titled "Lighting a Dark Continent". Which continent do you think the article was referring to? Why? Africa is indeed a dark continent: half of the population do not have access to electricity.¹ So why is it that such a title can be controversial? Words are more than words – they carry with them historical and cultural interpretations of those who speak and those who hear them. Those interpretations develop into meanings, conclusions and beliefs – all of which strongly influence actions.

In the field of international cooperation, the language that is often used can be problematic. As noted in a recent article published in the journal BMJ Global Health (Khan et al., 2022), "much of the vocabulary used in the sector has its origins in colonialism." Whether intentional or not, imagined or legitimate, this is intertwined with a seldom questioned, perhaps even unconscious hierarchy among nations, people and organisations. It is potentially reinforcing the very inequalities and structures of exclusion the sector is trying to dismantle.

Word choice therefore has profound implications for the dignity, respect, and responsibilities of everyone involved in international cooperation. It has the power to present or remove barriers, to exclude or include.

In view of this, the NADEL Center for Development and Cooperation has gathered and reflected on the language and terminology used in international cooperation. Our aim is to contribute to decolonising language – not necessarily by always suggesting solutions, but simply by making people aware of the implications

of the language they use. More specifically, this guide highlights contexts in which certain words may no longer be appropriate. It also sensitizes people to consider how language can be hurtful, and demonstrates that words carry connotations. It shows how in many cases, simplistic categorizations of countries or people are unhelpful and/or unnecessary.

We hope this guide triggers reflection and discussion on the structures of power, privilege, and bias which are inherent, yet often overlooked in international cooperation.

Much work has already been done on decolonial, antiracist and inclusive language. **This document seeks to summarize and complement that work with a focus on teaching and learning in international cooperation.** Links to resources which provide more in-depth analysis or more extensive lists of language are provided below.

WORK IN PROGRESS:

NADEL's mission is to inspire students to take action for a more sustainable and inclusive world. In this spirit, NADEL has developed an internal words matter guide that we use in our teaching to help us align our language with our mission and values. Language and the meaning associated with language can change over time. This glossary is therefore an on-going project. Whilst new words and resources will be included in subsequent iterations, we hope this first version will be useful or built upon by other teaching programs and organizations.

¹ <https://ourworldindata.org/energy-access#what-share-of-people-have-access-to-electricity>

WHY NOW?

While the push to decolonize has been around since colonization began, in the last few years, social movements like Black Lives Matter have drawn attention to the urgent need to challenge structures and practices that are responsible for racism as well as more subtle forms of discrimination. Many organisations working in international cooperation have therefore begun reconsidering their ways of working. For ETH NADEL, this glossary is part of a wider on-going effort to understand and teach international cooperation and global sustainable development from a decolonial perspective. We realise this might seem contradictory at first. “Development Cooperation” after all seems to be a child of colonialism. Nonetheless, as noted by Ethiopian scholar, Eyob Gebremariam (2021), we believe noticing and identifying the origins and concerns with words and phrases commonly used in the sector, and exploring potential alternatives is a good starting point for change.

WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT FOR AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

This document includes a list of words or terms commonly used in the international cooperation sector that may be problematic. The tables can be used as a quick reference. The words have been sourced through collaborative efforts of NADEL team members, and/or are based on literature (see other resources and bibliography). The tables provide a brief description of the origin of certain words, the challenges posed by their use, and in some cases potential alternatives.

WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED IN THE GLOSSARY?

1. This glossary refers only to language (words, terms and phrases). **Decolonising the international cooperation sector will take more than just a shift in language.** This guide is part of that broader effort.
2. Terms that are commonly accepted to be derogatory, racist, or that constitute hate speech are not included in this glossary. For an explanation of hate speech see: [What is hate speech? | United Nations](#).
3. Terms with colonial roots that are not specific to the international cooperation sector are not included in this version of the glossary.
4. This is not a general anti-racist or inclusive language guide. Much work has already been done on these topics. This guide does not repeat this work but provides links to existing resources.



OTHER RESOURCES AND LINKS TO ANTI-RACIST AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDES:

More detailed analysis of potentially problematic language used to refer to countries and people, and **guidance on anti-racist and inclusive language** can be found here and was used to inform the tables below:

- [How we classify countries and people—and why it matters | BMJ Global Health](#)
- [Inclusive Language Guide | Oxfam](#)
- [Antiracist language guide | University of Arizona Libraries](#)
- [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#)
- [Equity & Inclusion Glossary of Terms | University of British Columbia](#)

Additional sources this glossary relies on can be found in the reference list at the end of the document. For easier reading, the tables below do not include references.

Common terms used in the international cooperation sector

OVERARCHING CONSIDERATIONS:

The international cooperation sector relies heavily on jargon. Those not closely acquainted with the sector may find it difficult to understand or interpret many of the words that are considered 'standard' vocabulary. This vocabulary is in some cases imbued with prejudice, stereotypes or discriminatory views. However, by using some overarching principles to guide our choice of words, we can make this language more inclusive and non-judgemental.

These principles include:

- **Specificity:** Generalisations can be harmful. Where applicable, be specific about which countries, places, people, or which dimensions of poverty you are referring to.
- **Labelling:** Consider whether you need to classify or group countries or places at all. If not, simply refer to the country or place name, to the world or global population.
- **Context:** Context matters. Consider how people refer to themselves, their place or country of residence, or how they wish to be referred to. For example the "GX" countries of the UN, G77, G7+, G20, G7, OECD, are groups countries have self-selected into. Countries have, hence, actively decided to be part of them, so grouping that you might refer to if appropriate.
- **Dignity & Respect:** Language should not disempower people, undermine their autonomy, portray them as victims, or portray others as saviours or heroes.
- **Authenticity:** Avoid using words to gain approval or attention. This is particularly the case for words that imply results or processes considered positive. Words such as 'participatory' or 'empowered' should only be used if they can be substantiated with details. Using words casually takes vital meaning out of them and destroys their significance.

Countries

TERMS GENERALLY AVOIDED	
Term	Concerns or issues with this language
Advanced countries vs. underdeveloped countries	All countries are advanced in some ways and less advanced in others. Use of this classification perpetuates ideas of superiority and inferiority. These terms are often used to describe levels of economic development and overlook other dimensions of a country's situation.
Third world vs. first world	The terms are outdated. These terms are based on the political division of the world in the 20th century. "Third world" implies backwardness.
Core vs. periphery	A theoretical analogy created to understand countries of "high skills" and "power" at the core, and countries of low skill and power at the periphery. The terms imply there is an established hierarchy of countries.
Fragile states	The term has been criticised widely for various reasons including unclear or inconsistent definitions, state centric perspective, failing to account for the dynamic nature of conflicts and fragility, and focussing on negative rather than positive aspects of a state's situation. It takes a conflict lens.

TERMS USED WITH SENSITIVITY

Term	Aspects to consider for using this language
Developing vs. developed countries	The terms imply two categories of countries, with a “gap” in between. This gap does not exist. Most people now live somewhere in the middle. moreover, there is no consensus about what these words mean. It is argued that all countries are still developing in one sense or another.
The West	The West began as a geographical distinction and evolved into ideological / values-based distinction. It is also a geographically inaccurate way to describe countries. Latin America is in the Western hemisphere but not typically deemed part of “the West”. Australia and New Zealand are not in the western hemisphere but are typically considered part of “the West”. “Western” may still be a useful term to describe “Western” norms. We avoid using it in conjunction with “the East” or “Orient”.
High income countries (HIC); low- and middle-income countries (LMIC); low income countries, upper- and lower-middle income countries.	This categorisation is less controversial than others since it is explicit in that it refers only to income levels. However, it overlooks nuances, and the lines are somewhat arbitrarily set. Consider if income levels are relevant in your use case.
Industrialized countries vs. less industrialized countries	This categorisation should only be used when specifically referring to the status of industrialization of countries, but not generally used to group countries. The terms can perpetuate ideas of inferiority and superiority, can imply industrialization is an end in itself, rather than just one possible way to achieve higher standards of living for populations. Neglects the negative consequences of industrialization. We avoid using “industrialised” and “less industrialised” in conjunction with societies (i.e. “industrialised societies”).
Global North, Global South	Based on the Brandt Line ² developed during the post-cold war, IMF/structural adjustment period term. It is geographically inaccurate but often used as a relational and political construct. Some uses of the term seek to highlight and address power asymmetries along the North-South “divide”. However, some uses exacerbate these power asymmetries.
Majority world, vs. minority world.	Majority world denotes those countries (mostly low- and middle-income countries) that hold most of the world’s population. Only a minority of the global population lives in high-income countries. The term is sometimes used to disrupt current thinking. When used, it is not self-explanatory that it refers to size of the population.

² The Brandt Line is a visual depiction of the North-South divide between their economies, based on GDP per capita, proposed by Willy Brandt in the 1980s.

People

TERMS GENERALLY AVOIDED

Term	Concerns or issues with this language	Potential alternatives
Beneficiary/ies	From Latin beneficiarius which means enjoying a favor, or granted a privilege. Undermines agency by implying passive acceptance or receipt of things. It implies that people “benefit” from what is provided to them by the “giver”. Often it is not known whether people really “benefit” from a certain program or activity.	The people we work with. People in a specified country/location. People affected by (e.g. in humanitarian settings). Acknowledge that providers of charitable money might also have their own agendas.
Bottom of the pyramid	As with many terms it simplifies and generalises lower income groups and positions them literally at the lowest level.	People living in poverty/below the poverty line/on less than X.
We and they	Implies a superficial divide and portrays people as “other”. Implies that there is a homogenous group of “we” and “they”.	Use the name of the person, country or organization.
Natives	Implies primitiveness.	Indigenous, First Nations People, ask how people wish to be referred to, or refer to the specific name of the people you are referring to (Inuit, Māori).

TERMS USED WITH SENSITIVITY

Term	Aspects to consider for using this language	Potential alternatives
Target group	Can imply a top-down approach to addressing social issues, term can be de-humanising and may generalise a certain group.	Priority population, focus population. People affected by (e.g. in humanitarian settings).
Recipients	The term can reinforce power dynamics or undermine the agency of people by implying passive acceptance. In some cases, where good or services are being received, the term recipient might be accurate and useful.	The people we work with. Partners. People affected by (e.g. in humanitarian settings).
Local vs. international staff Local experts vs. international experts	International is often used, implicitly, to refer to organisations in the economically rich world. “Local” often has the connotation of inferiority, to the “international expert” from a high-income country.	Consider whether the nationality of the person is required information. If so, use the name of the location, or nationality of the person. Refer to their specified area of expertise (e.g., agricultural policy), or talk about experience rather than expertise.
The poor, poor people	Language should not undermine people’s agency. Poverty is multidimensional.	Be specific, if possible, about what dimension of poverty you are referring to in your case. People living in income poverty/below the poverty line/on less than X. People who have been marginalised, people who have been excluded, people who have been left behind, under-represented groups.

Other terms

TERMS GENERALLY AVOIDED		
Term	Concerns or issues with this language	Potential alternatives
In the field, fieldwork, field visit, on the ground, on mission vs. headquarters/HQ.	Military-style language. May be demeaning or imply danger or otherness. Often used to refer to trips to lower income countries, while work trip or business trip is used to refer to trips to higher income.	Use the name of location or country office (Accra office, Zurich office) or “work trip”. Data collection, surveys, engagement.
Development Aid, Development assistance	Language should not portray practitioners from high-income countries as “givers” or “saviours”, or portray people as passive recipients of “aid”. The term can reinforce a narrative dependency, and implies a one-way flow of resources and expertise.	International cooperation (finance), International SDG finance. Some argue for using the term “reparation payments”. Humanitarian Aid when linked to acute crisis.
Helping, saving, when referring to international cooperation funding or projects.	Language should not portray people as “heroes” or “saviours” and others as passive recipients.	Working with, working alongside.
Civilized vs. primitive Modern vs. traditional Industrialised societies vs. less industrialised societies.	These terms imply backwardness and have racist connotations.	Be specific about what you are referring to (e.g. modern agricultural technologies).
TERMS USED WITH SENSITIVITY		
Term	Aspects to consider for using this language	Potential alternatives
Capacity building, knowledge transfer.	Language referring to “low capacity” of certain people or groups. Perpetuates ideas of who is capable and who not, and what knowledge is of more “value”. Knowledge of local contexts is often implicitly devalued.	Knowledge sharing. Knowledge exchange. Implies two-way exchange and two-way cooperation.
“Empowering”, “giving voice to the voiceless”.	Implies goodness on behalf of the doer, implies that the “receivers” benefit and undermines agency of the people being referred to. Implies that people did not have a voice.	Creating spaces for participation or agency. Listening to all. Creating space for all voices to be heard.
Localization	Suggests something that is being done to people/ countries, rather than led by them and can hence, undermine agency.	Locally led. International cooperation organisations based in higher income countries transferring decision making power and resources to actors in lower income countries.

TERMS USED WITH SENSITIVITY		
Term	Aspects to consider for using this language	Potential alternatives
Development project	“Development project” might be linked to the idea that development is planned social change, as part of an effort by outsiders to intervene in a country to bring about “positive” change.	Be specific about what kind of “development” you are referring to. Acknowledge that the term has historical roots in colonialism.
Progress when referring to societies or countries	The normative meaning of “progress” is rooted in western/European/enlightenment thinking.	Be specific about what type of “progress” you are referring to. Where possible, acknowledge historical roots when using it.
Slum	Some argue that it is a word that has been used to stigmatize and marginalize population groups.	Use the name of the area. Informal settlements or lower income urban neighbourhoods or urban neighbourhoods without infrastructure or underserved urban areas. Context matters. If people who live in the area choose to use the word slum, use inverted commas.

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