



Introduction

Like many organisations working in our sector, at the Alliance, we have become increasingly aware that we must embrace our collective responsibility to help shape discourse on what our sector does and why.

We are more aware than ever that we must not allow the language we use to reinforce colonial attitudes to development or the idea of passive beneficiaries and victimhood. We must ensure that our words actively empower those we work with.

We also know that language can be key to building bridges, winning hearts and minds and increasing support for international development amongst the wider public. As [this comprehensive style guide](#) from the campaigning organisation [Sum of Us](#) puts it: “acknowledging the ability of language to shape and reflect reality, progressive campaigns can become more powerful vehicles for social change, inclusion, and justice.”

We therefore think it's vital to have open and frank conversations about the language we use in the international development sector – to help all of us reflect on what we do and why, critically assess our biases and ensure we actively promote our values.

Doing so could not only help us let go of outdated modes of thinking (acknowledging that the debate on [language and thinking is an age old chicken-and-egg question](#)), but through building consensus within our sector, we could also do more to communicate what we do and why in a way that brings the wider public with us.

This draft discussion paper aims to put forward some ideas on these issues, in hope that we can collaboratively build a shared set of guidelines with our members that helps ensure our language is always fit for purpose. We offer some context for these discussions, some draft principles to guide our language choices, some examples of language we think is problematic, and some alternatives that we (the Alliance) aim to use instead.

The paper does not aim to give all the answers, nor ask all the right questions. Rather, we hope it is seen as a starting point for wider discussions to build something useful for the sector in Scotland.

The context

Racial injustice

2020 was a year that reaffirmed the need for all of us to do more to confront racial injustice at the local, national and global levels.

The heightened attention to institutional and systemic racism across the world following the tragic murder of George Floyd at the hands of police in the USA last year challenged us in the international development and humanitarian sector to examine our own practices, organisations and structures.

As a result, our sector, whose work is defined by the historical legacies of colonial rule and shaped by the enduring global inequalities and injustices that it left behind, has recognised it cannot see itself as outside the debates that the #BlackLivesMatter movement ignited across the world.

New voices have also awoken on this multifaceted issue and many organisations, including many of our members, have begun to put more resources and energy into tackling it.

What is clearer than ever before is that this work must take on a variety of forms and is not only about diversity and inclusion in the workforce (big issues on their own), but is also about 'shifting the power', safeguarding, fair pay, diverse leadership and more. We must also see it as inextricably linked to our longstanding collective push to Leave No One Behind and achieve gender equality.

It is also true that this work is not new, and that many in the humanitarian assistance and international development sectors have been engaged in positive work on much of the above for a long time. However, we must also acknowledge that progress in some areas has been slow and find new ways to push forward.

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One such way to push forward is to critically assess and alter the language we use when talking about what we do and why. This may not be a panacea for the broad system change that is required to bring our approach to global sustainable development into the 21st century, but is certainly an integral part.

Political rhetoric and public support

We must also recognise that support for the broad system changes necessary to tackle global poverty, address inequality and fight injustice simply isn't at the level it needs to be. Getting our language fit for purpose could perhaps help with this.

Who better to persuade the wider public that addressing global poverty and inequality is important than people dedicated to that task? Yet somehow our collective voice is weak and we don't win the hearts and minds of the wider public as easily as we'd like.

Sadly, at UK level at least, the prevailing wind seems to be going in the wrong direction. The monumental shifts in the UK Government's position on global sustainable development over the course of 2020 - closing the doors to the Department for International Development then announcing its plans to significantly cut Official Development Assistance (ODA) – simply didn't bring about public outcry at a level we would have expected.

The fact is that the bold political moves to push these changes through were in part only possible because swathes of the UK population just don't care that much about the issues our sector holds dear. Furthermore, the political rhetoric around 'Global Britain' and the 'national interest' mainstream populist sentiments of 'us' and 'them', have weakened the moral argument for principled development financing.

We must face up to the reality that we (our sector) have collectively failed to capture the public imagination in the same way as, for instance, Marcus Rashford's campaign to protect free school meals. This is not because people are necessarily less compassionate when it comes to people elsewhere, it is more likely because they feel more removed from the issues they face.

So, perhaps finding new ways to describe what and why our sector does what it does could help us turn that tide. Other sectors are much better at using accessible language which has helped strengthen public support and understanding for their work. We need to do the same.

What does decolonising our language mean in practice?

At its heart we think 'decolonising our language' is about critical reflection. It is about creating a better narrative about why global sustainable development is necessary that is open and honest about the past, while also presenting a progressive vision for the future.





















Below we outline some principles to guide our word choice, then provide examples of language we think should be avoided, some alternatives and some grey areas.

The following subsections are not meant to be exhaustive lists of categories and terms, and should help us elicit others. Please add, comment, dispute and discuss!

Some useful principles to guide our choice of language

- ✓ Language should not be influenced by or validate existing power structures
- ✓ Language should be consistent with our values
- ✓ Language should avoid generalisations wherever possible
- ✓ Language should not reflect colonial, paternalistic or oppressive views of the world
- ✓ Language should be consistent in the face of strong political rhetoric
- ✓ Language should consistently define the issues we work on in a way that stays true to our values, no matter who the audience is
- ✓ Language should describe our work, our staff and our relationships with those we work with in a way that does not undermine their own agency or capability
- ✓ Language should not dehumanise or portray people as "other" "victims" and us as "heroes" or "saviours",
- ✓ Language should be actively anti-oppressive and support equality, diversity, and inclusion
- ✓ Language should be accessible, clear, and free of jargon, particularly the use of theoretical or academic concepts
- ✓ Language that is problematic should be challenged and not left for others to resolve

Key terms we hear all the time (which we think should be avoided)

To be avoided	Why	Alternative(s)
Aid or Foreign Aid	The word 'foreign' is othering and the word 'aid' reinforces power imbalances, colonialism and paternalism. "Foreign aid" also doesn't really convey much meaning or aspiration for what development finance actually is or achieves. It is also too often used to describe very different things, e.g humanitarian assistance, social development spending, investment in infrastructure, etc...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  ODA  Humanitarian assistance (when that's what it is)  Global sustainable development finance  Social Development Finance  Official Social Development Finance  International SDG Finance  <u>Global Public Investment</u>
Field visits, on the ground, in the field	These terms reinforce colonial attitudes, and can also invoke militarism and make the work of our sector about people from one place going to another place that is distant to do a job and leave. Also common in social science research and anthropology.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Just say where you are going and why e.g. visiting project x in country y
Beneficiaries, world's poorest, most vulnerable people, poor people	<p>These terms undermine agency or capability of those we work with. Associating words like 'poor', 'vulnerable' etc. do not explain the drivers of their situations, e.g. marginalisation, exclusion etc.</p> <p><i>More generally, we should avoid speaking on behalf of other people. Where possible, make space for people to tell their own stories from their own perspectives.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Partners  People we work with  Stakeholders  Constituents  People who have been marginalised / people who have been excluded / people who have not been listened to , under-represented groups/communities  Programme/Project participants
Third world Developing countries Global south	All of these terms are inaccurate and validate outdated thinking for different reasons. The most commonly used – 'developing country' – is also a loaded term that reinforces colonial and Eurocentric mindsets. Everywhere is 'developing', and pathways to economic and social development are not linear nor uniform.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Country x  Lower Income Countries  Middle Income Countries  Fragile and Conflict Affected States  the countries we/NGOs work in  'Global South' – ensuring we use inverted commas

More on describing the countries where our sector operates

- ✓ **Avoid generalisations** - Countries are not homogeneous. As such, there is no perfect term when grouping countries together, and this should be avoided whenever possible. Always try to reference specific countries/regions rather than generalising.
- ✓ If a generalisation is absolutely necessary, it is disputed as to what the best term is. Generally, the most accepted terms are UN sanctioned terms such as **'Low-income' or 'lower-middle income' countries** when describing groups of countries that receive bilateral or multilateral global sustainable development finance.
- ✓ Sometimes, we need to generalise by talking about a wider range of countries (e.g. when talking about debt cancellation). In this context, it is increasingly common to hear the term **'majority world'**, a term which the New Internationalist use. This term is arguably the most empowering and challenges the eurocentrism of our society's world view.

On the Climate and nature emergencies

- ✓ Where possible, we should be using terms that describe climate change and biodiversity loss as a state of **emergency or crisis**. We should avoid using terms that homogenise the effects of climate change (e.g. global warming) and down play its significance.
- ✓ Climate Justice – “insists on a shift from a discourse on greenhouse gases and melting ice caps into a civil rights movement with the people and communities most vulnerable to climate impacts at its heart”.
 - We should seek to unpack this term, and explain its meaning in relation to international development. E.g. The people and communities in countries who have done the least to cause the climate crisis are often on the front line of its devastating impacts. Historically high carbon-emitting countries therefore have a responsibility to help resource adaptation and mitigation across the world.
 - The term ‘high carbon-emitting countries’ also needs unpacked. Should we talk about rich countries rather than high carbon emitting countries due to the historical legacy of early industrialisation?

On Race and antiracism

- 🌐 The phrases ‘non-white’ and ‘BME’ can be perceived as othering
- 🌐 ‘People of colour’ is a phrase commonly used that is generally deemed to be more inclusive and is often shortened to ‘PoC’
- 🌐 Some argue that ‘diversity and inclusion’ would be better described as ‘power and privilege’, see [Charity So White](#). They also have a [clear definition of racism](#) that is useful

On Shifting the power

- 🌐 ‘Localisation’ can be interpreted as jargon, and many now prefer to talk about projects that are ‘locally-led, or ‘the need to shift power and resources to communities’
- 🌐 Rather than talking about ‘working for’ or ‘working on behalf of’, we should endeavour to use phrases like ‘working with’ or ‘standing in solidarity with those we work alongside’

Grey areas and other terms that need unpacking and further discussion

- 🌐 **Overseas** – does this term reinforce similar sentiments to ‘foreign’? does it serve as othering?
- 🌐 **National security** – would ‘shared security’ promote our values better?
- 🌐 **Experts** – this is surely only ok if we are talking about specified areas of expertise e.g. not ‘expert on East Africa’ but ‘expert on nutrition programmes in East Africa’ or ‘expert on global education policy’
- 🌐 **LGBTI ; LGBTI+ ; LGBTQI ; LGBTQ** – how do we ensure we are inclusive when we talk about underrepresented minorities? Is there a term that is more inclusive than others?
- 🌐 **Users of services Vs service users Vs consumers** – by choosing one of these terms (if appropriate to the project) are we reinforcing a particular world view?
- 🌐 **People living with disability Vs disabled people** - is one term more appropriate than the other?

Making language more accessible to the public

1. Be consistent

If we are consistent about the language we choose to use, and challenge inaccurate or loaded language used by others along the lines laid out above, we think it is more likely that, overtime, language can positively influence the way the wider public think about global sustainable development and why it is important.

2. Avoid Jargon

But to do this it is not only about challenging misconceptions, decolonising our language and putting forward our progressive vision for a fairer world, it’s also about ensuring we speak in a way that is clear and accessible, avoiding jargon at all costs.

Using jargon is alienating and inaccessible, not just if English is only one of many languages that you speak, but because it further reinforces the professionalisation of our sector as well. Before using a term, ask yourself “can I define that term easily and would it make sense to my uncle/child/mechanic?”

In this sense, we must acknowledge that sometimes multi-word alternatives are not always helpful if they make it harder to communicate what we do. Simplicity is therefore sometimes important, but never if it reinforces any of the issues highlighted above. Being aware of the tension between accuracy and simplicity is important.

3. Connect the local to the global; make our work relevant to all people

The moral, economic, social and environmental justifications for why our work is important is no different to the justifications for similar work done locally here in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK.

We must do more to make that connection, learning from the language choices of social movements at the local level that inspire people to act.

Resources

- 🌐 Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages - <https://www.dochas.ie/resources/communications-pe/code-of-conduct-on-images-and-messages/>
- 🌐 ODI on How to confront race and racism in international development - <https://www.odi.org/blogs/17407-how-to-confront-race-and-racism-international-development>
- 🌐 ODI Bites: decolonising international development (video) - https://www.odi.org/events/17431-odi-bites-decolonising-international-development?utm_campaign=1579316_ODI%20newsletter%2023%20October&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Overseas%20Development%20Institute&utm_country=&dm_i=4O2W,XULW,3CCXXY,47KM3,1
- 🌐 On language and its influence on the way we think - http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/uc/2014/06/can_language_influence_our_perception_of_reality.html?via=gdpr-consent
- 🌐 <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/does-language-i-speak-influence-way-i-think>
- 🌐 A Progressive's Style Guide from Sum of Us (comprehensive PDF guide) - <https://interactioninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Sum-Of-Us-Progressive-Style-Guide.pdf>
- 🌐 A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATING GLOBAL JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY - <https://www.healthpovertyaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/A-Practical-Guide-For-Communicating-Global-Justice-and-Solidarity.pdf>
- 🌐 The Common Cause Handbook from PIRC - <https://publicinterest.org.uk/download/values/Common%20Cause%20Handbook.pdf>
- 🌐 Jonathan Glennie on Global Public Investment - <https://www.globalpublicinvestment.org/>
- 🌐 Defining Racism (Charity so White) - <https://charitysowhite.org/>

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