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Introduction

"Language is the key to inclusion. Language is at the centre of human activity, self-expression and identity." (UNESCO 2012, p1)

The important role which language plays within international development is often not explicitly stated. Our choice of language – both in terms of the languages we use and the words we use – has a profound impact on our work. It affects how we communicate, who has access to our conversations, and how we represent what we do.

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.

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. 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."

Doing so could help us let go of outdated modes of thinking (acknowledging that the debate on [language and thinking is an age old chicken-and-egg question](#)), and through building consensus within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 is the second draft of a discussion paper that aims to put forward some ideas on these issues, in the hope that we can collaboratively build a practical how-to toolkit with our members that helps ensure continuous reflection of our language choices. We offer some context for these discussions, some draft principles to guide our language choices, and some suggestions for how to practically reflect on our language use.

The paper does not aim to give all the answers, nor ask all the right questions. We are not prescribing how our members should use language but encouraging them to adopt a critical stance on their own language use which ensures that their language does not cause people harm or perpetuate coloniality. We hope it is seen as useful for wider discussions to build on within the sector in Scotland and beyond.

The context - racial injustice and system change

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 that year challenged us in the international development and humanitarian sector to examine more deeply 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 narratives, '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 sector 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.

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.

What does reflecting on our language mean in practice?

“Language was the most important vehicle through which that [colonial] power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986, p3)

In [Peace Direct’s \(2021\) report *Time to Decolonise Aid*](#) they write that decoloniality ‘refers to the process of examining the matrix of power that emerged during and after the colonial period’ (p.15).

Language can act as a powerful tool in reflecting and reinforcing this matrix of power. It can also be used to disrupt and resist structures and systems which are products of coloniality. Language is not neutral and can represent a particular worldview. We should be deliberate in our choice of language to ensure it reflects our principles.

At its heart we think this is about critical reflection on how our language has been influenced by coloniality and on what we can do to disrupt this. 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.

Critically reflecting on language issues must be a core component of any work which engages with decolonisation or anti-racism. However, we also recognize that language cannot, and should not, be treated as separate from its speakers. Addressing our language is just one part of our work and must go hand-in-hand with addressing other harmful structures.

The contexts in which international development organisations work are often multilingual. Despite this English is often defaulted to as the de facto language of/for development. The dominance of English is another product of coloniality and we should consider how we can address this in our work and engage with linguistic diversity.

Below we outline some principles to guide our word choice, offer questions for reflection, and think about next steps in developing our approach to language use.

Some useful principles to guide our choice of language

- Language should be consistent with [our values](#)
- Language should not validate existing power structures
- 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 actors' 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

Reflections on language based on the principles

1. Describing the countries where our sector operates:

- **We think we should avoid generalisations** - Countries are not homogeneous. As such, there is no perfect term when grouping countries together, and this should be avoided whenever possible. We will 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 United Nations (UN) sanctioned terms such as **'Low-income' or 'lower-middle income' countries** when describing groups of countries that receive bilateral or multilateral 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.

2. Describing the climate and nature emergencies:

- Where possible, we think we should be using terms that describe climate change and biodiversity loss as a state of **emergency or crisis**. We will also avoid using terms that homogenise the effects of climate change (e.g. global warming) and down play its significance.
- Whenever possible we will emphasise the importance of **Climate Justice** – 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 the term ‘climate justice’, 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 carbon-emitting countries therefore have a responsibility to help resource adaptation and mitigation across the world.

3. Talking about race and antiracism:

- We cannot be anti-racist without actively thinking about and acting on being anti-racist. We need to critically reflect on the words we use to do this properly.
- 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.

4. Talking about ‘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’

5. 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?
- **Fragile and Conflict affected states** – is this term problematic, does it work with above values? If not, what would be 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; or service users; or consumers** – by choosing one of these terms (if appropriate to the project) are we reinforcing a particular world view?
- **People living with disability; or disabled people** – is one term more appropriate than the other?

Making language more accessible to the public

When it comes to how we communicate to the wider public (in English and in Scotland specifically), we will endeavour to follow our principles at all times, with a particular emphasis on 3 important factors: consistency, clarity & relevance.

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 or elitism within one particular organisation as well. Before using a term, we endeavour to ask ourselves "can I define that term easily and would it make sense to my uncle/child/mechanic/granny?"

Sometimes even terminology we don't consider to be jargon can take on different meanings for different groups of people (even for those who speak the same language), so we must be careful to ensure that the meaning we are choosing to communicate is clearly understood.

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 global sustainable development 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.

Next steps - developing a language policy

A key point of this paper is to encourage our members to adopt a deliberate and critical stance towards their own language use. One way to do this is for organisations to develop a language policy. A language policy provides specific and clear guidance for individuals on how language is used within specific organisations. This policy could be part of a larger communication strategy or a stand-alone document.

Our language resources are all the parts of all the languages that we are able to use. Individuals can use different resources in different languages to achieve a range of purposes.

A language policy helps to identify what language resources are required in different contexts, and to set out expectations for how language should be used. Language policies can be co-developed with project partners as different contexts will likely have different needs in terms of language resources.

Some key questions to ask and to discuss with partners when developing a language policy

- 🌐 What are the key terms we use to describe the people, processes, and places involved in our work?
- 🌐 Where do these terms come from? Who has chosen them?
- 🌐 Do these terms mean the same thing to people in the different contexts in which we work?
- 🌐 (When) is it appropriate to use different terms with different people?
- 🌐 What language resources are required in our work?
 - In Scotland/UK?
 - In the other countries in which we work?
 - To communicate internally?
 - To communicate with funders/the public/external partners?
- 🌐 Who has access to this language?
- 🌐 If we are working in multilingual contexts, how do we navigate the diversity of languages present?
- 🌐 How are technical terms translated into other languages?
- 🌐 What can be done to ensure everyone has access to the language resources required for our work?
 - Do we need to provide translations/translators/glossaries?

Terms have specific meanings for specific people in specific times and places. This is particularly important when working across contexts/languages. This is another reason why it is important to be clear what individuals/organisations mean by particular terms and why they have chosen to use them.

As noted above, languages cannot be separated from speakers. As well as thinking about what language/languages are used it is important to reflect on who has access to the language necessary to participate in these discussions. How does language act as a gatekeeping tool?

The Listening Zones of NGOs have done important work in this area. See their reports [Respecting communities in International Development: languages and cultural understanding](#) and [Do NGOs need a language policy?](#)

Thinking through our language choices – a table to support reflection

When thinking through the specific words that we use, the following table can provide a useful framework for reflecting on why we use specific terms, what meaning we want to convey, and any terms we want to avoid. We've included a few examples of specific terminology we've reflected on.

Term we choose to use	What we mean	Why we use it	Potential issues	Terms we choose to avoid and why
<i>global sustainable development</i>	A general term for programmes and projects across the world that aim to improve social, economic and environmental outcomes in a joined up manner.	We think joined up thinking is critical to solving global issues such as poverty and the climate crisis.	This term could be considered jargon or esoteric.	<i>International development</i> This term doesn't capture the complexity of what programmes and projects can and should aim to achieve.
<i>Official Development Assistance (ODA)</i> Or <i>Humanitarian assistance</i> (when that's what it is)	Development finance which specifically targets socio-economic development	This is a widely recognised term used by a number of organisations (such as the OECD and FCDO).	This is a technical term that people may not be familiar with. This term could be considered to belong to a 'language of development' that is rooted in colonialism.	<i>Aid/Foreign Aid</i> 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.
<i>Partners</i> <i>People/communities we work with</i> <i>Stakeholders</i>	Individuals and communities our organisation works with in delivering our programmes	We use these terms as we seek to have equitable relationships with the people we work with, we recognise their agency and their active participation in the work.	These are general terms which do not specifically identify the groups we work with. The language of 'partners' and 'stakeholders' could be perceived as more formal, business-like language.	<i>Beneficiaries, world's poorest, most vulnerable people, poor people.</i> 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. More generally, we should avoid speaking on behalf of other people and consider how people identify themselves.

Resources

On messaging, language principles, and language guides

- Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages - <https://www.dochas.ie/resources/communications-pe/code-of-conduct-on-images-and-messages/>
- Blog by Bond - <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2020/12/taking-british-politics-jargon-and-colonialism-out-of-our-language>
- 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>

On Racism, anti-racism and decolonisation

- [Time to Decolonise Aid](#) - a report by Peace Direct (2021)
- [Racism, power and truth: Experiences of people of colour in development](#) - a report by Bond (2021)
- 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=402W,XULW,3CCXXY,47KM3,1
- Defining Racism (Charity so White) - <https://charitysowhite.org/>
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ (1986) *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Heinemann Educational.

On developing a language policy

- Resources from Listening Zones of NGOs- [Listening Zones of NGOs: Language and Cultural Knowledge in Development Programmes](#)

On language and the SDGs

- [Final Report: Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals](#)
- [UNESCO \(2012\) Why Language Matters for the Millennium Development Goals](#). Thailand: UNESCO Bangkok.

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>