



Scotland's International
Development Alliance

Scotland's International Development Alliance Inclusive Language Guide

Updated:
February 2024

We are committed to keeping this guide updated, as we recognise that language is continually evolving. If you have any feedback contact us at admin@intdevalliance.scot

Scotland's International Development Alliance Inclusive Language Guide

Our inclusive language guide aims to help colleagues avoid bias, stop reinforcing existing power structures, and convey respect. With this language guide we hope to ensure our language is contributing to—not getting in the way of—the fundamental changes we are looking to make in the world: equality, inclusion, fairness, decolonisation, and global justice.

This guide has been put together based on work done in 2021 and shared by members at the time ([read here](#)). It recognises changes in the sector since then including a more pronounced commitment to working with networks and organisations in the global south and to changing power dynamics.

As an organisation with significant audiences in different geographical locations, and different structural locations in society, we are determined to ensure that when we communicate, we do so with respect, consistency, accuracy, and empathy. This language guide only refers to the use of English language terms. We recognise that the use of English in many contexts is in itself a legacy of colonial relations. Much work is being done on using a greater variety of languages amongst those working towards global sustainable development. We will continue to encourage diverse language use where possible.

We are also committed to the view that language, and hence this guide, should be challenged-- constantly. Only by talking about and reflecting on language can we hope to make it anti-oppressive. As such this guide should be viewed as a living document to be updated, amended, and questioned. As a part of this goal, we also hope to adopt ideal language when possible, though we recognise that in many contexts ideal terminology can be confusing. So, the guide below offers alternatives for use in a variety of contexts as well as the terms we want to encourage our sector to use.

We acknowledge that even in a single language, different words hold different power in different contexts. This guide hopes to reflect that by offering multiple alternatives. Ultimately it is up to the writer or speaker to determine best fit in context using the following principles as a guide.

Inclusive language principles

We acknowledge that even in a single language, different words hold different power in different contexts. This guide hopes to reflect that by offering multiple alternatives. Ultimately it is up to the writer or speaker to determine best fit in context using the following principles as a guide.

1) Always ask. When we write about people, communities, and cultures, as far as possible, ask how they prefer to be described. Sometimes there may be internal disagreement within a community about this, when this happens informed decisions may need to be explained in communications.

2) Add context. This involves writing about people in light of their lived experience--give people their own narratives and where possible, let them tell their story from their own perspective. This also involves avoiding unwarranted generalisations about people or geographical places. This principle further challenges us to stop portraying the issues and world we work in as natural, instead show the cause and social context of the problems we are addressing.

3) Write with respect. This includes avoiding speaking on behalf of other people, portraying any other people as victims and ourselves as heroes. Fundamentally, our language should describe our work in ways that never undermines the agency of those we work with.

4) Mean what you say. Many terms in this guide signify important cultural and political movements. It is important we also live up to the important social and political goals and messages we signal with this language. If you say we stand in solidarity with someone, we must actually be acting in solidarity to promote a movement and with the group we support agreeing to our actions.

Global sustainable development terms

The language in this field is constantly evolving and people hold differing opinions about which words work. But it is clear that some words do not work, and some do.

Problematic Phrases

Aid, Foreign Aid

Paternalistic language implies an unequal power relationship marked by altruism which denies the unjust distribution of resources that defines that dynamic.

Alternatives

Social development finance, international SDG finance, official development assistance (ODA)

Ideal Terminology

Global redistribution

Problematic Phrases

Beneficiaries, world's poorest, poor people, most vulnerable people, people in need, recipients

These phrases deny agency insofar as they define people by their poverty.

Alternatives

People, people living in/with (extreme) poverty, communities we work with, stakeholders, partners (if actually partners), marginalised communities

Problematic Phrases

Localisation

This phrase is often used to virtue signal minor adjustments to policies, not genuine shifts of power and resources.

Alternatives

Locally led (this involves local entities—not local offices—taking a leading role in priority setting, design, partnership formation, implementation, and defining and measuring results of projects)

Ideal Terminology

Shifting power and resources to communities

Problematic Phrases

Developing/developed world, first/third world, the West

These terms are hierarchical and refer to exploitative relationships and the Cold War.

Alternatives

In (insert name of place), Global North and Global South, low-and-middle-income
(if contextually appropriate)

Ideal Terminology

Majority world

Problematic Phrases

In the field, on the ground

Historically these are colonial and militaristic terms, they also suggest that power lies elsewhere.

Alternatives

In (insert place name), residents of (insert place name) or more generally: in communities

Problematic Phrases

Capacity building, empowering, knowledge transfer

Suggests those in the minority world are givers of power, skill, and knowledge.

Alternatives

Sharing learning and knowledge, community organising, knowledge exchange

Problematic Phrases

Working for, helping, giving,

These phrases deny agency by suggesting passive recipients of the global north's labour.

Alternatives

Working with, the communities we work alongside, standing in solidarity with (if we are actually acting in solidarity with a group)

Problematic Phrases

Global warming, global heating, climate change

Warming and change suggest the problem is climate/atmosphere related, not the emergent global crisis it is.

Alternatives

Climate crisis

Ideal Terminology

Climate emergency

Terms to use with care

Other terms in global sustainable development are less clearly acceptable, or problematic. The following is a list of terms that should be used with care.

Terms to use with care

International development

Global Sustainable Development is becoming the norm, as international ignores the work NGOs do in their own country here as well, but it isn't widely used yet, so is still context appropriate.

Experts

Only to be used about experts of a specific area

Overseas development assistance

A technical term referring to official funding. It should be used only in that context.

Terms to use with care

Humanitarian assistance

A technical term referring to assistance in emergencies. It should be used in that context only.

Development

As a term the worry is that this reaffirms post-colonial vocabulary, however no clear alternative has filled the gap yet. One suggestion is 'growth', but this seems to have the same problem. Better terms might include human development, global cooperation, or reference to wellbeing and flourishing, depending on the context. can we take out any reference to growth it is not helpful in a wellbeing context.

Vulnerable

This term is okay if is not used paternalistically. So don't say "vulnerable people" as a synonym for the majority world, but you can say that some sets of people are vulnerable to their circumstances (i.e., climate change, etc.)

Training

Only use for actual training in how to do something, not as a synonym for capacity building

Shift the power

As a phrase this is gaining a lot of traction in the sector and its recognition is useful. However, it is often used to virtue signal minor adjustments to policies, not genuine shifts of power and resources. an alternative that is used is equalising power, but that is less explicit than shifting the power.

Charity (n)

This word has paternalistic overtones. However, it is the legal classification of a certain tax-category of NGO in the U.K. so we can't abandon it. It is fine when referring to the British legal category, however in other contexts try to be more specific, (i.e., NGO, iNGO, CSO)

Race and ethnicity terms

Only refer to race, ethnicity, or nationality when relevant to the information we are communicating.

When writing about nationalities be specific and do not apply broad geographical labels to individuals unless they describe themselves that way. (e.g., say Nigerian, not African)

When writing about broad ethnicity, use: black, brown, white (not Caucasian) and use lower case because these are adjectives that apply to people, not proper nouns, unless someone asks you to do otherwise.

Don't use BAME unless asked to do so. If you can't be more specific, 'people of colour' is often an appropriate alternative.

When possible, ask individuals and groups what language they prefer.

Sex and gender terms

Sex: refers to biological characteristics.

Gender identity: refers to the social experience of being a woman, man, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum.

Use the acronym LGBTQI+ to refer to sexual orientation (experience of attraction), and gender identities (NB this acronym refers to both).

Be mindful of using unnecessarily gendered phrases, for instance:

Problematic Phrases

Alternatives

Manpower, man hours	➔	Workforce, staff/staffing, efficiency
Girls, guys	➔	Colleagues, everyone
Mother, Father	➔	Parent, guardian
Chairman, Spokeswoman	➔	Chairperson, chair, spokesperson

Be pronoun aware. Always respect people's preferences or use the person's name. Gender expression does not always align to their pronouns. If you must use a pronoun and preference isn't known use 'they'.

Honorifics and titles (i.e., Mr, Ms, Dr) can be personal in the UK, where they are still used. Be aware that many people do not want to use them or prefer a gender-neutral honorific. When possible, ask or do not use.

Disability terms

Disability rights activists have advanced different ways of avoiding ableist language. It is important to avoid language that implies disability as inherently negative or burdensome, for example:

- Diabetic
- A victim of
- Suffering from
- Handicapped

Some people advocate for person-first language, which focuses on the individual; others have advocated for identity-first language, which sees a disability as an integral—and valued—part of their identity.

Examples of person-first language:

- Person living with disabilities.
- People living with cancer
- Wheelchair user

Examples of identity-first language:

- Disabled Person
- Autistic Person
- Deaf Person

Which is appropriate depends on context, the disability, and the preferences of the person. When possible, ask people what they prefer.

Be aware that portraying a person as 'courageous' or 'special' because they have a disability implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to effectively contribute. It also risks stigmatising those who don't feel courageous or special.