

Words Matter!

World Choice in International
Cooperation



Agenda

- Why words matter in international cooperation.
- ETH NADEL's words matter glossary.
- Discussion and feedback.

Menti poll #1

- How comfortable are you with the language (words, terms, phrases) we use in international cooperation?

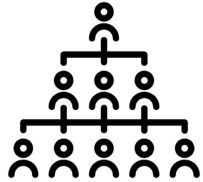
Why words matter

President of the
United States of America

The Dark Continent



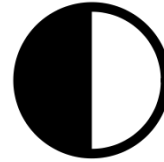
Word choice in international cooperation



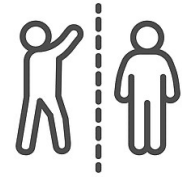
*hierarchies: nations,
organisations, & people*



*dominance of certain views
and ideologies*



*creation / perpetuation of
false dichotomies*



*entrench social /
cultural divisions*



directly affect the dignity and respect of people



responsibility of all involved in international cooperation

Why now?

“The challenge of Africa is (...) civilizational today.”



Macron, G20 Summit 2017

The New York Times

Europe, the ‘Dark Continent,’ Is the Stage for Another Great Migration

March 14, 2022



NADEL's Words Matter Glossary: An unfinished guide to word choice



- Reflecting on the origins and problematic connotations of words is a starting point for questioning the mainstream.
- NADEL has gathered and reflected on the language we use to create a Words Matter glossary.
- The glossary highlights the origins of certain terms, why they might be problematic and (in some cases) offers potential alternatives.
- Words alone are not enough. The glossary is part of a broader, ongoing effort.

Menti poll #2

- Is it ok to use this term?
- “Third world”
- “Beneficiary”
- “On mission”

Terms commonly used in international cooperation



Countries:

- "Advanced & less advanced economies"
- "High & Low income countries"
- "Industrialized & Less industrialized countries"
- "Global North & Global South"



People:

- "Beneficiaries"
- "Local staff/experts & International experts"
- "The poor, poor people"



Other terms:

- "On mission, on the ground"
- "Capacity building"
- "Empowering"
- "Aid, assistance, helping, saving, giving"

Overarching principles

- **Labelling:** Consider whether you need to classify or group countries, places or people at all. If not, simply refer to the country or place name, to the world or global population.
- **Specificity:** Generalizations can be harmful. Where applicable, be specific about which countries, places, people, or which dimensions of poverty you are referring to.
- **Context:** Context matters. Consider how people refer to themselves, their place or country of residence, or how they wish to be referred to.
- **Dignity & Respect:** Language should not disempower people, undermine their autonomy, portray them as victims, or portray others as saviors or heroes.

We are interested to hear your views: Discussion group options

Group 1: Terms used to refer to countries

→ Hosted by Priya



Group 2: Terms used to refer to people

→ Hosted by Medinat



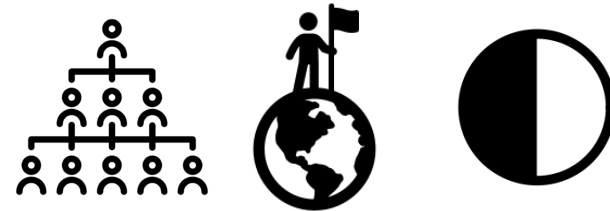
Group 3: Other common terms

→ Hosted by Jasmine



Group 4: Opportunities and limitations of changing language in IC

→ Hosted by Shruti



How we refer to countries

Examples of terms generally avoided	
Term	Concerns or issues with this language
Advanced economies/countries vs. underdeveloped economies/countries	All countries are advanced in some ways and less advanced in others. Perpetuates ideas of superiority and inferiority.
Third world vs. first world	Based on the political division of the world in the 20 th century. “Third world” implies backwardness.
Fragile states	Unclear and inconsistent definitions, state centric perspective, fails to account for the dynamic nature of conflicts and fragility, and focussing on negative aspects of a state’s situation. Takes a conflict lens.

Draft for discussion

Examples of terms used with sensitivity	
Term	Concerns or issues with this language
Developing vs. developed countries	Implies two categories with a “gap”. This gap does not exist. No consensus about what words mean. All countries still developing in one sense or another.
High income countries (HIC); low- and middle-income countries (LMIC); low-income countries, upper- and lower-middle income countries.	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	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. Neglects the negative consequences of industrialization. Can be suitable if used when specifically referring to the status of industrialization of countries, but not generally used to group countries.
Global North, Global South	Based on the Brandt Line developed during the post-cold war, IMF/structural adjustment period. Geographically inaccurate but often used as a relational and political construct. Some uses of the term seek to highlight and address power asymmetries. However, some uses exacerbate these.
Majority world, vs. minority world.	Majority world denotes those countries that hold most of the world’s population. A minority of the global population lives in high-income countries. Sometimes used to disrupt current thinking. Can be unclear.

How we refer to people

Examples of terms generally avoided		
Term	Concerns or issues with this language	Potential alternatives
Beneficiary/ies	From Latin beneficiarius (enjoying a favor, or granted a privilege). Undermines agency by implying passive acceptance or receipt of things. Implies that people “benefit” from what is provided to them by the “giver”.	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.
Local vs. international (e.g. 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 “expat” or “international expert” from a high-income country.	Is the nationality of the person is required information? 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.
Natives	Implies primitiveness.	Indigenous, First Nations People. Find out how people wish to be referred to, or refer to the specific name of the people (Inuit, Māori).

Examples of terms used with sensitivity		
Term	Concerns or issues with 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).
The poor, poor people Most vulnerable 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.

Draft for discussion

Other commonly used terms

Examples of terms generally avoided		
Term	Concerns or issues with this language	Potential alternatives
Capacity building, knowledge transfer.	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.
In the field, fieldwork, field visit, on the ground, on mission vs. headquarters/H Q.	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, helping, saving, giving.	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. See also notes on “Development”	International cooperation (finance), International SDG finance. Some argue for using the term “reparation payments”. Humanitarian Aid when linked to acute crisis.

Examples of terms used with sensitivity		
Term	Concerns or issues with this language	Potential alternatives
“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.
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.

Draft for discussion

Menti poll #3

Thank you!

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