

Stronger words, stronger policy: Modernizing language for contemporary conceptions of global development

BY KALILA JAEGER, RAIMUND ZÜHR, AND SHEBA GEORGE
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Over the last decade, [individuals](#), [advocacy groups](#), and [institutions](#) have called for development actors to reassess the old-fashioned language that once dominated the field of global development. Many of the standard industry adages stem from an outdated conception of two separate classes of nations: wealthy, benevolent providers and destitute, passive recipients.

Those of us who work in the field know this could not be farther from the truth. Global development is not a series of discrete, monodirectional transactions; it is an ongoing, collaborative struggle to improve the lot of all human beings on our shared planet. [Effective projects](#) in development are characterized by long-term partnerships, critical self-reflection, and a multidirectional pooling of resources and knowledge.

At the Donor Tracker, we have used this last year as an opportunity to listen, read, and learn from peers in the development space and to reflect on how we can be part of the push to modernize the way we talk and write about global development. This Insight identifies three outdated concepts (monodirectionality, geographic overgeneralization, and false dichotomies), and explains how and why the Donor Tracker is rethinking the words we use. We also connected with experts in the 14 countries we cover to highlight examples of how donors are adopting more appropriate language.

In 2015, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were retired and replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which serve as the goalposts for contemporary global development. The UN [explicitly states](#) that while “the MDGs were intended for action in developing countries only”, the SDGs “are universal and apply to all countries”. The accompanying 2030 Agenda [specifies](#), “all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan”.

The goal of this 'Insight' is to encourage advocates and donors to consider how the language they use shapes

both their policies and their relationships and attitudes towards their partners in global development. By modernizing our vocabulary, we can modernize the contours of the industry writ large, acknowledging past oversights and injustices, and making room for a conceptualization of development that puts all people on even footing where they belong, as co-implementers of the SDGs, and partners in the global fight to improve living conditions in every country, so all people have the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

MONODIRECTIONALITY: “AID”, “PROVIDERS”, AND “RECIPIENTS”

The word “aid” and the terms “providers” and “recipients” which frequently accompany it, combine to paint a picture of a monodirectional financial transaction in which a wealthy benefactor transfers funds to an impoverished grantee. This paradigm is insufficient to describe the complex nature of global development work, which, when done right, involves the establishment of profound economic and cultural ties between partners, and benefits donors in multiple, concrete ways.

COVID-19 is bringing the collectivity of development challenges into sharp focus. Until the virus is eradicated in the poorest, most underserved communities, new variants will continue to emerge, threatening recovery everywhere. Supporting those countries currently struggling to address new COVID-19 outbreaks is not a favor or an act of service, it is a form of necessary, mutually beneficial partnership.

For these reasons, the Donor Tracker will...

- Refer to development cooperation between “partner countries”, rather than assistance from “providers” to “recipients”. This language better recognizes the multidirectional benefits of development assistance and the global partnerships needed to reach the SDGs.

- Not use the word “aid”. We strongly prefer terms such as grant funding, concessional or non-concessional loans, private sector investment, etc., which provide a clearer picture of what type of financial partnership is occurring concretely.

Of the three outdated linguistic concepts discussed in this Insight, donors have made the most progress towards adopting language that recognizes the multidirectionality of development.

Australia

- Australia has phased out the use of the word “aid”; its most recent [development policy](#) does not use “aid” at all.

Canada

- Canada has fully eliminated the use of the word “aid” in its [development materials](#), instead using “international assistance” or “international coordination”. Materials also refer to “funding for international initiatives”.
- Canada often uses the “[most vulnerable](#)” to refer to its primary development partners, at once recognizing development’s multidirectionality while also acknowledging that some countries are currently more vulnerable to certain challenges.

European Union Institutions (EUI)

- The EUI rarely use the word “aid” and even limit their use of “assistance” to humanitarian contexts. In lieu of “aid”, the EUI tend to use “development cooperation” or “international cooperation”.
- The EUI have recently started making greater use of the term “partnerships”. This change can be seen reflected in the renaming of the European Commissioner for Development and International Cooperation to the [European Commissioner for International Partnerships](#). The Commissioner’s mandate is to work “together with partner countries across the world to achieve sustainable development”. Similarly, the Directorate-General for Development and International Cooperation has been renamed the [Directorate-General for International Partnerships](#).
- A new [EU Geopolitical Commission](#) explicitly recognizes development as one of its tools, and its founding documents call for “policy first” programming that brings

“mutual benefits” to the EU and its “[partner countries](#)”.

France

- France has utilized partnership terminology in its policy documents as [far back as 2018](#) and often uses technical official development assistance (ODA) language, eliminating the need for the term “aid”.

Germany

- “Development cooperation”, rather than “development assistance”, is preferred by the German development ministry (BMZ).
- Germany has switched to using “partnership” language, which sets development partners at “eye-level”, a phrase frequently used in Germany’s [development materials](#).
- The BMZ also helpfully publishes and defines all its development policy vocabulary and acronyms for clarity and transparency in its full [Lexicon](#).

South Korea

- South Korea primarily uses ODA terminology in its materials.
- The term “partner country” is only used to refer to South Korea’s 27 priority partner countries, and the [strategy](#) governing this cooperation is entitled ‘Country Partnership Strategy’. However, even in the strategy document, partner countries are referred to as “recipient countries” in Korean.

Spain

- Spain’s development agency (AECID) uses “partner countries”. Like Canada, it also refers to “vulnerable” countries, groups, and people.
- Spain uses the language of “Cooperative support for development” and the phrasing of “inclusive development” has become more common in Spanish [development documents](#) since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda.

Sweden

- Sweden eliminated the use of the terms “development aid” and “assistance” several years ago (in Swedish and English) and now uses “[development cooperation](#)”.

- At the same time, Sweden switched the language in its policies to refer to “[partner countries](#)”.

The remaining Donor Tracker donors (Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, the UK, and the US) still use “aid” regularly in their policies, often paired with “providers” and “recipients”.

GEOGRAPHIC GENERALIZATION: “AFRICA” AND “SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA”

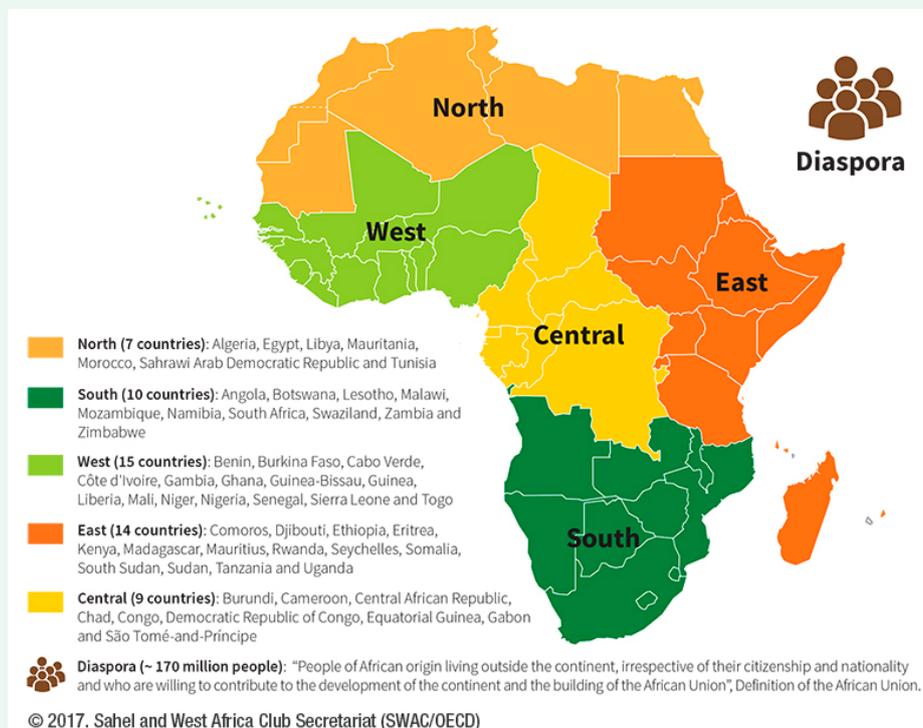
The overgeneralization of African continental regions in high-level development policy is problematic because it erases the African continent’s heterogeneity which is an essential consideration for effective policy planning and implementation. If a donor announces a major initiative with hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to “build trade with Africa”, details are needed on how the donor will cooperate with individual countries, or at the very least subregions.

Advocates are increasingly calling for an end to the use of the term “sub-Saharan Africa”. “Sub-Saharan Africa” refers to 48 of 55 countries on the vast continent of Africa, making it an overly broad descriptor that serves to euphemistically separate Black Africa from Arab Africa, an arbitrary and erroneous dichotomy.

For these reasons, the Donor Tracker will...

- Publish information wherever possible on policies at the individual country-level. When donors publish overly broad policies which generalize the African continent to the detriment of the policy itself, we will report this information as news.
- Refer to the regions of Eastern, Western, Central, and Southern Africa, as [designated](#) by the African Union (see Figure 2: ‘The six regions of the African Union’) where country-level information is missing.

Figure 1: The six regions of the African Union



Source: SWAC/OECD, 2017.

Just two of the 14-largest OECD DAC donors covered by the Donor Tracker have phased out terminology that over-generalizes countries across the African continent.

Norway

- Norway has opted to take the simplest route to clarity and specificity, simply referring to each of their [16 partner countries](#) by name.

Germany

- Germany [differentiates](#) between the regions of Central Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, Sahel, and West Africa, which each have their own policy division within the BMZ. Parallel divisions exist for other continents' regions too.
- However, in some strategy documents and interviews, the BMZ still refers to “sub-Saharan Africa” without further specification.

The other 12 Donor Tracker donors (Australia, Canada, the EU, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US) still regularly use “sub-Saharan Africa”, or even just “Africa” in their policy documents.

FALSE DICHOTOMIES: “THIRD WORLD”, “GLOBAL SOUTH”, AND “DEVELOPED/DEVELOPING COUNTRIES”

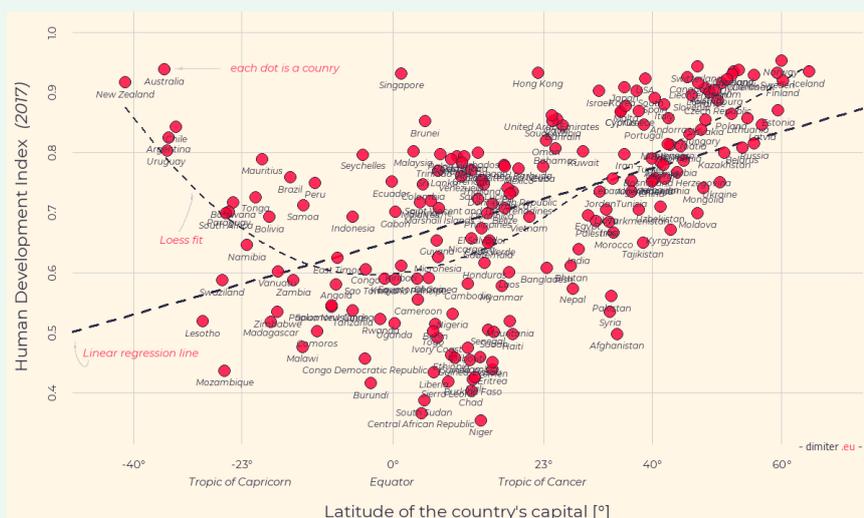
Phrases which purport to group countries by development status are problematic because of their overgeneralization and inaccuracy.

The “third world” is an [archaic designation](#) for countries that were neither aligned with the “Western” nor “Eastern” worlds during the Cold War. Needless to say, this term is not a useful metric for gauging living standards in 2021.

The term “global South”, which essentially replaced the “third world” paradigm, is similarly flawed; redividing the globe along latitudinal rather than longitudinal lines does not improve the specificity or accuracy of the terminology. As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is no linear relationship between geographic latitude and development conditions.

A 2015 essay for the World Bank [concluded](#) that the terms “developed” and “developing” were overly broad and no longer distinctive as “developing” countries became increasingly dissimilar. China, inarguably one the most powerful countries in the world, [considers itself a devel-](#)

Figure 2: The "Global South" and "Global North" are inaccurate terms



Source: 'Research Design Matters' blog, 2018. Dimiter Toshkov.

oping country but few would assert that it can usefully be grouped with other so-called “developing countries” in terms of geopolitical positionality.

No country has successfully eradicated hunger, disease, or inequality, and each nation faces its own unique struggles in addressing the many challenges that form the basis of sustainable development. To the extent that some countries are further along in fighting these battles than others, the most predictive indicator is wealth. For this reason, the most accurate way to discuss different groups of countries’ development accomplishments, is to refer to their income status.

For these reasons, the Donor Tracker will...

- Not refer to “the third world”, “the global South”, “developing” or “developed” countries. We instead use the World Bank classifications of “low-income”, “lower-middle-income”, “upper-middle-income”, and “high-income” countries.

Only three Donor Tracker countries have phased out the use of these dichotomizing terms.

EUI

- The EU has almost entirely eliminated references to “developed” and “developing” countries, instead identifying partner countries’ income levels.
- “Fragile” is used as a descriptor for states experiencing significant humanitarian conflict.

United States

- The US refers to its “host country partners” as “fragile states” and puts considerable emphasis on the “people” and “local governments” its programs seek to support, rather than categorizing countries by development status.
- Still, some documents do refer in passing to the “developing world”.

Sweden

- Sweden refers to partner countries by income level. It also uses “fragile” or “post-conflict” states.

All other Donor Tracker donors (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Spain, and the UK) still utilize the dichotomizing language of “developed” and “developing” countries in their policy documents.

Words are the building blocks of policy

In global development and international relations, words are the building blocks of policy and the basis of relationships between nations. The way we speak to and about one another matters, and it is in everyone’s interest that we do it with clarity, consistency, and respect. The Donor Tracker will continue to reexamine our own lexicon and vocabulary (and yes, even our website’s very name!) to look for the most effective and respectful forms of communication as we continue to share the data-driven development finance news you expect from our team.