

# TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE — ANTI-RACISM AND DECOLONISATION

## Why it matters

Language is powerful. In our communication at Light for the World, we strongly encourage colleagues to think carefully and critically about the impact of the terms and phrases we use. We use respectful, inclusive language that reflects our values as an organisation and accurately represents the individuals and communities we work alongside. This guide focuses on anti-racism and decolonisation. Transformative language guides are also available on **disability** and **sex and gender**. We are conscious of intersectionality<sup>1</sup> and that people may be subject to multiple forms of discriminatory language based on their various social and political identities.

## Key Principles

### Use anti-racist language

Racism is a belief system that results in the discrimination and devaluation of groups and individuals. It denies access to resources and power, based on attributed biological, cultural, national and/or religious characteristics. Anti-racism goes beyond “not being racist”. Anti-racism recognises that racism has been structurally embedded in societies for centuries, marginalising and oppressing certain groups and individuals. Harmful stereotypes are a part of that. Anti-racism is an active, intentional commitment to tackling racism on an organisational and societal level, including through our language.

### Resist patronising, “white gaze” or “white saviour” language

We strongly encourage you to avoid language that reinforces colonial or white ethnocentric mindsets and stereotypes. This is a manifestation of “white gaze”,<sup>2</sup> where content is produced primarily from and for white audiences and which assumes white ethnocentric models are how we should view progress. Instead, we should use language that accurately reflects the diverse experiences, audiences and expertise present in the communities we work alongside. Avoid patronising language — like “developing countries” or “empowering communities” — which is vague and undermines the agency or capability of those we work alongside.

### Be specific, avoid generalisation

Africa is a continent of more than 50 countries, each with its own unique culture. Rather than communicating about “African countries” or “lower-income countries”, whenever possible name the countries you are referring to. Similarly, avoid religious terminologies that attach an entire community to an event. This fails to recognise diversity within cultural groups and potentially reinforces certain stereotypes. For example, instead of “Islamic insurgencies”, use simply “insurgencies”.

### Remember that we are all on a learning journey

We want to engage in active listening and learning and make changes in language use based on feedback and new insights. Many NGOs are attempting to transform their language to support decolonisation, but there remains debate over certain words and phrases. Language is part of culture and cultural change takes time, so it will naturally be a process to evolve the language we use in our communication. It is important to follow these discussions and, where necessary, adapt our language to ensure it follows the key principles outlined above.

**The below glossary is not exhaustive but gives guidance on some of the most common words and phrases we strongly advise to use (and avoid) in Light for the World’s communications. If you have questions, please contact the Global Communications team.**

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1 Intersectionality refers to the ways in which different aspects of an individual’s identity can expose them to several overlapping (or “intersecting”) forms of discrimination and marginalisation.

2 The “white gaze” is the assumption the default audience is white.

Do use	Don't use	Why
Project participant/contributor The communities we work alongside/ with The people we work with The people we support Underserved people/communities People who have been excluded/ underrepresented People living in poverty/people experiencing (extreme) poverty	Beneficiary Poorest Poor People Most vulnerable people People in need Voiceless Our children/people Helpless/Victim	To respect human dignity, we avoid terms that ignore the agency of the people we work with (people are actors of their own lives, not victims) and unfairly define them by their current circumstances. Beneficiary, for example, implies the person is a passive recipient of "aid". Similarly, language like "we identified (person) in (country)", or "our teams met (person)", suggests the person is passive and Light staff are active. Our communication avoids language that dehumanises or "others" project participants by portraying them as "helpless victims" who need to be "saved". When talking about children and/or people Light for the World supports, it is never acceptable to use a possessive adjective in communication, for example, "our children". If describing a person or community as "vulnerable", "living in poverty" or "marginalised", explain the context of why they are in that position.
The countries we work in (Specific country/countries) Lower-income countries Programme countries	Developing countries Third World Global South Poor countries Poorest countries Sub-Saharan Africa (as a generalisation)	"Developing" and "Third World" countries are outdated terms that can be considered patronising and judgemental, implying one country's culture is more "developed" than another's. "Global South" can be confusing as some higher-income nations (like Australia and New Zealand) are in the Southern Hemisphere. Rather than "sub-Saharan Africa", where possible identify the specific countries.
In (location) On site at projects On a visit to (location) In the community	In the field On the ground Field visit Field trip Mission	These phrases have military and colonial connotations. It is better to be specific about the location.
Working with/alongside Communities claiming their rights Amplifying the voices of /providing a platform for Being an ally to Supporting	Empowering Giving a Voice to	"Empowering" can be patronising as it implies permission or authority is needed for a person to take control of their life. It implies an "empowerer" and a "disempowered" individual. Consider if the context is truly "empowering" and who is "empowering" whom.
Community-led growth projects Community-led development Sharing learning and knowledge Capacity development <sup>1</sup> / sharing	Capacity building	"Capacity building" can imply a community is incapable of growing independently and needs outside "expertise", or that no capacities exist to begin with. Remember, we highlight the existing experts and expertise of the communities in which we work.
Black (capital case "B") Indigenous (capital case "I")	black (lower case "b") indigenous (lower case "i")	If necessary to mention someone's ethnicity (for example, if relevant to highlight discrimination as a result of a person's ethnicity), ethnic identities should be capitalised. If in doubt, ask.
Informal settlement Informal housing	Slum Shanty town Overcrowded camps	These terms have negative connotations and conjure an image that may not be representative of the reality or reinforce stereotypes.

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1 "Capacity development" is a holistic process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time.