CONCERN
worldwide

LANGUAGE MATTERS

A GUIDE ON HOW BEST TO DESCRIBE THE WORK OF CONCERN WORLDWIDE

April 2024 (Version 1.0 EN)

Contents

Introduction

The language we use to describe the people we work with, the countries we work in, and how we work is very significant. Our choice of words can potentially dehumanise people, portray a sense of superiority and paternalism, illustrate a particular world view, and unwittingly influence our attitudes and our ways of operating.

As an organisation, we want our language to respect people, to demonstrate how we believe people should be treated, and the approach we feel should be taken regarding the issues of poverty and social injustice.

In considering our language, it is important to reflect on our core value of 'We Believe in Equality…' and to ask ourselves:

- 'Is our language amplifying the humanity and capacity of the people we work with? Or is it taking away from that humanity and capacity?'[1]

- 'Is our language centring the Programme Countries in our communication? Or are we portraying higher income countries as more central?'

- 'Does our language portray us as an organisation working in solidarity with marginalised and conflict affected communities to address global issues of poverty and inequality? Or does it portray us as benevolently providing charity to people who are 'other' than us?'

- 'Does our language realistically represent Concern's role? Or does it in any way overstate our role?'

Listed below are words and terms which can be considered problematic, along with suggestions of words and terminology which could be more appropriate in promoting Concern's mission and values. What is an appropriate alternative very much depends on the context and the audience. In some limited instances – certain reports, campaigns, etc. – a word or phrase in the '*Words/Phrases We Would Like To Stop Using*' column might in fact be the most fitting as it is the language of the donor or government agency for example; and in donor proposals and press releases for example, we are often restricted by word and page limits and so using longer versions of phrases is challenging.

What is important though is that we all think about our language, and base our choice of words on careful consideration of their implications.

*As language is constantly evolving and changing, this guidance will be reviewed and revised at regular intervals.

Development of this Language Guide

The development of this guide was initiated and overseen by Concern's Workplace Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group. A draft document was drawn up, based on guidance from other organisations (including Dochas, Bond, USAid) and suggestions and comments from a number of staff across Concern.

The draft guide was then discussed at workshops with Country Directors, who were invited to consult with their staff and give feedback; Programme Directors; and Directorates in Concern Republic of Ireland. The guide was also shared with the other Fundraising and Support offices (UK, US, and South Korea) who were also invited to consult with their staff and give feedback.

Based on the consultation at these workshops and the feedback submissions received, the guide was further refined by the Workplace Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group. The final copy of the guide was approved by the Concern Senior Management Team at their meeting of February 2024.

Format of the Document

Words and phrases in the first column are words and phrases which we would like all staff to try to stop using.

Further words and phrases are also listed which we would encourage staff to reflect on their use of.

Suggested alternatives are given for all of the words and phrases highlighted. The choice of suggested alternatives will depend on the context and audience, and perhaps there is a more appropriate alternative, not listed, for that situation. This is why it is important that we consider the four questions in the introduction to this document, and choose the most appropriate word/phrase for the particular audience.

1. Who We Work With

Words/Phrases We Would Like To Stop Using

WORDS/ PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Beneficiaries', 'The people we serve', 'Clients'	• Participants • Project participants • Programme participants • The people we work with • The communities we work with • Community members • Recipients (specifically of goods/food items)	'Beneficiaries' can be understood to imply that the people are passive recipients though the benevolence of others and is undermining of their agency. 'The people we serve' can also be understood to imply benevolence. 'Clients' implies a transactional relationship.
'The poor'	• People living in poverty/extreme poverty • People in situations of poverty/extreme poverty • People experiencing poverty/extreme poverty • People facing poverty/extreme poverty • People affected by poverty/extreme poverty	It's important to emphasise that we are talking about people and that they are not defined by the fact that they are poor/living in poverty.
'The marginalised', 'Destitute'	• People/groups who are marginalised or excluded • People/groups who have been marginalised or excluded by... • Marginalised/Discriminated/Excluded people/groups	As above. Also, if possible, state what the people are marginalised by. 'Destitute' is quite old fashioned and reductionist.
'Vulnerable people', 'Vulnerable populations'	• People in vulnerable situations/conditions • People affected by... (situation or condition) • People who are most vulnerable to... due to... • People at risk of... (situation or condition) • People impacted by conflict/climate change/political instability etc • Crisis affected populations	'Vulnerable people' can be taken to imply that the people themselves have a weakness of some kind.
'The displaced', 'IDPs'	• Internally displaced people/People who are internally displaced • People who are refugees • People seeking international protection • People who are migrants • Stateless people • People fleeing their homes due to...	It is important to emphasise that these are people, and not to dehumanise them or reduce them to acronyms. We acknowledge however, that 'IDPs' is a technical term which may be appropriate in some instances, but for the most part, it is better not to refer to people by using acronyms.
'PLW'	• Women who are pregnant and/or breastfeeding	Again it is important not to reduce people to acronyms. Also, 'Lactating' sounds very functional and clinical, thus 'breastfeeding' would be more appropriate.

Further Words/Phrases To Consider

WORDS/ PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Victim'	• People who face/have faced harm • People who are/have been subjected to harm • Survivor	'Victim' can be seen as disempowering. However, 'Victim' can be appropriate in some circumstances, for example, where the person has not yet 'survived' (so in Concern we use 'Victim/Survivor' in our safeguarding investigations); where the person has been killed; or when used as a legal term, or in terms of conflict.
'Slum dwellers'	• People living in informal settlements	'Slum' can be seen as a derogatory term, with negative connotations. Again, it is important to emphasise that we are talking about people. 'Informal settlements' is used as an alternative in some contexts, however, it could be argued to imply illegality and have negative connotations also. *Further consideration of the appropriate language is needed on how we differentiate between camps, sites, and areas in urban settings which are called 'slums'.*

2. Where We Work

Words/Phrases We Would Like To Stop Using

WORDS/ PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Developing countries', 'LDC (Least Developed Country)', 'Global South', 'Failed states'	• Lower income countries • Poor-vulnerable contexts • The world's poorest countries • Conflict affected states/areas/contexts • Fragile contexts • Fragile and conflict affected areas • Countries where Concern runs programmes • Programme countries • Partner countries	The idea that some counties are 'developed' and others are 'developing' carries with it the notion that some countries have reached their potential and that other countries are behind (inferior). It raises the question of how we define 'developed'. It is an out-dated concept. 'Global South' is too broad a concept as it includes countries across a wide range of social, economic and other conditions. *Bond[2]
'Global North'	• Higher income countries • Affluent/Wealthier nations	As 'Global South' above. *Bond
'In the field'	• Working with communities • Working in the community • Name of the location (city, region, country) • Programme areas	'The field' can be considered militaristic and colonial, and can be seen as implying inferiority.

3. Concern Personnel And Offices

Words/Phrases We Would Like To Stop Using

WORDS/ PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Field offices', 'Overseas offices' when used by Fundraising and Support offices.	• Programme Country offices • Name of country office (e.g. Concern Niger or Niger Country Office)	'Field offices' can be considered militaristic, colonial language and to imply inferiority. 'Overseas offices' can be seen to imply the centrality of the office which isn't 'overseas'.
'Home offices'	• Fundraising and Support Offices • Concern Republic of Ireland/UK/US/South Korea	'Home office' can be seen as implying a colonial mind-set.
'HQ'	• Head office/headquarters • Concern Republic of Ireland	Again, 'HQ' can be seen as very colonial and also militaristic.
'Field visit' 'Field trip'	• Visit to X (country name) • Programme Country visit • Support visit	As above.
'Field staff'	• Programme Country staff • Project Staff/Support Staff/Programme Staff (if you need to specify)	As above.
'Expat staff'	• International staff	'International' is a more neutral term. (Generally it is those in higher income countries that are able to be 'expats' in lower income countries, as opposed to 'immigrants', which is the term most often used to describe people from lower income countries working in wealthier countries)[3].

Further Words/Phrases To Consider

WORDS/PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Local staff'	• National staff	'Local' can be seen as implying a colonial mind-set when talking from a head office/ fundraising and support office point of view. However, 'local' staff is appropriate when talking about staff who are local to a particular town or region.
'Field offices' when used by Programme Country staff to refer to smaller offices in their country.	• Name of office (e.g. Concern's Goma office) • Project offices/Programme offices • Community based offices • Area offices • District offices • Regional offices • Office locations	'Field offices' can be considered militaristic, colonial language and to imply inferiority.

4. How We Work

Words/Phrases We Would Like To Stop Using

WORDS/ PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Lifting people out of poverty', 'Giving voice to the voiceless', 'Saving'	• Working with communities to address/ reduce poverty • Working in communities to address/ reduce poverty • Working with people to… • Community involvement in… • Local engagement…	These terms imply that the people are passive and powerless.

Further Words/Phrases To Consider

WORDS/ PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Protection of women and girls'; 'Protection of men and boys'; 'Protection of older people'; 'Protection of people with disabilities' etc	• Protection of the rights of women and girls/men and boys/older people/ people with disabilities etc • Protection of women and girls' rights/…/… • Protection programming for women and girls/…/…	'Protection of women and girls' etc, unless it is stated what they are being protected from, can give the impression that the individuals in that group are powerless.
'Empowering people'	• Working with people/comm-unities to claim their rights • Supporting people's agency and autonomy • Supporting people's empowerment	'Empowering people' implies that we are granting the people power, rather than supporting them to claim their power for themselves.
'Transforming lives' or 'People transforming their lives', 'Transform their societies'	• Working with (people, families, communities, groups, authorities…) to bring about change • Working with people to address extreme poverty • Working with people to improve their living conditions • Working with people to make positive societal changes • Facilitating change	We are working to change the causes of poverty, hunger and inequality. 'Transforming lives' can be seen as negatively judging the people's individual lives and/or, overstating the impact that Concern's intervention can have. 'Transforming gender norms' is about the goal of changing social systems – as opposed to people – and therefore is an appropriate aspiration.
'Capacity building'	• Sharing learning and knowledge • Training • Transferring resources • Strengthening/enhancing skills/ capacity/capability in xyz	'Capacity building' could be used in certain circumstances such as, for example: 'Capacity building training on new budgeting systems was carried out', where the people have no prior knowledge or experience of the subject. But otherwise, one of the other phrases would be more appropriate.

WORDS/ PHRASES	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES	RATIONALE
'Localisation', 'Shift the power'	• Community driven approach • Locally/Community led • Locally/Community owned • Shifting power and resources to • Communities	Bond suggests that the term 'localisation' has colonial undertones as it implies that the International NGOs are defining the process. However, this is a term which is currently used in Concern and by other International NGOs. *Further consideration of the appropriate language in this regard will be required as we progress on this agenda.*
'Aid'	• Humanitarian assistance/relief • Humanitarian response • Emergency response • Advocacy for social justice	According to Bond, *'we wouldn't describe the critical work charities do to support people [in the UK], such as protecting children from poverty or abuse, as "aid". So there is something very distinct about the word "aid" and its association with the "other".*
'You can help them'	• You can contribute to this work • You can support this work	This can be seen as putting the person 'helping' in a superior position to 'them' who can be perceived as being unable to help themselves. (Instead, people can contribute to work which seeks to address the issues of hunger, poverty, the impact of conflict, climate change, etc.) The use of this phrase might be applicable in some circumstances, depending on the audience or context, but it is important to consider the point about it made above.
'Charity'	• International Non-governmental Agency	'Charity', when used to describe the type of organisation that Concern is in terms of our approach, brings with it the idea of benevolence and disempowerment. However, we are legally a charity, and as such, have to describe ourselves as a charity where necessary.
'CWW'	• Concern Worldwide	CWW as an acronym for Concern Worldwide reduces our visibility.

Endnotes

1. *bond.org.uk*
2. *bond.org.uk*
3. *bond.org.uk*
4. Other resources: *Dochas Guide To Ethical Communications 2023*
5. *USAid Style Guide 2023*