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Buzzwords and fuzzwords: deconstructing development discourse

Andrea Cornwall

> *All things are subject to interpretation; whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.* (Friedrich Nietzche)

Words make worlds. The language of development defines worlds-in-the-making, animating and justifying intervention in currently existing worlds with fulsome promises of the possible. Wolfgang Sachs contends, 'development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavour; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies, and a fantasy which unleashes passions' (1992:1). These models, myths, and passions are sustained by development's 'buzzwords'. Writing from diverse locations, contributors to this special issue critically examine a selection of the words that constitute today's development lexicon. Whereas those who contributed to Sachs' 1992 landmark publication *The Development Dictionary* shared a project of dismantling the edifice of development, this collection is deliberately eclectic in its range of voices, positions, and perspectives. Some tell tales of the trajectories that these words have travelled, as they have moved from one domain of discourse to another; others describe scenes in which the ironies – absurdities, at times – of their usage beg closer critical attention; others peel off the multiple guises that their words have assumed, and analyse the dissonant agendas that they embrace. Our intention in bringing them together is to leave you, the reader, feeling less than equivocal about taking for granted the words that frame the world-making projects of the development enterprise.

The lexicon of development

For those involved in development practice, reflection on words and their meanings may seem irrelevant to the real business of getting things done. Why, after all, should language matter to those who are *doing* development? As long as those involved in development practice are familiar with the catch-words that need to be sprinkled liberally in funding proposals and emblazoned on websites and promotional material, then surely there are more important things to be done than sit around mulling over questions of semantics? But language *does* matter for development. Development's buzzwords are not only passwords to funding and influence; and they are more than the mere specialist jargon that is characteristic of any profession. The word *development* itself, Gilbert Rist observes, has become a 'modern shibboleth, an unavoidable password', which comes to be used 'to convey the idea that tomorrow things will be better, or that more is necessarily better'. But, as he goes on to note, the very taken-for-granted quality of 'development' – and the same might be said of many of the words that are used in development discourse – leaves much of what is actually *done* in its name unquestioned.

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Many of the words that have gained the status of buzzwords in development are (or once were) what the philosopher W.B. Gallie (1956) termed 'essentially contested concepts': terms that combine general agreement on the abstract notion that they represent with endless disagreement about what they might mean in practice. Yet the very contestability of many of the words in the lexicon of development has been 'flattened', as Neera Chandhoke suggests for *civil society*: terms about which there was once vibrant disagreement have become 'consensual hurrah-words' (Chandhoke, this issue). Development's buzzwords gain their purchase and power through their vague and euphemistic qualities, their capacity to embrace a multitude of possible meanings, and their normative resonance. The work that these words do for development is to place the sanctity of its goals beyond reproach.

Poverty is, of all the buzzwords analysed in this collection, perhaps the most compelling in its normative appeal; as John Toye notes, 'the idea of *poverty reduction* itself has a luminous obviousness to it, defying mere mortals to challenge its status as a moral imperative'. The moral unassailability of the development enterprise is secured by copious references to that nebulous, but emotive, category 'the poor and marginalised' (Cornwall and Brock 2005). Elizabeth Harrison draws attention to the 'righteous virtue' of anti-corruption talk, which she argues makes it virtually immoral to question what is being labelled 'corrupt', and by whom.

Many of the words that describe the worlds-in-the-making that development would create have all the 'warmly persuasive' qualities that Raymond Williams described for *community* in his memorable 1976 book *Keywords*. Among them can be found words that admit no negatives, words that evoke Good Things that no-one could possibly disagree with. Some evoke futures possible, like *rights-based* and *poverty eradication* (Uvin, Toye). Others carry with them traces of worlds past: *participation* and *good governance* (Leal, Mkwandawire), with their echoes of colonial reformers like Lord Lugard, the architect of indirect rule; *poverty*, whose power to stir the do-gooding Western middle-classes is at least in part due to its distinctly nineteenth-century feel; and *development* itself, for all that it has become a word that Gilbert Rist suggests might be as readily abandoned as recast to do the work that it was never able to do to make a better world.

Alongside words that encode seemingly universal values, the lexicon of development also contains a number of code-words that are barely intelligible to those beyond its borders. They are part of an exclusive and fast-changing vocabulary. These words capture one of the qualities of buzzwords: to sound 'intellectual and scientific, beyond the understanding of the lay person, best left to "experts"'(Standing, this issue). Some have their origin in the academy, their meanings transformed as they are put to the service of development. Among them *social capital* and *gender* are two such examples, with applications far distant from the theoretical debates with which they were originally associated (Fine and Smyth, this issue). Others circulate between domains as different in kind as the worlds that they make: business, advertising, religion, management. Take *empowerment*, a term that has perhaps the most expansive semantic range of all those considered here. Advertisements beckoning consumers to 'empower' themselves by buying the latest designer spectacles mimic the individualism of the use of this term by development banks, just as the brand of 'spiritual empowerment' offered on the websites of the new Christianities lends radically different meaning to its uses by feminist activists to talk about collective action in pursuit of social justice (Batliwala, this issue).

Buzzwords get their 'buzz' from being in-words, words that define what is in vogue. In the lexicon of development, there are buzzwords that dip in and out of fashion, some continuing to ride the wave for decades, others appearing briefly only to become submerged for years until they are salvaged and put to new uses. What we see, in some cases, is less the rise and rise of a term than its periodic resurfacing – evident, for example, in Alfini and Chambers'

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account of changes and continuities in the language of British aid policies. Tracing the reinvention of ideas, as well as words, over time brings into view some of the paradoxes of development. *Community* and *citizenship* featured, for example, in the vocabularies of the 1950s colonists in Kenya who sought to 'rehabilitate' errant anti-colonial activists through community development programmes that would teach them to become responsible 'citizens' (Presley 1988). *Community participation* came into vogue in the 1970s, taking on an altogether different connotation in the 1980s as 'do it for yourself' became 'do it by yourself' as neo-liberalism flourished (Leal, this issue; Cornwall 2000). Toye's Angels are timeless, but their ministrations have their own historicity. Anti-poverty policies have genealogies that can be traced back over centuries: to take one example, Elizabethan provision of 'outdoor relief' to those judged to be the 'deserving' poor, along with 'setting the poor on work', is not far distant from some of today's *social protection* policies described here by Guy Standing.[1]

Among words with familiar referents, there are others in this collection that have an entirely contemporary feel, keywords of the times we live in. *Globalisation* still captures the *Zeitgeist*, however much the term has come to be qualified in recent years (Guttal). *Security* (Luckham) has become emblematic of the new realities of development, and the increasingly polarised worlds that we have come to inhabit. *Faith-based* (Balchin) is a term whose apparent novelty disguises continuities between the three Cs of the age of colonialism (Civilisation, Christianity, and Commerce) and today's mainstream development – continuities that are increasingly visible. As part of the new world that has been constructed with the conjunction of *development* and *security*, talk of 'faith' has come to displace any debate about *secularism*, as Cassandra Balchin contends: 'today in international development policy, religion is simultaneously seen as the biggest developmental obstacle, the only developmental issue, and the only developmental solution' (this issue). And there are words, like *peace-building*, which Tobias Denskus compares to the 'non-places' such as airports and supermarkets described by Marc Augé (1995), that arrive in the ether and linger to enchant the consumers of development's latest must-have terms.

The Development Dictionary brought together critical genealogies of the key concepts of the age to write the obituary of development. It is a sign of how far, and how fast, things have changed that there is so little overlap between the words that feature there and here. But many of the entries in *The Development Dictionary* appear in today's development discourse in new guises: *state* as *fragile states* (Osaghae) and *good governance* (Mkandawire); *environment* as *sustainability* (Scoones); *planning* (development institutions' preoccupation of that age) as *harmonisation* (Eyben) (their preoccupation in this one). *Equality* is as much of a concern as ever, but has come to be used in development more often with *gender* (Smyth) in front of it. *Capacity building* (Eade) transforms *helping* into a technical fix, generating its own entourage of 'experts'. International NGOs have made much of a shift from *needs* to *rights* (Uvin). And *progress* continues to be regularly invoked, even as the hopes once associated with it quietly slip away.

The apparent universality of the buzzwords that have come to frame 'global' development discourses masks the locality of their origins. Significantly, few of the words used in Anglo-dominated development discourse admit of translation into other languages: many come to be used in other languages as loan-words, their meanings ever more closely associated with the external agencies that make their use in proposals, policies, strategies, and reports compulsory. Even the word 'buzzword' itself is peculiarly Anglophone. Gilbert Rist notes:

> *I eventually decided to write this article in English, for the simple reason that 'buzzword' is just impossible to translate into French. It comes under what we call* 'la langue de bois', *whose translation into English does not exactly convey the same meaning.*

La langue de bois, the language of evasion, well captures one of the functions of development's buzzwords. But, as Rist rightly observes, buzzwords do not just cloud meanings: they combine performative qualities with 'an absence of real definition and a strong belief in what the notion is supposed to bring about'.[2]

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Buzzwords as fuzzwords

> *When ideas fail, words come in very handy.* (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

The language of development is, as Fiona Wilson suggests, a hybrid, not quite the language of social science nor of 'living' English; its 'vocabulary is restricted, banal and depersonalised'. Its 'underlying purpose', she notes, 'is not to lay bare or be unequivocal but to mediate in the interests of political consensus while at the same time allowing for the existence of several internal agendas' (1992: 10). Policies depend on a measure of ambiguity to secure the endorsement of diverse potential actors and audiences. Buzzwords aid this process, by providing concepts that can float free of concrete referents, to be filled with meaning by their users. In the struggles for interpretive power that characterise the negotiation of the language of policy, buzzwords shelter multiple agendas, providing room for manoeuvre and space for contestation.

Scoones' tale of the rise and reinvention of the buzzword *sustainability* draws attention to the 'boundary work' (Gieryn 1999) performed by this concept in bridging discursive worlds and the actors who animate them. Scoones notes that 'to be effective in this boundary work, remaining contested, ambiguous, and vague is often essential'. Yet, as Pablo Leal, Evelina Dagnino, and Srilatha Batliwala make clear in this issue, it is the very ambiguity of *participation*, *citizenship*, and *empowerment* that have made them vulnerable to appropriation for political agendas that are far from those that the social movements that popularised their use had in mind. Their accounts provide powerful examples of the politics of meaning, as differently positioned users put very different versions of these concepts to use.

Leal explores the trajectories of *participation*, showing how amenable the term was to pursuit of a neo-liberal policy agenda, and how divorced its mainstream appropriations are from its more radical roots. Dagnino highlights the 'perverse confluence' that marks the flowing together of neo-liberal and radical democratic meanings of *citizenship*. Batliwala traces the depoliticisation of *empowerment* as it has been converted from an approach that sought to fundamentally alter power relations to a status that constitutes development's latest 'magic bullet'. She asks:

> *Should we be troubled by what many may consider the inevitable subversion of an attractive term that can successfully traverse such diverse and even ideologically opposed terrain? I believe we should, because it represents not some innocent linguistic fad, but a more serious and subterranean process of challenging and subverting the politics that the term was created to symbolise.*

Ines Smyth explores the morass of competing meanings that have come to surround the use of another word that has traversed different domains and ended up depoliticised in the process: *gender*. Noting the 'resounding silence around words such as "feminism" and "feminist"', her analysis gives a compelling sense of the lack of fit between organisational imperatives and the original goals with which *gender* was associated by feminist scholars and activists. She writes:

> *Real women and men, power and conflict all disappear behind bland talk of 'gender', while the language of 'mainstreaming' creates the possibility of orderly tools... and*

systems through which profoundly internalised beliefs and solidly entrenched structures are miraculously supposed to dissolve and be transformed.

There are parallels here with Scoones' account of how *sustainability* became subject to 'the default bureaucratic mode of managerialism [...] and its focus on action plans, indicators, and the rest' (Scoones, this issue). For all the loss of momentum and fragmentation that was a casualty of its institutionalisation, however, Scoones argues that 'sustainability' has retained a 'more over-arching, symbolic role – of aspiration, vision, and normative commitment'. It is that combination of aspiration, vision, and commitment that, for Smyth, makes abandoning the term *gender* altogether less attractive than reanimating it by harnessing it to terms that might restore some of its original focus on power relations: *rights-based* and *empowerment*.

Rights-based gains much of its allure from the legitimacy that it promises, grounding development in a more powerful set of normative instruments than Enlightenment ideals. But, as Peter Uvin contends, what exactly development actors mean when they invoke the language of 'rights' needs to be closely examined. As he shows, rights-talk may amount to a thin veneer over development business as usual. Until, as Uvin argues, donors begin to apply some of their high-moral-ground talk about rights to themselves, rights-talk risks remaining fluffy and meaningless: akin to what Mick Moore, in his analysis of the World Bank's new-found enthusiasm for *empowerment*, calls 'cheap talk': 'something that one can happily say in the knowledge that it will have no significant consequences' (2001:323).

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Reforming relationships

Many of the words that have enjoyed a meteoric rise in popularity over the past decade are those which speak to an agenda for transforming development's relationships. Today, *civil society, social capital*, and *partnership* are as ubiquitous as *community*, evoking much the same warm mutuality. As Guy Standing puts it, these kinds of word are 'intended to invite automatic approval' (this issue); and their rising fortunes have been as much to do with their feel-good factor as with what they promised to deliver.

Neera Chandhoke's account of the rise and rise of *civil society* shows us what is lost when buzzwords are domesticated by development agencies. From the intense differences in perspective that the term once provoked, it has become emblematic of something that no-one could reasonably argue against: close, convivial relations of solidarity and self-help, and an essential bulwark against the excesses of the state and the isolation of the individual. The problem, Chandhoke argues (this issue), is not that these are not part of what can happen in 'civil society'. It is that projecting normative desires on to actually existing societies simply serves to obscure the empirical and analytical question of 'what civil society actually does and does not do for people'. After all, as Chandhoke reminds us, 'civil society' is only as civil as the society that gives rise to it.

Another facet of buzzwords emerges in Ben Fine's account of *social capital*: their use as substitutes for terms that are far less easily assimilated into a consensual narrative. Of the buzzwords examined in this collection, *social capital* is one of the most accommodating: its uses span just about any and every kind of human relationship, lending it considerable discursive power as a feel-good catch-all Good Thing. Charting its rise within mainstream development, Fine shows how it came to be linked to a broader set of personal, institutional, and professional projects, including that of what he terms 'economics imperialism'. Like *civil society*, the normative appeal of social capital sits uneasily with its 'darker' sides; the 'wrong kind' of social capital is, after all, *corruption* (Harrison, this issue).

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Miguel Pickard's account of *partnership* captures some of the ambivalence that accompanies Northern development agencies' projection of their own desired self-image on to complex power relations in 'the South'. Pickard also highlights the contradictions of donors' demands for an ever-increasing volume of reporting and planning, with the emphasis on measurable outcomes, and the realities of working to bring about social change. As Islah Jad contends in her account of the 'NGOisation' of Palestinian women's movements, the professionalisation and projectisation that have come about in response to these demands may not only weaken the transformative potential of aid-receiving organisations, but can also have more far-reaching political consequences. Jad reminds us that to attribute to NGOs the almost magical democratising properties ascribed to *civil society* is to overlook the extent to which donor intervention has sapped the energies of once-vibrant movements, as they come to conform to the strictures of NGOisation (Alvarez 1988).

Riding the wave as the self-proclaimed champions of 'global civil society', international non-government agencies have increasingly turned to *advocacy* as their new metier. John Samuel shows quite what a mire of meanings now surrounds the term *public advocacy* as it has become the latest fad in the NGO world. Drawing on experiences from India that affirm that 'advocacy without mobilisation is likely to be in vain', he argues passionately for a return to a more 'people-centred' approach:

> *We need to become equal participants in social communication, rather than playing the role of highly paid experts travelling around with our ready-made toolkits and frameworks for prescribing the best communication medicine.*

Samuel argues that such an approach is grounded in close links with social movements. Yet, echoing themes emerging in the contributions by Leal, Eade, Jad, and Batliwala, these links are being lost as advocacy becomes professionalised and the voices of marginalised people are appropriated by urban and international elites.

Deborah Eade's account of *capacity building*, another buzzword that has come to be closely associated with international NGOs, poses pithy questions about exactly what and whose capacities are seen as worth building. Like Leal, she highlights the left-leaning traditions that originally informed the notion; and, equally, she notes its usage today in the service of neo-liberalism. By troubling an idea that seems at first glance so evidently morally commendable, she identifies the paradoxes and hypocrisies that lie at the heart of the development enterprise. In doing so, she pricks the bubble that surrounds representations of NGOs in development.

Development's remedies

The disconnects described by Leal, Batliwala, Eade, and Samuel are evident on a grander scale in the world of official development agencies – bilateral and multilateral donors and development banks. Among the remedies prescribed by the institutions that populate this world for addressing its manifest failure to achieve its bold and ambitious promises are measures for tackling the structure of the development industry itself. Some have a direct origin in New Public Management, such as donors' current preoccupation with 'results'. Others have echoes of projects of governance of earlier times, whether 1960s budget support or, further back still, the carving up of colonial dominions between the world powers of the age.

Rosalind Eyben's account of *harmonisation* exposes the quixotic nature of the aid world. As she points out, there is a certain attractiveness in the logic of donor co-ordination. Yet in practice, the harmony in '*harmonisation*' is an illusion: instead, she suggests, donors gang up on recipients to drive through their agendas, becoming 'cartels' with whom it may be imprudent

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to argue. Premised on achieving a noiseless consensus on poverty policy that would be scarcely imaginable in the signatories' home countries, the Paris Agenda contributes to neutralising those who might contest it by draining funding from 'civil society' to channel through direct budget support. Eyben observes some of the contractions. One is the fate of another prevalent piece of donor rhetoric, *country ownership* (see Buiter, this issue), evident in the perverse contradictions of 'country-owned' but identikit Poverty Reduction Strategies (see Rowden and Irama 2004). Another is the 'strange irony that the economists-turned-managers who govern Aidland advocate *co-operation* among themselves on efficiency grounds, while on exactly the same grounds impose polices based on principles of *competition* on their recipients (Severino and Charnoz 2003)' (Eyben, this issue).

As *results-based management* has hit mainstream development agencies, a veritable industry has sprung up to measure 'results' and provide the necessary evidence – as ever, sorely difficult to find – that development is working. The days when *process* showed a glimmer of becoming fashionable came and went very quickly; today's development is all about the quantifiable and measurable. *Best practice* – with its implicit assumptions that practices can be found that are 'best' for all – is part of this ever more homogenising world of development prescriptions, indicators, and 'results'. As Warren Feek's contribution makes amply clear, what may make a practice 'best' may come to depend as much on context as anything inherent in what is being done. He argues:

> *The 'best practice' highlighted after an exhaustive international search may work in the poor barrio on the outskirts of Cali, Colombia, but may be completely inappropriate – perhaps even 'bad practice' – if replicated in Blantyre, Malawi; Puna, India; Kuala Trengganu, Malaysia; and even the town in which I was raised: New Plymouth, New Zealand. Probably even Barranquilla, Colombia would not do what they do in Cali, Colombia, because it just would not work in Barranquilla. Things are different in Barranquilla!*

'And', he continues, 'if the point of labelling something the "best" is not that others replicate it, then why label it the "best"?' Why indeed?

Things may well be different for the people of Barranquilla. But for the aid-agency staff who populate the expatriate enclaves that can be found in the capital cities of any Southern country, the new architecture of aid keeps them insulated from anything that might be happening locally. Denskus' account of *peacebuilding* paints a vivid picture of just how distant aid staff may now find themselves from the realities of the countries that they move between. He cites an aid official's account of the impact of hostilities on the supermarket baskets of expatriate 'peacebuilders'; and talks of hyper-real donor-created bubbles in which aid officials spend their time talking among themselves and come to gain greater knowledge of each other's programmes than what is actually happening out there in the field.

As Guy Standing observes, 'throughout history, institutions have arisen to institutionalise specific discourses and divert knowledge from outside critique' (this issue). Robin Broad's account of the 'art of paradigm maintenance' within the World Bank reveals the work to which *knowledge management* has been put in an era where the Bank needed to reinvent itself to secure its own place in the global order. Her analysis of the politics of 'knowledge management' in the institution that would have us regard it as the Knowledge Bank highlights the sleights of hand and mind that accompany the production of 'knowledge' for development. The philosopher Nelson Goodman argued that 'a statement is true and a description or representation right for a world it fits' (1978:132). Robin Broad's account shows how 'truth' is made to fit the world that the Bank wishes to make; and the tactics that she describes underscore the partiality – in the sense of being partial to, as well as consisting of a partial picture – of

the representations of the problems of (and, implicitly, the solutions for) development that emerge from this mighty information machine.

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The end of ideology?

Many of the buzzwords analysed in this collection gained popularity precisely through what Fox (in this issue) terms their 'trans-ideological' properties. Yet just as they appear to rise 'above' ideology, they are densely populated with ideological projects and positions. The 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein 1953) of many of the terms considered here are so diffuse that their ideological implications become clear only in the context of their use by particular, positioned, social and political actors. Unpicking these layers of meaning brings identifiably ideological differences into clearer view.

Good governance appears at first glance to be less ambiguous than many of the terms considered here. Its chief prescriptions are encoded in a universal toolkit for the construction of liberal democratic institutions that closely enough resemble those that facilitated the growth of capitalism in the West that they will do the same wherever they are implanted. Yet, as Thandika Mkandawire's article shows, the genesis of 'good governance' in debates with African intellectuals had quite a different project in mind: the transformation of state–society relations to create a more inclusive and accountable state. These meanings continue to circulate within use of the term *governance* in development, which has acquired – as Sierra Leonean commentator Freida M'Cormack (pers. comm.) puts it – the status of 'the mother of all buzzwords'. But, as Mkandawire makes clear, the mantra-like quality that 'good governance' has attained in international policy circles has led to a diminution of concern with democratic citizenship and the privileging of traditional neo-liberal remedies. That these remedies continue to fail the people of Africa then becomes ascribable to 'bad governance'.

Security acquires its discursive power through the very opposite of the orderly and predictable world that *good governance* would seek to create: its capacity to evoke the fear of things falling apart. Robin Luckham juxtaposes the framing of security and development discourses:

> *In contrast to development, whose language is firmly rooted in the grand narrative of the Enlightenment, the discourse of security arises from the double-edged and ambivalent nature of development, including its roots in a destructive capitalism which demolishes livelihoods, communities, and even states – indirectly through the structural violence of poverty, and directly through war and political violence.*

Both *security* and *development* come together in talk of *fragile states*, a label whose origins are widely ascribed to the World Bank. Eghosa Osaghae's exploration of the rise of the idea of the 'fragile state' and the use of this term in the African context makes a convincing case for the need to take a less simplistic view of state capacity and fragility. Highlighting the extent to which the term connotes 'deviance and aberration from the dominant and supposedly universal (but Western) paradigm of the state, which played a key role in the development of capitalism', he argues:

> *. . . ultimately, the responsibility for determining when states are no longer fragile is that of citizens of the countries concerned and not that of 'benevolent' donors and the international development community whose motivation for supposed state-strengthening interventions is to ensure that fragile states take their 'rightful' places in the hegemonic global order.*

It is all the more ironic, then, to observe the extent to which another term that the World Bank launched into circulation – *country ownership* – has become a decorative epithet that promises something quite different from that delivered by the monoculture of 'reform'. 'Country

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ownership' would, after all, seem to posit quite the converse to the institutional recipes of *good governance*, resonating with the ideals of self-determination that spurred anti-colonial struggles and shaped post-independence nationalist governments. Such are its evident contradictions, Willem Buiter argues, that it needs to be seen as 'a term whose time has gone'. As he points out, to confuse the deployment of the term 'country ownership' by today's development powers with any meaningful opportunity by developing countries to shape their own development would be a grave mistake. Rather, he comments, 'country ownership' boils down to decisions made by the few who own the country – and, by extension, the compacts that they make with the international financial institutions.

Among the panaceas that found their way into mainstream development in the late 1990s, propelled by the 'good governance' agenda, *transparency* and *accountability* are two that achieved instant popularity across the spectrum. In Fox's analysis of these terms, and the none-too-straightforward relationship between them, he shows how their 'trans-ideological character' allows them to be appropriated by a variety of political and policy actors. As such, he observes, these terms become as amenable to the proponents of New Public Management as to human-rights activists. Fox draws attention to another property of buzzwords that their apparent universality conceals:

> *One person's transparency is another's surveillance. One person's accountability is another's persecution. Where one stands on these issues depends on where on sits.*

Much the same could be said for *corruption*; quite what and who is judged to be 'corrupt' is, as Harrison points out, just as much a matter of positionality. Commenting on the growth of a veritable anti-corruption industry geared at cleaning up the state, she notes the extent to which this has come to deflect attention from the probity of other actors, including development agencies themselves. The ironies of the confluence of anti-corruption efforts with neo-liberal policy prescriptions raises further questions. Harrison asks: 'does the focus on anti-corruption, with its attendant increase in privatisation, concessions, and contracting-out, in turn open the door for greater corruption among multi-national corporations?' (this issue).

The ambivalent nature of development, in Luckham's terms, is more than evident in the effects of the kind of *globalisation* that mainstream development's lenders and donors have sought to foster. Shalmali Guttal's analysis draws attention to the discursive moves that equate 'globalisation' with 'development', 'democracy', 'rights', and 'choice'. This, she argues, provides a convenient cover for the sanction and support for corporate expansion that forms part of the agenda of neo-liberal states and multilateral institutions. But, Guttal argues, 'globalisation' has, equally, fostered the flowering of resistance: 'the same technology that has exacerbated the financial insecurity of countries has also been used by people's movements and activists to jam the gears of globalisation' (Guttal, this issue).

Language matters

If terms that were once calls to mobilisation in pursuit of social justice, or concepts that were good to think and debate with, have been reduced to vague and euphemistic buzzwords by their incorporation by the development establishment, what is to be done? As Scoones puts it, 'can an old buzzword be reinvigorated and reinvented for new challenges, or does it need discarding with something else put its place?' Some contributors to this volume would argue that there are words that are beyond redemption; others would contend that it is necessary to reclaim some of the associations once conveyed by terms that are too precious to lose and use them to give 'mainstreamed' buzzwords new vigour and purpose. Their analyses suggest a variety of strategies and tactics.

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Out with the old, in with the new

One way of dealing with a denatured buzzword is to dump it altogether, and hope that others will follow suit. Replacing tired old buzzwords with captivating new alternatives, or rehabilitating the 'lost' words that spoke for hopes and dreams that never went away, is to play the development-buzzword game on its own terms. It is worth considering some of the words that might be put in the place of today's fuzzwords. *Justice*, *solidarity*, and *redistribution* are attractive candidates, resonant with the demands of countless movements in their struggles to make a fairer, better world. They are resounding calls to action. And they are words that mainstream development agencies might sooner choke on than assimilate. But there is no guaranteeing that they would not become smoothed out, stripped of any disruptive meanings, and incorporated. Think, for example, of how *power* and *political agency*, words that might seem at first sight to be anathema, have come to enter the discourse of the World Bank in recent years (see, for example, Alsop 2005).[3]

Another approach is to propel into popularity words whose very dissonance with mainstream development lends them their potential as alternative frames for thought and action. A number of the missing words identified by Alfini and Chambers – like *love, peace, respect* – would seem to fit the bill. But they share the warm, persuasive qualities of other buzzwords; and they are no less vague in what they might come to mean. Better, perhaps, to seek out words that are less ambiguous and which might provoke development actors out of the complacency of othering 'the poor'. What would it take, for example, to make *pleasure* the buzzword of 2010? As a former bilateral donor commented, 'the very idea of talking about pleasure in the context of development makes me very uncomfortable'. This is precisely what is needed, it might be argued: words that provoke discomfort, that shake people up. Talk of 'pleasure' takes us beyond monochromatic representations of abjection, reminding us of the humanity of those whose lives development agencies would wish to improve. *Pleasure-based approaches* suggest more prospect of enhancing well-being and saving lives than current development models (Jolly 2006). But there is equally no guarantee that as a result of its incorporation, *pleasure* would not become tomorrow's *freedom*.

Leveraging incorporated buzzwords

Gita Sen proposes that rather than abandoning terms that are felt to have become corrupted, a more productive approach might be to 'recognise that the fact that new terms and frameworks are being taken up by the opposition is an important sign not of failure, but of success in the first level of the struggle for change' (2004: 13). Citing Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, she argues, 'if knowledge is power, then changing the terrain of discourse is the first but very important step. It makes it possible to fight the opposition on the ground of one's choosing' (*ibid.*). As Hilary Standing (2004) points out, it is naive to expect bureaucrats to be either willing or able to carry out the transformative work that those who advocate the adoption of radical concepts expect of them. But this does not mean that the inclusion of these words in development policies is not useful to others, including those within development bureaucracies who are able to use them as levers for change.

For all the association of Foucault's work with the totalising power effects of discourse, his work on 'governmentality' reminds us that even the most powerful masters of meanings can never completely secure the capture of language for their own projects. It is in the 'strategic reversibility' (1991:5) of discourse, he argues, that the potential for resistance and transgression lies. As we have seen with the reclaiming by social movements of words used to denigrate and exclude, such as 'queer' and 'mad', the words that make the worlds of the powerful can be used

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as tools for mobilisation and resistance. It is, after all, in the very ambiguity of development buzzwords that scope exists for enlarging their application to encompass more transformative agendas.

Incorporated buzzwords may, indeed, serve as bridges from one domain into another: allowing activists and progressive bureaucrats to enlist each other in efforts to refashion development policy and practice, and providing a discursive meeting ground on which actor-networks come together around a shared 'story-line' (Hajer 1993). While rejection may be a necessary precursor to reinvention, then, ditching terms whose symbolic potency is not yet spent in favour of novel but unfamiliar terms may leave practitioners at the periphery of the worlds of discourse-making, bemused and adrift. For all the emptying of meaning that occurs as words come to be institutionalised by development agencies, spaces for contestation and resignification of meaning are never completely closed. Even the most unpromising of buzzwords can provide entry points for the mobilisation of alternatives: take, for example, the reworking of meanings for *security* described by Luckham, in efforts to claim normative and discursive ground within the ambit of development policy.

Constructive deconstruction

Tackling what Guy Standing (2001) calls development's 'linguistic crisis', some might argue, calls for more than tactical resistance and for making the most of the room for manoeuvre offered by the appropriation of the language of social movements by the development establishment. What would it take to rehabilitate words that have been reduced to feel-good fuzzwords, to turn the uneasy silence of consensus into vigorous debate, and to revive denatured and depoliticised buzzwords?

Constructive deconstruction – the taking apart of the different meanings that these words have acquired as they have come to be used in development discourse – provides an opportunity for reflection, which is a vital first step towards their rehabilitation. By making evident the variant meanings that popular development buzzwords carry, this process can bring into view dissonance between these meanings. If the use of buzzwords as fuzzwords conceals ideological differences, the process of constructive deconstruction reveals them: and, with this, opens up the possibility of reviving the debates that once accompanied the use of bland catch-all terms like *civil society* and *social capital*. And if this is accompanied, as in the genealogical accounts in this and Sachs' collections, by tracing their once-radical meanings, it can also help to wrest back more progressive usages of even some of the most corrupted of terms in the current development lexicon, such as *empowerment*.

What this requires is not only close attention to meaning. It also calls for a disentanglement of the normative and the empirical, a focus on 'actual social practices rather than wishful thinking' (Rist, this issue). This can clear the ground for the more politicised and indeed explicitly normative discussion that Leal proposes in this issue for *participation* when he asks:

> *What exactly do we wish to participate in? Can we continue to accept a form of participation that is simply added on to any social project, i.e. neo-liberal modernisation and development, creating an alibi for development by transferring ownership to the poor in the name of empowerment? Or should participation be re-located in the radical politics of social transformation by reaffirming its counter-hegemonic roots?*

Such a process, as Rist argues for *development*, would enable us to 'be aware of its inclusion in a corpus of beliefs that are difficult to shatter, expose its mischievous uses, and denounce its consequences'. Dislocating naturalised meanings, dislodging embedded associations, and de-familiarising the language that surrounds us becomes, then, a means of loosening the

hegemonic grip – in Gramsci's (1971) sense of the word 'hegemony', as unquestioned acceptance – that certain ideas have come to exert in development policy and practice.

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Reclaiming meaning through reconfiguration

For all that might be done to seek more specificity in definition, words gain their meanings in the contexts of their use; and these meanings are relative to the other words that surround them. Raymond Williams points out that particular combinations of words 'establish one set of connections while often suppressing another' (1976: 25). The very mobility of meanings of many of the words that make up the development lexicon makes them difficult to resignify without the help of other words that can moor them to specific projects. Ernesto Laclau's (1997) notion of 'chains of equivalence' offers further insights, as well as a strategy for reanimating denatured buzzwords. As terms are added to others, Laclau argues, 'chains of equivalence' are formed: the more words in the chain, the more the meaning of any of those words comes to depend on the other words in the chain.

Used in a chain of equivalence with *good governance, accountability, results-based management, reform*, and *security*, for example, words like *democracy* and *empowerment* come to mean something altogether different from their use in conjunction with *citizenship, participation, solidarity, rights*, and *social justice*. In either chain, other words that might be added – such as *freedom* – would come to mean quite different things. Thinking of words in constellations rather than in the singular opens up further strategies for reclaiming 'lost' words, as well as salvaging some of the meanings that were never completely submerged. Embedding words in chains of equivalence that secure meanings that would otherwise be pared away, and employing a politics of hyphenation that lends particular meanings to words with multiple potential referents, can serve as means of resisting decoupling and recombination – and give tired buzzwords a new lease of life.

Conclusion

Different words, different contexts, different actors, and different struggles call for different strategies: some combination of any or all of those outlined here may be required at some times and for some purposes. As the contributions to this special issue of *Development in Practice* make clear, engagement with development's language is far more than a matter of playing games with words. These reflections on the language of development evoke bigger questions about the world-making projects that development's buzzwords define and describe. Pablo Leal contends: 'our primary task is, as it should always have been, not to reform institutional development practice but to transform society'. Whether *development* has a place in that process of transformation may come to depend on our willingness to resignify it.

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Notes

1. For further information about anti-poverty policies in Elizabethan England, see www.victorianweb.org/history/poorlaw/elizpl.html.

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2. Although internet searches failed to track down a site dedicated to development's buzzwords, there are numerous others devoted to the management-speak that is becoming pervasive in development institutions. See, for example, the Official Bullshit Generator at www.erikandanna.com/Humor/bullshit_generator.htm and the Systematic Buzz Phrase Projector at www.acronymfinder.com/buzzgen.asp?Num=111&DoIt=Again. My personal favourite is the Elizabethan Buzzword Generator at www.red-bean.com/kfogel/hypespeare.html And you can send your most reviled buzzword to www.buzzwordhell.com. *La langue de bois*, the language of evasion, has its own generator: www.presidentielle-2007.net/generateur-de-langue-de-bois.php.
3. To take an example, in a major 2003 report on inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean, senior bank staff – including the Vice-President and Chief Economist for the region – conclude that 'breaking with the long history of inequality in Latin America' depends on 'strong leadership and broad coalitions' ... to mobilise 'the political agency of progressive governments and the poor'. See http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/LAC/LAC.nsf/PrintView/4112F1114F594B4B85256DB3005DB262?Opendocument.

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