

We Are the Jargonistas: Effective Communication in ‘Development’

Everyone hates jargon, in principle at least. Jargon is antonymous of motherhood and apple pie. But if nobody likes jargon, why does it persist? The answer is that jargon lies in the ear of the receiver. My definition of jargon is *a term that could be easily misunderstood using the common English lexicon but of which the proponent assumes an implicit understanding amongst their audience*. Note the distinction here between verbiage and jargon; I am a strong advocate of additional vocabulary where it contributes to the style or substance of a piece of writing or speech. If words are unfamiliar, they can be researched in any dictionary and, if used correctly, will add to the descriptive power of the piece and, subsequently, the recipient’s vocabulary. If, however, a dictionary is consulted and it is still not clear what the author was attempting to communicate, then it is likely that it was an example of jargon.

I should add here a note about where this abbreviated diatribe came from. In examining the development research landscape, it became apparent that many of the same ideas are being used in different fields. However, the lexicon of the protagonists in each of these fields has codified their message in such a way as to obfuscate its meaning. If we want to communicate effectively in development and beyond, it is important that we do not assume obvious that which is far from it. It is not just the general public to whom these terms are unclear; academics studying economics, political economy or even development would not be familiar with these terms if they had not been directly involved in the implementation or evaluation of aid programmes. If people who study the field for a living find the terminology obtuse, then imagine an ‘elevator pitch’ to a politician; use any of the terms below and their eyes will glaze over before you reach the second floor. The remainder of this article is focused on examples which will, no doubt, prove controversial; primarily because the reader probably uses one or more of them daily. That is not, in itself, a problem. The point is simply to highlight the importance of knowing your audience in order to communicate effectively.

Development: Let’s start by addressing the large tusked creature in the corner. Say to any randomly selected educated person ‘I work in development’ and the almost universal reply will be, ‘of what?’. The truth is that development could be applied to such a wide range of contexts that if the subject matter is not familiar, the word becomes meaningless. The recent addition of the adjuncts ‘international’ or ‘overseas’ have done little to clarify matters as cars, children or photographs can be developed aspatially. In communicating effectively, it is important not to leave your audience

guessing on the subject matter until the fourth paragraph so think of a way to clarify your field of interest.

Project & Programme: While the distinction between these terms might be taken for granted amongst development professionals, such a distinction is neither clear in the English language, nor in the understanding of the wider populace. It is entirely feasible that they could have been employed vice versa, with several small programmes occurring within a larger project.

Results Measurement, Evaluation and Impact Assessment: Here, both the distinction between the terms and the meaning of the terms themselves are questionable. Can you measure the impact of something and then evaluate the assessment of your findings? Or can you, in fact, substitute any one of those terms for any other one without changing the meaning of the sentence? There is a hierarchy implicit within development amongst these terms which has arisen as a result of the next piece of jargon, but that is not something which would be clear to someone not working directly in development. The *Guardian's* dedicated development website is one of the most popular mass media outlets for development discussion. While its readers - many of whom contribute to development related charities or vote based on development related issues - are interested in whether development works and how donor money is spent, you will find very few references to M&E or Impact Assessment outside of their new 'Professionals Network'.

Logframe: This is a seemingly unnecessary contraction which serves to obscure the purpose of the term. A logframe is a logical framework (unfortunately 'framework' itself being a rather overused term, the meaning of which has become unclear) meaning a way of understanding what you expect to happen in theory, and a quantification of this; this change will lead to x and then y and then z, based on assumptions *a*, *b*, and *c*. Indeed, in some programmes a logframe is used as a work plan and the logic aspect of the contraction has seemingly disappeared. A logframe sounds like something that children climb on and it would really benefit from elaboration.

Theory of change: This, to me, is fairly clear and a welcome departure from the previous term. However, the differentiation between them is something that the general public are likely to find confusing. Here is a logical framework for how you expect change to happen, but here also is our theory of change. One is, effectively, a broad theoretical approximation of the other without quantification. They are effectively pro-forma for modern development programmes and an understanding of the distinctions should not be assumed in wider communication.

Facilitation: Interestingly, this is a term that is like motherhood and apple pie. Who can object to facilitation, the alternative being obstruction? Here, we have an example of cognitive dissonance as

those that are fervently anti-jargon are also fiercely pro-facilitation and therefore an advocate of jargon. This piece is not about the technicalities of what each of these terms actually means but rather the imperative that both the orator and their audience understand the same things by them. That is the essence of effective communication.

Intervention: This is a delicate term for two different reasons. Within M4P there are very different technical factors governing interventions partially dictated by the term above. But there is also the common understanding of the term intervention which is more frequently associated with counselling. Then there is the connotation of the autocratic, i.e. the British intervention in Iraq, and the political concept of interventionism. Again steering clear of the technical dimensions, it is important that the audience is aware that by 'intervention' we mean what we practically do.

Participatory: Often used as an addendum to win contracts, participation has a long history of use and misuse in development. Imagine the passive observer, how does a participatory workshop differ from a workshop? A workshop is, surely, commonly understood to be a participatory exercise, as opposed to a lecture or presentation. The term is, therefore, a tautology.

Strategic: This is a related piece of window dressing commonly used to inflate the importance of departments or individuals. A strategic thinker, a strategic advisor, a strategic plan; how do they differ from their non-strategic equivalents? Often, the term is misused, such as in the ubiquitous 'strategic framework', which is most commonly a theoretical framework but occasionally a simple work plan.

While the list is, of course, inexhaustible, the problems caused by the use of jargon are twofold. Firstly, there is often miscommunication between the author and the audience which limits the potential impact of what are commonly valid messages. Secondly, and perhaps more perniciously, jargon is used as a smokescreen for incompetence and incomprehension. So how shall we address these failures? Issue an edict from Bono allocating definitive definitions to each of the terms? Use different, more bespoke terms that are less easily confused? Shall we call a programme 'Tom' and a project 'Jerry'? No. I propose a far less autocratic and less facetious solution. The first step is to recognise the problem – *we are the jargonistas!* Know what jargon is and be aware of the dangers of using it in communication. Secondly, you need to know your audience and alter your terminology accordingly. Ask yourself, could this be misinterpreted? If so then spell out exactly what you mean. In an age where development is under increasing scrutiny, the onus is on us, the people who believe that good development practice is a good thing, to communicate that fact as effectively as possible to as many people as possible.