

Equitable Partnerships Brief #4

Partner-Inclusive Language

- for Agrifood Research and Innovation for Development - Version 1.0

Why language?

The language you use when working with others signals how you—or your organisation—perceive the partnership. It can either reinforce hierarchy and distance, or foster inclusion, equity, and mutual respect.

Just as gender-inclusive language shapes whether people feel seen and valued, partner-inclusive language plays a critical role in how relationships are experienced. Thoughtful word choices help create an environment where partners feel respected, equal, and genuinely part of a shared endeavour.

Partner-inclusive language use begins with recognising common non-inclusive or exclusionary narratives that defy principles of equitable partnerships.

Purpose

This document is an iterative compilation of everyday non-inclusive language use cases in Agrifood Research and Innovation for Development (RI4D) partnerships. It offers alternative framing to anchor communication in respect, collaboration, and agency.

Intended audience includes researchers, leaders, funders, communicators, and any stakeholders engaged in Agrifood RI4D.

Collaborative Approach

An open call for contributions was made to develop this brief. Over 60 people responded, and 18 contributors, the majority of whom are from the Global South, shared their lived experiences of written and spoken communication.

The contributors were asked: (a) what was language they found to be non-inclusive as a partner, (b) why they felt this was non-inclusive, and (c) alternative language that could be used.

Language examples

#	Non-inclusive language	Views on how it could be perceived	Potential inclusive alternatives	Views on suggested alternatives
Outside-in deficit narrative				
1	Organisation X will <u>deliver</u> solutions (or <u>transfer</u> technologies) to farmers ... We bring solutions...	Could seem hierarchical or non-collaborative, with farmers expected to follow directives.	Organisation X <u>works alongside</u> farmers and relevant partners to apply and adapt solutions... We co-develop solutions with farmers...	The inclusive alternative shows farmers and other partners owning the process.
2	As part of the project, we will <u>build/strengthen the capacity</u> of partners. We <u>trained the partners</u>.	Could indicate local actors do not have expertise and simply convey outside-in knowledge flow. Also overlooks mutual learning outcomes.	The project partners will focus on <u>capacity sharing</u> as a key objective. <u>Capacity strengthening</u> activities will be undertaken. <u>Training</u> will be incorporated into the programme.	Terms need to be selected depending on the activity: ⇒ <u>Capacity Sharing</u> is appropriate when both parties are gaining new knowledge. The researcher should recognise and appreciate that they are also gaining knowledge, e.g., about the farming practices, preferences, etc. ⇒ <u>Capacity Strengthening</u> is appropriate when not a formal /structured course but a one-way knowledge exchange. 'Capacity strengthening' is considered more appropriate than '<u>Capacity Building</u>' as building may be interpreted as not having any capacity to start with. ⇒ <u>Training</u> is appropriate when it is a formal structured training course. Also, how the term is used in a sentence reflects genuine or transactional partnership.

Unequal positioning narrative				
3	Bon Institute and <u>its partners...</u>	Could seem hierarchical and suggest partners are not equal.	Bon Institute <u>works in partnership</u> with...	The alternative underscores joint ownership, coordination, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and accountability.
4	We are working <u>bottom-up</u> with local organisations contributing to the efforts of the international project team.	While bottom-up is often used to reflect an inclusive or a locally-driven approach, it could be interpreted as hierarchical—Global South countries or local organisations/people are at the bottom and other countries or international organisations are higher.	We are working with <u>grass-roots</u> (/local) organisations, ensuring ownership through co-design and co-implementation in the project.	The inclusive alternatives present implementation and uptake as a collaborative process, positioning actors as equals.
5	The <u>top-down</u> approach in disseminating technologies proved ineffective.	Using top-down, even if it is to indicate an inclusive approach, reflects a non-existent hierarchy.	The <u>non-inclusive</u> approach in disseminating technologies proved ineffective.	
6	Serving communities at the bottom of the pyramid...*	This framing generalises lower income groups and positions them at the lowest level.	Working with people or communities living in poverty or on less than X (amount) per day...	The alternative avoids labelling and offers factual positioning.
7	Farmers were selected for data monitoring <u>to test the technology</u> .	If not articulated as part of genuine co-research process, this presents farmers as labour or data sources for extractive research.	Farmers <u>co-designed</u> and <u>evaluated</u> field trials. Trials were hosted and <u>managed jointly</u> with producer groups. Participants contributed data and participated in validating interpretation and action planning.	The alternative shows that co-design is not just language. It determines who holds knowledge and who benefits from research outcomes. When farmers are named as co-researchers, it creates accountability to return findings to them, not just to funders or journals.
8	Extensionists/field advisors were <u>mobilised to disseminate</u> results.	Language that reduces extensionists to messengers does not adequately reflect their expertise and could discourage engagement.	Extensionists' <u>insights and expertise informed and guided</u> implementation considering producers' realities.	The alternative shows that extensionists are professionals with field intelligence and pedagogical expertise, versed in both technical content and the community context.

9	<u>Anecdotal farmer views</u> and <u>traditional knowledge</u> were validated through research.	Terming farmer knowledge 'anecdotal' while treating research findings as automatically valid, reflects a hierarchy of knowing that undermines genuine partnership. Both forms of evidence have standards of rigour; they are simply different.	Research, experiential evidence, and local knowledge <u>were triangulated and analysed</u> .	The alternative with 'experiential' or 'community-generated' knowledge emphasises that farmers actively produce and test knowledge through practice, rather than simply inheriting it.
Passive or recipient narrative				
10	The digital tools developed through the project <u>reached 5,000 farmers</u> in...	By using 'reached' or 'targets,' farmers or other actors are being positioned as passive entities, beneficiaries, recipients, project targets, or means to an end.	<u>Five thousand farmers have accessed and used</u> digital tools through the project in...	The inclusive alternatives shift framing of stakeholders from passive recipients to being active participants in the change process.
11	The project <u>targets 5,000 farmers</u> through digital tools...		The project aims to <u>make digital tools accessible</u> to 5,000 farmers in...	
12	<u>Reaching</u> farmers at scale...		<u>Scaling in collaboration with</u> farmer-led networks and organisations...	
13	The project <u>reached 5,000 beneficiaries</u> ...	Implies power imbalance, framing it as providers and beneficiaries.	The project <u>collaborated with</u> 5,000 stakeholders/community members...	The alternative emphasises collaboration and equal positioning of actors. It also fosters a sense of community ownership, which impacts sustainability of a project's outcomes.
Empowering narrative				
14	The project <u>empowered</u> 5,000 farmers and women	Empowering suggests that farmers/women are weak and lack agency, reinforcing the idea of project researchers having power to impart. Instead, farmers/women need a collaborator who respects their wisdom. Real innovation is about building a bridge between their knowledge and the new tools that can magnify it.	Farmers <u>increased their yields</u> by 20% through improved varieties made available through the project. Women <u>accessed</u> new markets through project initiatives that provided the platform to...	The inclusive alternatives specify outcomes with active phrasing rather than grouping them broadly under the term 'empowerment.'

Other non-inclusive framing

15	Bon Institute's innovations are highlighted in the Annual Report...	This framing does not convey shared ownership and recognition of the partners.	This Annual Report highlights innovations that Bon Institute <u>has co-developed</u> with a wide range of partners...	The alternative recognises and reflects the range of inputs and collective ownership.
16	<u>Adoption</u> is low because <u>farmers do not understand the benefits</u> .	Can infer non-adoption or low uptake is due to the farmer, whereas the reasons could be varied and complex.	The full benefits were not realised because the <u>adoption strategy was not successful</u> .	The alternative takes the blame away from the farmer and opens discussion on the many factors that influence uptake, including the quality of the partnership.
17	Funders <u>financed</u> the project.	This does not reflect adequately when funders are actively engaged in the issues beyond being a financial provider.	Funders <u>supported/partnered with stakeholders</u> to resource the initiative.	The alternative reflects funders' intellectual contributions and engagement beyond providing funds, when such contributions and engagement exist.
18	<u>Funders</u> included...	Could frame the funding relationship as charitable giving, positioning communities as recipients of goodwill rather than partners with rights and agency.	<u>Funding partners</u> included...	
19	<u>Localisation</u> of...*	Suggests something that is being done to people, rather than led by them and can hence undermine agency.	<u>Locally-led</u> ...	The alternative transfers decision making power and resources to actors in lower income countries.

*ETH NADEL, *Words Matter*, [20260203_Guidelines_WordsMatterGuide_v8.pdf](#)⁸

Agrifood research and innovation discourse through time

Discourse is shaped by social realities—problems and contexts, roles of actors, power structures, knowledge hierarchies—and in turn shapes or normalizes social realities.¹ A close look at criticism of prominent paradigms shows evolution of Agrifood RI4D discourse through time.

Transfer of Technology (1960s–1990s, characterized Green Revolution) Farmers framed as adopters rather than innovators; extension framed as technology delivery; NARS as implementers of research produced externally. <i>Solutions that worked in research stations did not work in fields of resource-poor farmers because local contexts and knowledge were not factored.²</i>	Participatory research (1990s–2000s) Consultative participation without decision-making <i>Projects termed participatory often involved passive or consultative participation rather than shared decision-making authority.³</i>
Agricultural Innovation Systems (2000s–present) (i) Dominant narratives shape research agendas <i>Productivity gaps and innovation scaling narratives influenced research priorities and policy framing.⁴</i> (ii) Scaling discourse may oversimplify complex innovation processes <i>Scaling often assumed innovations could be replicated across contexts, leading to challenges when institutional or ecological conditions differed.⁵</i>	Transdisciplinary research (2010s–present) Power asymmetries may persist in co-production processes <i>Co-production initiatives can reproduce existing power imbalances and knowledge hierarchies if they fail to tackle power imbalances.⁶</i>

Note that research has also shown that institutions tend to adopt inclusive language faster than development practices can change.⁷

Make the shift today

Partner-inclusive language in Agrifood RI4D discourse addresses inequities and strengthens collaborations that are essential for tackling global challenges. It is one of the first milestones in changing perceptions around partnerships.

The outcomes of discourse with inclusive language can be significant for all stakeholders. Some of these could be:

- Farmers positioned as knowledge contributors elevate valuable local or indigenous knowledge from ancillary to essential.
- Framing NARS as co-designers addresses funding inequities and encourages locally relevant knowledge and research that is easier to sustain than externally driven research and development agendas.
- International R4D organisations can expect higher engagement with their work and rise in credibility among national, regional, and global actors.

Through inclusive language use, equitable partnerships can be collectively built for impactful and sustainable agrifood research.

Practitioners' perspectives on inclusive language use



Tracy Rashida Alhassan Bawa, CEO, BOOD Company limited, Ghana

In the past I struggled with communication that unintentionally positioned farmers and team members as mere employees, limiting their sense of ownership and engagement. The business struggled with mismanagement, theft, waste of agricultural inputs and so on. Over time, I have deliberately shifted toward inclusive language in both my documentation and daily interactions, ensuring that farmers and staff see themselves as partners in a shared vision. This has strengthened responsibility, commitment, and collective accountability, where everyone understands that the success or failure of the business affects us all.



Dr Sarita Sehgal - Associate Director, The Partnering Initiative and Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Cape Town, Graduate School of Business.

Language plays a critical role in shaping relationships, framing knowledge, and fostering shared understanding and embodiment of more respectful and equitable ways of working together. Shifting the terms we use to describe agricultural research and innovation, and the role of farmers and other stakeholders, is therefore an important first step toward more inclusive practice. However, language alone is not enough. Simply referring to farmers and local actors as “partners” does not automatically make them partners in practice, just as replacing terms like “bottom-up consultation” with “co-creation” or “co-design” does not by itself create more inclusive processes. Meaningful change requires corresponding shifts in researchers’ and innovators’ mindsets, behaviours, incentives, and institutional conditions. For changes in language to have substance, there must also be collective recognition of - and commitment to - the values and practices that the new language is intended to represent. This will ensure that farmers and other local actors feel they are true partners with agency in clarifying problems and delivering solutions and will ultimately ensure both uptake and sustainability.



Katja Vuori, CEO, AgriCord

Language use shapes perceptions, relationships, and ultimately power balances, and in agricultural research and innovation it remains difficult to consistently apply inclusive language, as both traditional research communities and donor discourse often still reflect paternalistic or even colonial patterns. For AgriCord, mandated and steered by farmers’ organisations, advancing more inclusive research and innovation processes that ensure genuine and equal participation and steering by farmer organisations also means paying attention to how language is used. At the same time, there is a legitimate concern that actors may simply adopt the “right” terminology to secure funding, while underlying practices remain unchanged. Even so, working deliberately on language matters: it can help shift norms, influence expectations, and gradually contribute to changes in mindsets and, ultimately, in practice.



Cathy Amenya, Programs and Partnerships Manager, Movement for Community-Led Development (MCLD)

Development organisations, researchers, and funders consistently approach farming communities as though they are problems to be solved rather than partners to think with. We design programmes around what communities lack, and our language gives us away. We call them beneficiaries, target populations, we talk about knowledge transfer and capacity gaps. But lack of money is not the same as lack of knowledge, skills, or agency. A community that has farmed the same land across generations, adapted to shifting seasons, and sustained families without external support holds expertise that no institution can replicate. When we start our work by asking what communities already know rather than what we have come to teach, the quality of our partnerships and our results change entirely.



Kofi Kisiedu Acquaye, Africa Regional Coordinator, Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD)

Across the many conversations I facilitate with young people, researchers, farmers, and development partners, one lesson stands out: language matters. The words we choose shape participation, signal respect, and influence how people see their role in creating change.



Dr Melanie Connor, Senior Social Scientist, Behavioral Science, IRRI

My work at IRRI depends heavily on collaboration with colleagues and partners spanning different sectors, roles, disciplines, and institutional positions. Whether the task is technical or communication-oriented, effective collaboration requires clarity, patience, and an ability to communicate ideas in ways that are accessible to diverse stakeholders. Since partners bring different experiences, priorities, and levels of familiarity with the concepts IRRI is working on, taking time to listen to partners' needs and aspirations and to co-design processes and perspectives is essential to achieving a shared understanding. When this approach is practised consistently, it contributes to an environment of mutual respect, inclusion, and trust.

A key challenge arises when inclusive communication practices, in particular inclusive language, are misunderstood or are culturally diverse. Efforts to promote equity can sometimes be interpreted as a push for uniformity or as overlooking differences in cultures, roles, and responsibilities. In these situations, non-inclusive language or resistance to inclusive framing can create friction and complicate collaboration. Navigating these dynamics requires balancing respect for institutional contexts and cultures with a commitment to maintaining inclusive, evidence-based, and effective working relationships.



Ann Grace Akiteng, CPA, Program Coordinator, Creative Initiative for Enterprise Development, Uganda

Language use shapes relationships, perceptions, power balances, and ownership in agricultural enterprises like agribusiness and innovation. It is always affected by funder and community requirements and their perspectives. Creative Initiative for Enterprise Development is largely focused on restoration of degraded landscape and uses agribusiness as a sustainability tool to generate short term income. It is farmer-centred but responding to the market demands. It therefore calls for attention to language that puts the farmers at the forefront. Language choice is the powerhouse for mindset change, adoption, and uptake of technology and practice.



Darshika Prasadani Senadheera, Communication officer, Asia - Pacific association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), Sri Lanka

As a young professional, my day-to-day work highly depends on collaboration with different job roles and positions. Whether it is communication or technical work, effective communication with different stakeholders requires patience and clarity with the aim to reach mutual understanding. When I work like this, everyone feels respect, equity, and inclusion. However, one challenge is that some colleagues may feel overpowered with this as they may misinterpret equity with equality, which can sometimes create operational difficulties. On the other hand, partner-inclusive language encourages everyone to openly express ideas, solutions, and innovations without fear of losing recognition for their work. I believe applying partner-inclusive language in your work is a continuous process that needs setting aside personal ego and focusing on shared goals.



George N. Chidimbah Munthali, PhD., Mzuzu University, Malawi

The idea of inclusive language use resonates deeply with my academic and professional work in research for development, particularly in the areas of sustainable agriculture, rural livelihoods, and community development. Through my experience as a lecturer and researcher, I have observed how language can subtly shape relationships between researchers and communities, either reinforcing hierarchies or enabling genuine collaboration. I firmly believe that advancing partner-inclusive language is a critical step towards fostering equitable partnerships, enhancing mutual respect, and ensuring that local knowledge systems are appropriately recognised and valued.



Kafula Chisanga, PhD., Provincial Agricultural Research Coordinator, Zambia Agriculture Research Institute

As an agriculture researcher, I have seen that language significantly impacts the work I do by shaping the research environment, determining the quality of collaboration, and affecting the fairness of research findings. Inclusive language, such as the use of gender-neutral terms, person-first language, and avoiding stereotypes, has always fostered a supportive, innovative, and productive environment. On the other hand, exclusive language use has normally led to marginalising individuals or

farmers, thereby affecting the research quality and creating hostile environments to operate in. Farmers are not incorporative and as a researcher, one cannot get the desired information.



Mary Oloyede, Associate Professor (Horticulture/Plant Physiology), Osun State University, Nigeria.

On language barriers, information may need to be translated and brought to the farmers through audio, video, and in written format in a language that farmers are familiar with.



Rebeca Lozano, Language teacher, International School

Language and communication practices are shaped by cultural context; awareness of this diversity is fundamental to cultivating inclusive and respectful organisational environments. In many international organisations, communication practices are often implicitly shaped by dominant western cultural norms, where indirectness, hedging, and pragmatic softening are frequently privileged as markers of professionalism. Within this framework, employees who come from cultural backgrounds that value more direct and explicit modes of communication may be misinterpreted, and in some cases, socially or professionally marginalised. What is intended as clarity and efficiency in one communicative tradition can be perceived as abruptness or lack of interpersonal sensitivity in another. This risks reinforcing asymmetrical power relations, whereby certain discourse styles are legitimised while others are devalued. It is therefore essential that organisations adopt explicitly articulated, culturally responsive communication guidelines that recognise the legitimacy of diverse communicative repertoires. Such an approach can help prevent the formation of exclusionary communicative norms and instead promote a more inclusive, equitable, and genuinely intercultural professional environment.



Allison Grove Smith, Director, Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service, CGIAR

Changing language is powerful! How we talk about ourselves and our relationships forms and informs our world view. This work from GFAiR is important to create inclusion in how we speak and write, and thus, how we experience the world. The lexicon dovetails well with the Independent Science for Development Council's 2022-2024 publications on inclusive innovation.⁹

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This brief is part of the Equitable Partnership Brief Series designed for Agrifood Research and Innovation for Development. The series currently includes briefs on:

- Partnership Principles
- Applying Partnership Principles in Projects
- Assessing Partnership Principles in Projects
- Partner-Inclusive Language
- Case studies of applied Partnership Principles

We welcome collaborations to further co-develop these or other guides and case studies that can assist in more equitable partnerships in research and innovation.

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