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# International Development Buzzwords: Understanding Their Use Among Donors, NGOs, and Academics

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**ABSTRACT** *Scholars and practitioners of international development often note the use of ‘development buzzwords’: terms that represent hot topics in the field. Buzzwords characterise a development issue and imply elements of possible solutions. This article analyses the prevalence of these words in development discourse, asking who among donors, major nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), or academics adopts buzzwords earliest and uses them the most. We also analyse how these actors use buzzwords—whether buzzwords represent new ideas or essentially repackaged old concepts. The article compares the prevalence of buzzwords among three bodies of text published since 1990: social science journal articles on NGOs; World Bank annual reports; and the annual reports of BRAC, Save the Children, and World Vision. Using topic modelling and keyword searches, we trace how the terms ‘reproductive health,’ ‘gender,’ ‘participatory development,’ and ‘accountability’ ebbed and flowed over these literatures. We find suggestive evidence against ‘donor-driven development’: buzzwords appear first in academic literature and the annual reports of NGOs, followed by the World Bank. We also find evidence that international conferences and emergent health crises influence buzzword use. We conclude that buzzwords’ function and fates vary, with some losing priority, others losing substance, and yet others persisting as multivalent concepts.*

## 1. Introduction

For decades, scholars and practitioners of international development have focused considerable attention on the discourse of ‘development’ as a way of understanding the evolution of the field and the power relations within it. In 1981, Arndt examined the meaning of ‘economic development,’ and Heryanto analysed the ‘development of “development” ’ several years later (Arndt, 1981; Heryanto, 1988). In a series of influential publications in the mid-2000s, Cornwall, Eade, and colleagues critically explored the concept of development ‘buzzwords’ (Cornwall, 2007; Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Cornwall & Eade, 2010). Most recently, in the fall of 2018, prominent Oxfam development practitioner and London School of Economics professor Duncan Green sparked considerable attention by inviting readers of his blog and Twitter account to vote on which ‘awful Devspeak words’ they would most like to ban.<sup>1</sup> His blog noted that words the development community dislikes fall into categories: patronising or neo-colonial; designed to baffle; or previously meaningful, but made meaningless by overuse.

Recognising the power that words can have in development, we set out to understand the trajectories of some terms and phrases commonly understood as ‘buzzwords’ in development discourse. By buzzwords, we mean words or phrases that represent hot topics in development that

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ebb and flow over time. Buzzwords characterise the nature of a particular development issue and often imply elements of possible solutions. In this paper, we question who among donors, major nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and scholars uses buzzwords the most, who adopts them earliest, and *how* each group uses them. To do so, we use quantitative text analysis of a new corpus of 3,336 scholarly articles on NGOs in international development (Brass et al. 2018) and annual reports from the World Bank and three international NGOs (BRAC, Oxfam, World Vision) spanning 1990–2014. We assess whether buzzwords appear among donors and then spread to academics and NGOs as a rhetorical signal of donor-driven development, or whether their use first grows in academic literature, and then appears in development practice. We also analyse *how* these actors in the development community use buzzwords, questioning whether different actors use them in different ways, as well as whether they represent new ideas and approaches, the repackaging of old ideas, or strategic tools in the service of political agendas. The inclusion of the corpus of scholarly NGO articles in this analysis demonstrates the utility of the NGO Knowledge Collective, a data portal that brings together scholarship on NGOs spanning disciplines, time, and geography (Schnable et al. 2019).

Buzzwords' usage patterns matter for several reasons. As buzzwords capture the zeitgeist of a particular moment in development 'time,' reviewing their historical trajectory is an important approach for understanding when, why, and how priorities have shifted about development problems. Relatedly, buzzwords both reflect and drive the possible solutions to development problems. They can also signal dynamics of power in a development field, as influential actors indicate hegemonic approaches to development that weaker actors must adopt to demonstrate legitimacy. We discuss these different dimensions when presenting our framework for buzzwords.

We focus on four particular buzzwords: *reproductive health*, *gender*, *participatory development*, and *accountability*. These terms reflect four key areas in the development field and thus allow us to examine our research questions across sectors. They also capture different elements of the development process: while reproductive health and gender are topical, participatory development and accountability are approaches that cut across sectors. We find suggestive evidence that new development terminology appears first in academic literature and the annual reports of NGOs, followed by the World Bank. We also find that events such as international conferences and emergent health crises influence buzzword usage. We conclude that the function and fates of buzzwords vary, with some losing priority, others losing substance, and yet others persisting as concepts with distinct meanings for different actors.

### 1.1. A framework for buzzword use

We understand development buzzwords to be words or phrases that characterise the nature of a development issue and make suggestions about a solution. They thus tell us about priorities and structure action. A critical feature of buzzwords is their capaciousness, which presents opportunities to build consensus but also to de-radicalise (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Cornwall & Eade, 2010). While the phenomena they characterise might be centuries old (Ravallion, 2011), the words themselves are often new; buzzwords suggest *en vogue* ways of thinking. Buzzwords can thus galvanise attention for development problems by framing them in new and more productive ways that appeal to those with power and resources. Their use can also serve as a pathway to legitimacy for peripheral actors in the development field.

Like the 'essentially contested concepts' put forth by Gallie (1955; see also Collier, Hidalgo, & Maciuceanu, 2006), the power of buzzwords is that they suggest consensus on some abstract notion, but are vague enough to allow for several competing interpretations. As Ghaziani and Ventresca (2005, p. 524) note in their discussion of 'keywords,' these words are 'often mobilised by different groups of social actors for different purposes, whose meanings are contested during unsettled times ... [they] incorporate ambiguous and often competing ideas and are sites where global

meanings meet local, varied subcultural interpretations.’ By being ambiguous, buzzwords bring together many actors, across languages, contexts, and sectors to discuss complex topics.

This ambiguity can provide room for ‘working misunderstandings’ (Bowen, 1964: 178 as cited in Swidler & Watkins, 2017, p. 219, 278) – allowing development actors to agree nominally upon shared goals but pursue them in very different ways. Swidler and Watkins (2017) observed how donor concern about orphans, captured in the buzzword ‘orphans and vulnerable children,’ allowed local community based organisations a sufficiently broad mandate to pursue their preferred projects of economic support to poor children, not exclusively children whose parents had died. The capaciousness of the buzzword made space for agency by the local organisations to pursue objectives technically not covered by the mandate of their funding.

Buzzwords in this way are generative – they open space for creativity in imagining new programmes, or can give development practitioners a new vessel to reinvigorate interest in certain topics or practices. Bebbington, Guggenheim, Olson, and Woolcock (2004) describe how particular actors within the World Bank drew on the concept of social capital, popularised by Robert Putnam, as a strategic tool to better emphasise the relevance of social relations to achieving the Bank’s poverty reduction agenda. The capaciousness of the social capital concept allowed proponents to operationally define it in a way that took it from the networks outside and at the margins of the Bank into the organisation’s mainstream.

To some, the negotiation over meaning or the tolerance for buzzwords’ ambiguity is ripe for abuse. Cornwall (2007) and a number of the authors in the 2010 edited volume on buzzwords generally see the capaciousness of buzzwords being used for ill – to co-opt radical approaches, or to water-down conceptual and political debates into a thin consensus of ‘hurrah words’ (Chandhoke, 2010, p. 176). Buzzwords can become ‘fuzzwords’ – terms that mean everything and nothing, and thus threaten to slow development by making concepts difficult to operationalise and measure (Cornwall, 2007; Cornwall & Eade, 2010). While ‘working misunderstandings’ can allow actors to interpret terms flexibly to suit their needs, they can also obviate the need for compromise and complicate the achievement of accountability because the parties involved have different interpretations of the end goal.

As buzzwords become institutionalised, they can also be deployed to bring legitimacy to groups and ideas. Actors may use buzzwords to signal membership in the professional field of development (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Cornwall & Eade, 2010), while actors on the fringes of the development field may be able to gain legitimacy for creative ideas by packaging them with buzzwords. Buzzword use can thus be understood as an example of isomorphism, which may occur for normative or mimetic reasons, as organisational fields respond to useful ideas or evolving intellectual norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Some organisations, however, use buzzwords opportunistically, by appealing to donors’ favoured terms to gain resources (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Cornwall & Eade, 2010).

We argue that to assess the effects of buzzwords, we need to pay systematic attention to their patterns of adoption, routinisation, and fading. Such changes often occur around ‘critical junctures’ (Collier & Collier, 1991), or significant events that galvanise use of specific terms. For international development buzzwords, these include convenings, major publications with global reach, or system-wide shocks such as the end of the Cold War or the emergence of HIV. Slower-moving political or financial changes can also amplify or dampen term usage. Once popularised, in many cases path dependence keeps these terms in circulation. But buzzwords sometimes are replaced when more urgent or better-packaged problems arise and supersede earlier terms.

In this paper, we are most interested in how such trajectories of use vary across different sets of development actors. Are buzzwords concepts coined by scholars that spark new strategies among development actors, such as in the case of ‘social capital’? Or are they shibboleths that donors demand grant-seeking NGOs use to signal their legitimacy? A pattern of use first by donors and later by NGOs might indicate ‘donor-driven development’ – NGOs looking to donors

rather than the communities in which they work to set their agenda (Godfrey et al., 2002; Lewis, 2003; Morfit, 2011).

There are several reasons to think that development buzzwords originate in the donor discourse, including World Bank publications. The *World Development Report* is published each year on a specific theme that many would recognise as a buzzword, such as ‘sustainable development’ (World Bank, 2003), ‘equity’ (World Bank, 2006), ‘gender equality’ (World Bank, 2012b), and ‘digital dividends’ (World Bank, 2016). Furthermore, the vast majority (88%) of World Bank programmes now explicitly involve NGOs and other civil society organisations.<sup>2</sup> More generally, NGOs are highly dependent on external funding. As a result, NGOs seeking to be involved in World Bank programmes or wanting to renew their funding may adopt buzzwords or phrases to indicate their legitimacy in the field and to curry favour with their (potential) funders.

The use of buzzwords within published academic studies could hypothetically occur either after or before practitioners popularise the terms. On the one hand, academics often draw inspiration from what is happening in current events in the ‘real world.’ If that is true of academics who study international development issues, then we would expect the buzzwords to show up in academic articles with some lag behind donors like the World Bank or major international NGOs. On the other hand, buzzwords tend to be *concepts* rather than ‘objective’ phenomena. If we understand buzzwords as conceptual ways of framing behaviour or problems, or as strategic tools picked up by actors working within development organisations, it seems more likely that buzzwords would originate in academic work and diffuse into the discourse of practitioners.

There may even be a particularly tight coupling between academic literature and World Bank publications given the number of PhDs (most often economists) employed by the Bank. Babb (2009) argues that the World Bank is a crucial node where academic and political legitimacy overlap; ideas that become ‘accepted wisdom’ at the Bank can diffuse out both towards governments and towards academia. Indeed, James Wolfensohn made this role in ‘researching and disseminating the lessons of development’ a centrepiece of his presidency of the World Bank. He argued that the Bank should be the ‘Knowledge Bank’ (Wolfensohn 1996, as cited in Broad, 2010, p. 294). Researchers employed by the World Bank are promoted based on their publications in Bank venues and academic journals, and on their perceived influence on policies adopted by borrower countries, not on whether those policies improve the wellbeing of the people they affect (Broad, 2010).

We build on previous studies of buzzwords by assessing the organisational patterns of adoption for multiple actors over two and a half decades. We examine the following propositions: 1) NGO dependence on donors makes them likely to follow the World Bank in adopting buzzwords; 2) Academics precede development practitioners in their adoption of buzzwords, especially buzzwords that are more abstract; 3) there is a tight coupling between World Bank and academic usage of buzzwords.

### 1.2. A set of representative buzzwords

We selected four buzzwords, ‘reproductive health,’ ‘gender,’ ‘participatory development,’ and ‘accountability,’ for several reasons. First, they represent some of the most commonly written-about topics within published academic papers on NGOs and international development. Specifically, these buzzwords come from the top three sectors within the academic literature on NGOs and international development: governance, health, and gender (Brass, Longhofer, Robinson, & Schnable, 2018, p. 141). Second, these buzzwords reflect NGO work in the two main areas of development NGOs globally: service provision (reproductive health, gender) and democracy and empowerment promotion (gender, participatory development, and accountability).<sup>3</sup> Third, these concepts represent both programmatic topic areas (reproductive health, gender) and ways of thinking about how to implement and evaluate programmes (participatory development, accountability). Finally, they all represent big ideas to solve problems whose complexity challenges the translation of concepts into action. We briefly introduce these four terms and why we consider them to be buzzwords, and then discuss them further in the analysis.

*Reproductive health* implies that ‘people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce, and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so.’<sup>4</sup> There is widespread consensus that ‘reproductive health care’ includes access to contraception, cervical cancer screening, and testing for sexually transmitted infections and HIV. For many actors, reproductive health care by definition also includes access to safe abortion services, but because the term emerged out of United Nations (UN) deliberations, it cannot officially encompass access to safe abortion (McIntosh & Finkle, 1995). The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development institutionalised the term and made efforts towards achieving it a global norm (Eager, 2004; Robinson, 2015).

*Gender* refers to the socially constructed attributes differentiating boys and girls and men and women, which interact with biological sex but are not necessarily defined by it. ‘Gender’ and ‘development’ have been rhetorically and practically packaged in a number of ways since the 1970s. The first was ‘women in development,’ an approach first used in the 1970s that was akin to an ‘add women and stir’ solution to increasing the participation of women in development (Razavi & Miller, 1995). Next came ‘women and development,’ and then ‘gender and development’ in the 1980s, which embraced a deeper understanding of gender as a social construct that influenced the wellbeing of particularly women, but also men, and emphasised gender relations (Razavi & Miller, 1995; van Eerdewijk & Davids, 2014). Since the mid-1990s, a crucial part of gender and development has been the concept of ‘gender mainstreaming,’ a set of strategies and processes for bringing about gender equality by ensuring that *all* programmes and sectors address gender, as opposed to developing programmes targeting women in isolation.

For its proponents, *participatory development* means not only recognising the knowledge, skills, and interests of developing communities, and creating buy-in among those affected by the development process, but also empowering people more generally in society. The idea stems from the work of Paolo Freire in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s, which emphasised that the oppressed must take an active role in ameliorating their own lives (Freire, 1971). Robert Chambers popularised the concept in international development circles in the early 1980s, stressing that actors affected by development programmes should be active in, or ‘own,’ the decision making in those programmes. Chambers used the term ‘rapid rural appraisal,’ which morphed into ‘participatory rural appraisal’ by the 1990s (Chambers, 1981, 1983), and is sometimes referred to as ‘community-driven development’ at the local level.<sup>5</sup> Participatory development as an idea has grown beyond the local, rural level and is now considered *de rigueur* at the national level as well – efforts to achieve ‘aid effectiveness,’ for example, all call for ‘country ownership’ of development, rather than donor-driven development (OECD, 2008). ‘Participatory development’ was identified explicitly as a buzzword as early as 2007 (Leal, 2007).

Of the four buzzwords we discuss here, *accountability* probably has the most meanings that induce contestation (Fox, 2018). It is associated with transparency, social appropriateness, voice, and responsiveness. Accountability as a buzzword usually relates to the ‘proper’ use of resources by development actors, meaning transparent and, ideally, democratic (Wenar, 2011). Philanthropic actors likewise focus on demonstrating that charitable donations go towards those in need, rather than administrative overhead. The impact of such accountability on NGOs and other development actors has been to increase, sometimes overwhelmingly, reporting requirements. Specifically, NGOs often must file annual and sometimes quarterly reports documenting resource use, effectiveness, and efficacy (DeMattee, 2019; Gugerty & Karlan, 2018; Mayhew, 2005). Concerns have also risen about *to whom* development actors, especially NGOs, are accountable. NGOs may be downwardly accountable to the target communities they purport to serve, or upwardly accountable to the donors who fund their activities (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015; Ebrahim, 2003; Fox, 2018; Kilby, 2006; Putzel, 1998).

## 2. Data and methods

How and when are these buzzwords used by donors, NGOs, and scholars? We analyse these buzzwords in three sets of texts over the period 1990–2014: (1) the annual reports of the World Bank; (2) the annual reports from Save the Children, BRAC, and World Vision; and (3) academic articles on



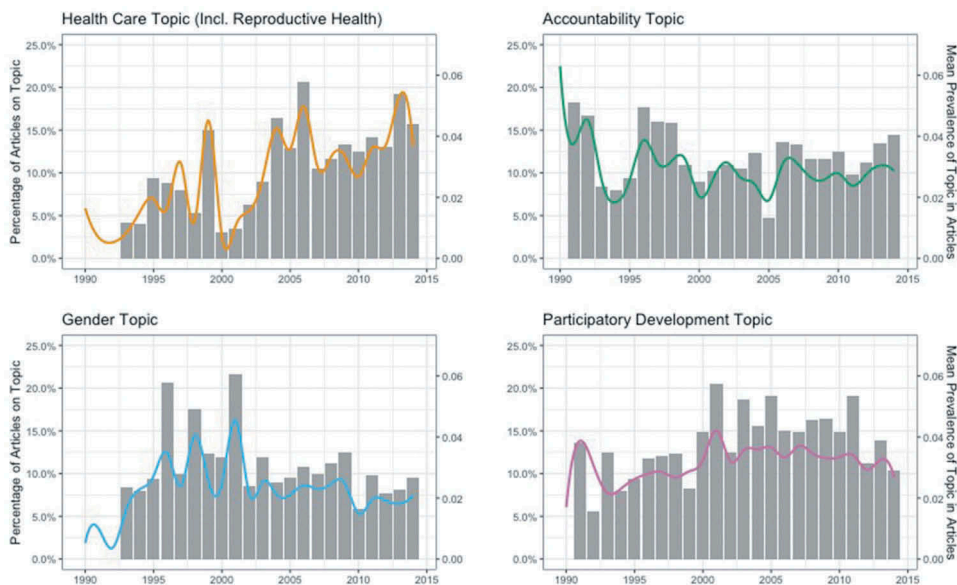
NGOs in international development. We chose to focus on the World Bank as it is the premier intergovernmental development organisation, with the largest portfolio and some of the greatest influence on development thinking and programmes. We sometimes refer to ‘donors’ rather than the World Bank specifically, given that studies have demonstrated that analysis of single-donor aid tends to generalise across donors (Briggs, 2019). We examine the Bank’s annual reports because they best reflect the donor’s year-to-year use of language (rather than the thematic World Development Reports). We chose Save the Children, BRAC, and World Vision as large international NGOs with global scope and varied countries of origin. We cannot claim that they are representative of international NGOs but believe they capture a diverse array of sectors and geographies. Annual reports are prime examples of the public discourse of the World Bank and these NGOs and describe at length each organisation’s programme areas and approach to development.

The third literature is 3,336 scholarly articles written in English on NGOs in international development from 1990 to 2014 as described in Brass et al. (2018). Although there are limitations to this set – it excludes the grey literature, articles published in journals not indexed by EBSCO, and pieces with poorly-worded titles or abstracts – it captures well the extent of academic thinking about NGOs (broadly defined) in international development over the past 25 years.

To conduct the textual analysis, we converted all reports and articles into text documents and removed common stopwords (e.g., ‘and,’ ‘what,’ ‘they’). We analysed keyword counts using the *quanteda* and *corpus* packages in R. All keyword counts are standardised per 10,000 words per corpus, per year. Note the relative frequencies for the World Bank and the NGOs are for each year’s annual report, while for the academic texts all of the articles in a given year are pooled. To contextualise source documents’ use of key terms, we also used the online text visualiser Voyant Tools to read the sentences surrounding where the keywords appear in the World Bank and NGO annual reports.

For the buzzword ‘reproductive health,’ our analyses below describe keyword frequencies for the word ‘reproductive.’ This approach allows us to capture instances of the phrase ‘reproductive health,’ as well as instances where the words ‘reproductive’ and ‘health’ aren’t immediately adjacent, as in the common phrase ‘reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health.’ We discuss below other contexts in which the word ‘reproductive’ occurred. We searched on the term ‘gender\*’ which allowed us to find instances of ‘genders’ or ‘gendered’ in the text. We discuss the phrases in which this term is used (for example, gender and development, gender mainstreaming) in each set of texts. For the buzzword ‘accountability,’ we combine keyword frequencies for the terms ‘accountable’ and ‘accountability.’ For ‘participatory development,’ we searched for only the term ‘participatory’ to capture the common phrase ‘participatory approach,’ and because the terms ‘participant’ and ‘participation’ are used frequently in the utilitarian sense of the number of participants in an NGO programme. Where we discuss other keywords by comparison below, we explain the exact syntax of our search. In all cases, the search terms reflect our best judgement about the terms that convey the development trends of interest.

Because the academic literature was too large to look at keywords in context for each document, we also analysed it using topic models (details are available in Supplementary Materials). Topic modelling is a machine learning technique that detects where words disproportionately occur together in documents. We used the Structural Topic Model package in R (Roberts, Stewart, & Tingley, 2014). Topic models produce both topics – lists of words that occur in documents together at rates greater than would be expected by chance – and a breakdown of how much each document is composed of each topic. For instance, the article ‘Dimensions, Manifestations, and Perceptions of Gender Equity: The Experiences of Gram Vikas’ (Jayapadma, 2009) is comprised 33 per cent of the ‘gender’ topic, 11 per cent of the ‘participatory and community development’ topic, 10 per cent of the ‘staff and volunteers’ topic, and so on. Using topic modelling allows us to ‘zoom out’ on the buzzwords to see how the use of similar terms waxed and waned in the academic corpus over time. When we discuss the most common terms in a topic, we refer to ‘FREX terms,’ those most likely to appear in the topic but unlikely to appear in other topics. (The Supplementary Materials contain lists of the terms comprising each topic). Each of our buzzwords appears in only one topic.



**Figure 1.** Prevalence of topics within the academic literature on NGOs.

Figure 1 shows the results from the topic modelling for the four buzzwords in the academic literature. The left Y-axis shows the percentage of articles in which each topic appeared in each year. We define a topic as being present in an article if a reader of that article would identify the article to be at least in part about that topic. Following DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei (2013), we examined a number of prevalence thresholds and determined that 7 per cent was an appropriate minimum prevalence for a topic to be discernible to a reader. Figure 1 thus reports the percentage of articles in each year for which a topic was prevalent at 7 per cent or higher. As a robustness check, we also analysed the mean prevalence of a topic in each year, and no substantive differences in the patterns appear; this measure appears on the right Y-axis of Figure 1.

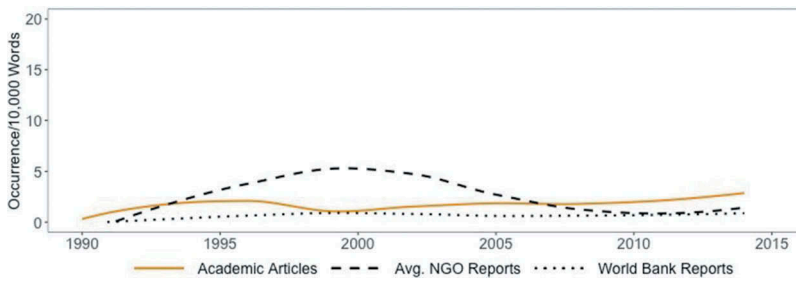
Figures in our findings section show loess-smoothed plots for the occurrence per 10,000 words in each year for buzzword terms across the three sources of text (World Bank annual reports, annual reports of Save the Children, BRAC, and World Vision, and the academic articles), which we present in conjunction with discussion of how the texts used the term. We are particularly interested in comparing *when* donors, NGOs, and scholars started using particular buzzwords, and how usage frequency changed over time.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Reproductive Health

Figure 2 shows the use of ‘reproductive health,’ beginning with low, but growing levels in the early 1990s. Academics adopted the term first, and the World Bank and NGOs followed, with NGOs making a more dramatic increase than the Bank. Across actors, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo marked a shift in the term’s use (Eager, 2004; Robinson, 2015). Hosted by the UN and the third in a series of decadal conferences about population, the Cairo conference’s animating idea was that women’s full participation in socioeconomic life, made possible through contraception, was the key to achieving socioeconomic development. Embracing the concept of ‘reproductive health’ spanned participants’ different goals of lowering population growth, promoting women’s rights, and increasing socioeconomic development, and thus served as a compromise





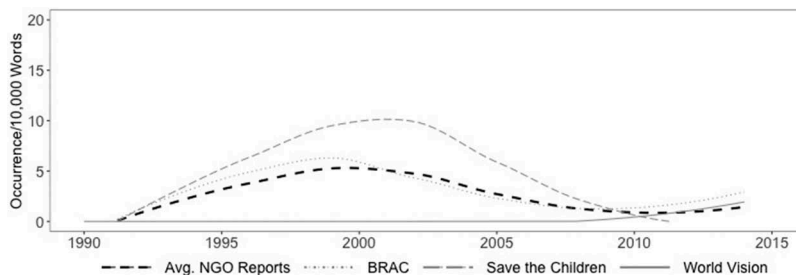
**Figure 2.** Prevalence of ‘reproductive health’ across the academic, NGO, and World Bank literatures.

between women’s rights advocates as well as neo-Malthusian population controllers (Hodgson & Watkins, 1997). Following the conference, international and domestic organisations began to use ‘reproductive health’ in place of ‘family planning.’ While some understood and embraced the fact that reproductive health was a broader concept than family planning, many practitioners and policy-makers just substituted the new term for the old. Interviews with individuals designing and implementing reproductive health programmes after the conference indicated that many practitioners did not understand the term in principle or in practice (Hardee et al., 1998; Luke & Watkins, 2002).

Throughout the observation period, the World Bank infrequently mentioned reproductive health, although usage of the term ‘reproductive’ increased after Cairo until 2000. Prior to the conference, Bank reports from the early 1990s used the term to refer mostly to rates of contraceptive use, but in 1994 the report said that ‘Population programs must meet a wide range of the reproductive health needs of women and men’ (38). By the late 1990s, however, the Bank folded reproductive health in with discussions of ‘maternal and child health’ or ‘reproductive and child health.’ And by 1997, references to the HIV/AIDS epidemic had eclipsed those to reproductive health.

The reports of the NGOs, BRAC and Save the Children, meanwhile, reflect the greatest ‘buzz’ around reproductive health (Figure 3). For these two NGOs, programmes featuring reproductive health first expanded but then later contracted. Immediately after the Cairo conference, BRAC created a Reproductive Health and Disease programme to target members of its village organisations. In the next decade, reproductive health also appeared in BRAC’s programmes for teen girls and its nutrition facilitation programme. But by the mid-2000s, BRAC folded reproductive health into the discussion of maternal, neonatal, and child health, as BRAC integrated it with broader and more advanced systems of health care delivery in Bangladesh (2010, pp. 9–11, 36–37).

Save the Children also responded to the Cairo conference but framed that response in terms of its own institutional commitment to children:



**Figure 3.** Prevalence of ‘reproductive health’ across the three NGOs.

While Save the Children has worked in the field of reproductive health and family planning within the health sector for more than 20 years, this year there has been a renewed emphasis on meeting women's and men's reproductive health goals. The reason: Increasing the spacing between children to at least 24 months will reduce their risk of dying by 50 per cent. (Save the Children, 1995, p. 14)

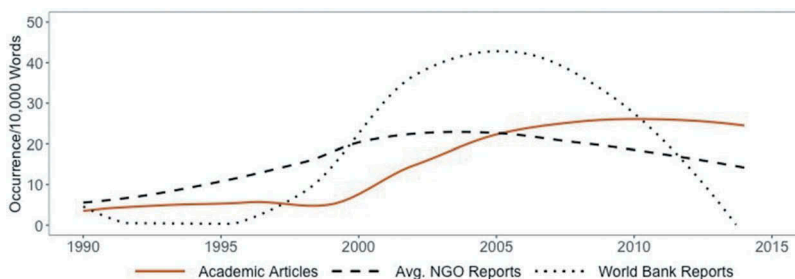
In contrast, World Vision very rarely used 'reproductive' during the entire observation period, perhaps because of the organisation's evangelical roots. When a discussion of reproductive health did occur, in the 2010s, the report referenced it relative to organisational goals for children: early marriage was likely to result in harms to reproductive health for girls (2012, p. 47).

In the academic literature, international events seem to have strongly shaped the use of 'reproductive health.' 'Reproductive' did not appear in the academic articles on NGOs until 1991 when articles begin discussing the World Health Organisation's definition of reproductive health and the shift it represented away from direct management of population size, presaging the larger conversation at the Cairo conference three years later. Articles studying NGO work in the following decades showed how the reproductive health perspective was (often imperfectly) implemented in developing countries.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) shaped references to reproductive issues after 2000. Articles in the 2000s tended to analyse efforts to offer reproductive health services in integrated ways, often through the training of community health workers or skilled birth attendants. However, articles' focus was often on maternal mortality – the goal under which reproductive health ultimately fell after its initial omission from the MDGs (Crossette, 2005).

The topic model information shown in Figure 1 above provides further evidence that reproductive health has been a relatively minor part of the scholarly analysis. Unlike accountability, participation, and gender, which have their own clearly defined topics, the term 'reproductive' appears as part of a broader 'health care' topic, which has increased in overall prevalence since 1990.

The decline of the reproductive health buzzword is attributable mainly to the rise of HIV, which parallels broader trends in the development and global health fields (Robinson, 2017). As Figure 4 shows, discussion of HIV/AIDS climbed dramatically in the academic literature in the early 2000s and then continued to grow, at a much slower rate, in the following years. The study of HIV became a major field of inquiry among academics that persisted into the 2010s, even as rates of new infection stabilised and then declined. The trends in usage of 'HIV' in the academic literature parallel the trends in global funding for HIV (Kates, Wexler, & Lief, 2018, Figure 1). By the end of the observation period, the term 'HIV' appeared seven times more frequently in academic articles than 'reproductive.' In World Bank reports, mentions of HIV grew 10-fold between 1998 and 2002, and then gradually decreased to fewer than 5 occurrences per 10,000 words by 2012. Compared to academics and the World Bank, NGOs referenced HIV/AIDS more frequently in the 1990s and steadily increased usage for over a decade, likely reflecting the realities observed on the ground in the countries in which they worked. The declines in usage of HIV/AIDS across all three literatures, but



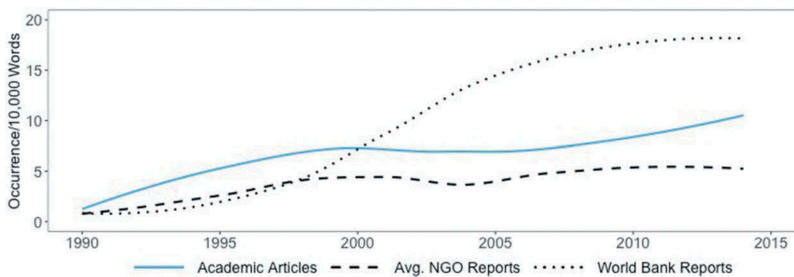
**Figure 4.** Prevalence of 'HIV/AIDS' across the academic, NGO, and World Bank literatures.

particularly the World Bank and the NGOs, suggest the rise of other development priorities. Although new priorities may be warranted, they compete with the needs of more than 35 million people still living with HIV/AIDS in 2017, and detract from the nearly two million new infections each year (UNAIDS, 2018).

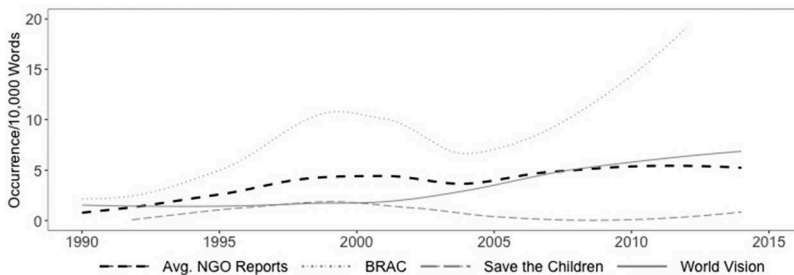
### 3.2. Gender

Academics, the World Bank, and NGOs all began the 1990s with relatively low use of the term ‘gender,’ but increased usage at different rates and to different levels (Figure 5). Academics and NGOs, and in particular BRAC, first increased their use of ‘gender’ in the early 1990s, followed by the World Bank’s dramatic increase in its use during the late 1990s. ‘Gender’ was 20 times as frequent in World Bank reports in 2005 as in 1995. Both academics and NGOs continued to increase the use of ‘gender’ following a plateau (academics), a dip (BRAC), and uptick (World Vision) in the early 2000s, while the World Bank ultimately plateaued at the same high rate of usage as BRAC.

Two things happened in the mid-1990s that may have affected the use of the gender buzzword. First, the 1994 World Bank annual report describes the pivot from a ‘women in development’ strategy to a ‘gender and development’ approach; in short, moving from simply targeting women with projects to integrating an analysis of gender roles and dynamics into programme design (World Bank, 1994, p. 37). Second, the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995 institutionalised ‘gender mainstreaming’ (True & Mintrom, 2001). The Bank’s reports after this point show increasing attention to measuring gender and to integrating gender analysis into new corners of the Bank’s work. By 2000, gender was a cross-cutting theme of Bank projects, alongside education, the environment, and governance. References to gender by the Bank often appeared as part of a named category like ‘Social Development, Gender, and Inclusion.’ The Bank used ‘gender’ more often than the more concrete terms ‘women’ or ‘girls.’



**Figure 5.** Prevalence of ‘gender’ across the academic, NGO, and World Bank literatures.



**Figure 6.** Prevalence of ‘gender’ across the three NGOs.

The MDGs' explicit focus on gender also shaped the Bank's use of the term from the mid-2000s onwards. While the gender and development approach of the 1990s made gender equality a means to development, the MDGs made gender equality a goal in itself. This culminated in the Bank's 2012 *World Development Report*, which focused specifically on gender equality (World Bank, 2012b): 'The main message of the Report is that gender equality is both a core development objective in its own right as well as smart economics – enhancing productivity and improving prospects for the next generation' (World Bank, 2012a, p. 2). The Bank's use of 'gender' arguably took on the quality of a 'fuzzword,' as Cornwall characterises it: a concept that can be broadly stretched, used in this case to describe both development means and ends. This usage aligns with arguments for investing in women on efficiency grounds (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009), which scholars have criticised as a 'feminisation of responsibility' for curing poverty that comes at the expense of promoting women's rights (Chant, 2016, p. 3).

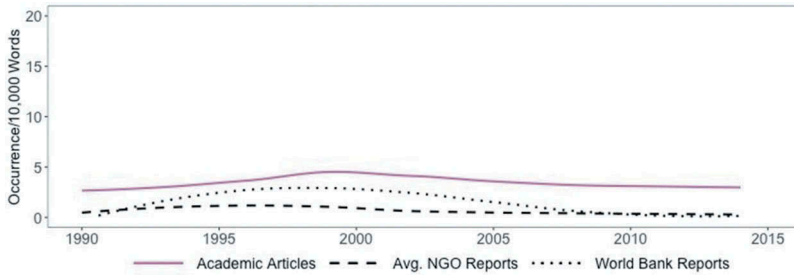
Use of the gender buzzword varied among NGOs (Figure 6). Save the Children and World Vision rarely used 'gender.' World Vision mainly used the term in its non-discrimination statements until 2010, and one of Save the Children's few uses of 'gender' was in 2000, but only in reference to a USAID grant for 'gender sensitive' programmes (Save the Children, 2000, p. 6).

BRAC's discussion of gender, like that of the Bank, shows more evolution over time and more closely reflects international events. BRAC steadily increased its usage of the term from the early 1990s through 1999 in the years surrounding the Beijing conference, followed by a modest decline until 2004, and then an increase from 2004–2014. In the early 1990s, BRAC discussed gender with reference to gender equity within the NGO's management. By 1997, BRAC added promoting gender equity in society more broadly to its mission statement. The chairman of BRAC took a strong normative position on gender equity in the organisation's 2011 report, describing gender not merely as a 'theme' in development or one of many goals, but as a central issue of justice:

I strongly believe that gender equality remains the greatest unfinished agenda not only of my life's work but of our time ... I consider the subjugation of half of the world's population to be the greatest injustice in the history of humankind. In order to right this wrong, we must fight patriarchy in all of its manifestations, and I hope that BRAC and all of us who are associated with it will continue to be at the forefront of this fight. (BRAC, 2011, p. 3)

Academic articles on NGOs in international development, like the annual reports of the World Bank and NGOs, devoted increasing attention to gender in the 1990s. Academic discussion of gender steadily increased and was more prevalent than that of the World Bank or the NGOs until the early 2000s. But while the Bank and BRAC's attention to gender continued to rise until the mid-2010s, the academic literature's use of gender peaked in the early 2000s, then waned before a small uptick in the 2010s. In the topic model of the academic literature (Figure 1), the topic in which gender appears shows the same shape: increasing to a peak in 2001, and then gradually declining, suggesting that within academic work on NGOs, the overall theme of gender and not just the term itself rose and then declined in significance.

Academic articles also responded to international events. Articles from the early 1990s that included the 'gender' topic often referred to 'women's NGOs' and the paradigm of 'women in development.' Despite its institutionalisation at the 1995 Beijing conference, the phrase 'gender mainstreaming' did not appear in the academic articles until 2001. Notably, articles that used this phrase were typically case studies of particular NGOs, often co-authored by NGO employees or development consultants. While some academic articles in the 2010s measured gender equality in the ways motivated by the MDGs and preferred by donors and NGOs, other discussions focused on the interaction of gender with other development issues including violence, HIV/AIDS, democratisation, and empowerment.



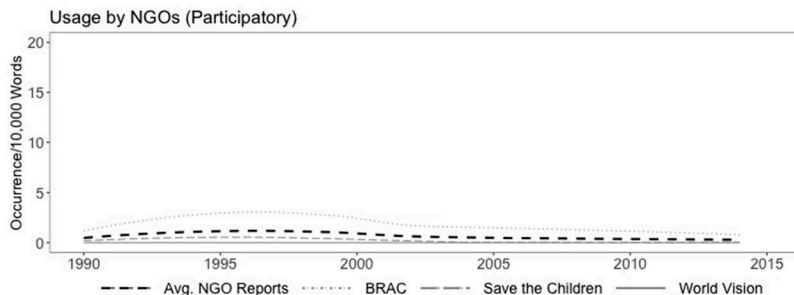
**Figure 7.** Prevalence of ‘participatory’ across the academic, NGO, and World Bank literatures.

### 3.3. Participatory development

There was little variation across groups in the usage of ‘participatory,’ with a slight uptick in usage across publications in the late 1990s and then low, steady usage for the rest of the period (Figure 7).

At the beginning of the observation period, academic use was highest, with NGOs and the Bank near zero. This pattern soon shifted as the term ‘participatory’ grew eight-fold in the World Bank reports between 1991 and 1996. The reports of the early 1990s occasionally mentioned involving NGOs and other actors in participatory processes, but in 1994, the Bank gave new emphasis to participatory development with a major internal report on the issue and a new 300,000 USD participation fund (World Bank, 1994, p. 37). The Bank argued that greater citizen participation in development projects would yield better results.<sup>6</sup> Summaries of Bank-funded projects in the late 1990s usually included a heading on the project’s ‘participatory approach.’ The Bank backed away from participation and used the term with decreasing frequency beginning in 1996. From the mid-2000s onward, the term rarely appeared, although reports invoked vaguely similar concepts, such as ‘country ownership’ and ‘partnership.’ By the mid-2000s, the term ‘participatory approach’ had nearly disappeared, as concerns grew regarding elite capture of these programmes (Platteau, 2004; Zerah, 2009). Mansuri and Rao’s (2013) seminal report, *Localising Development: Does Participation Work?*, echoed this trend, finding limited effect of top-down, induced participation on development outcomes. But as the phrase ‘participatory’ waned, the use of ‘civil society organisations’ increased (Brass et al., 2018), hinting that including certain kinds of organisations in meetings or projects replaced a commitment to participation by citizens in projects.

Although NGOs’ links to civil society and grassroots suggest that ‘participatory’ would be common in their reports, this is not the case (Figure 8). The term ‘participatory’ did not appear in any World Vision annual report. Save the Children used the two-word phrase ‘participatory development’ only three times over 25 years, and in those instances it was in reference to techniques used by an alliance of NGOs to which it belonged. But BRAC, a southern NGO that derives most of its funds from member contributions and earned income, used the term more robustly. Early BRAC



**Figure 8.** Prevalence of ‘participatory’ across the three NGOs.

reports referred to ‘participatory’ mainly as an approach to teaching and training, in contrast to rote methods. The phrase ‘participatory development’ or ‘participatory approach’ still occurred much more rarely than in World Bank reports, and BRAC never described participation as the solution to effective development. But over time, BRAC reports presented more concrete sites for participation: participatory research for seed varieties; a course in participatory evaluation; and participatory wealth ranking in villages, to prioritise recipients of programming. By the 2010s, ‘participatory’ became a feature of local governance to be cultivated through BRAC’s advocacy.

Academic use of the term ‘participatory’ was anything but fuzzy in the early 1990s. Discussions of ‘grassroots development’ or ‘sustainable development’ frequently referred to ‘participatory’ strategies and authors paid careful attention to the nature and the role of participation in these visions of development. Academic literature used the concept in multiple, specific ways to analyse the nature of NGOs and their relationships with other actors. The topic models (Figure 1) show that the overall attention to the theme of participatory and community development in academic articles trends with the rise and fall of the term ‘participatory’; rising and peaking around 2000, with a small and gradual decline afterwards.

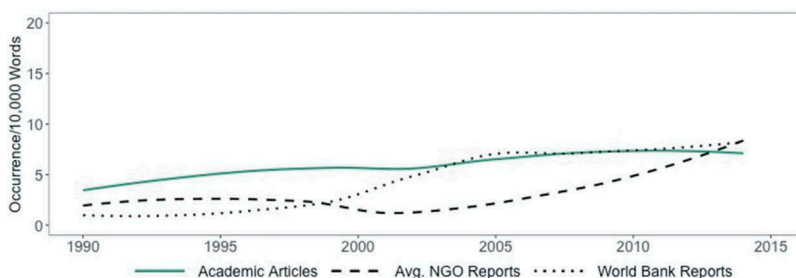
Additionally, a voice quite critical of participatory approaches grew in the academic literature. While participatory development ‘can succeed for specific kinds of projects and programmes in favourable circumstances’ (Brett, 2003, p. 1), critics accused NGOs, donors, and other outsider actors of ‘performing’ participation or partnership (Mercer, 2003) rather than seeking to implement the truly ‘transformative participation’ that would result in empowered communities and individuals (White, 1996). These critics also noted that NGOs’ participatory mechanisms might also unintentionally reinforce structures of domination, denying the powerless and marginalised a voice in the process (Mercelis, Wellens, & Jegers, 2016).

### 3.4. Accountability

The buzzword ‘accountability’ was dynamic in the 1990s and 2000s, with its rate and context of use changing meaningfully over 25 years across the three types of organisational documents (Figure 9). Academic articles used the term most frequently at the start of the observation period, with the World Bank first and then NGOs later increasing their use of the term to ultimately meet academic usage.

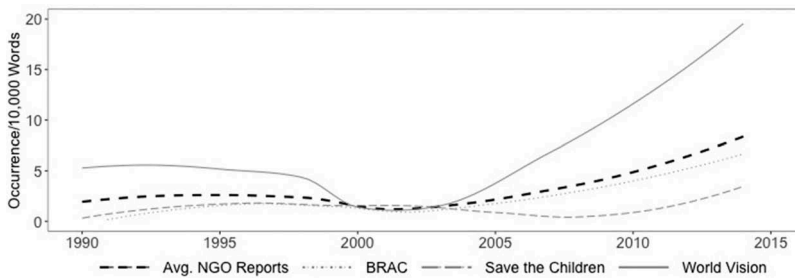
The World Bank used ‘accountability’ in the first half of the observation period to refer to internal principles of probity, but shifted its use of the word towards discussions of demonstrated effectiveness in an organisation’s projects. International events also influenced use of the term. The language of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness flashed into the Bank’s discourse of accountability between 2005–2009, when reports discussed ‘mutual accountability’ between donors and aid-receiving governments, before that phrase disappeared from reports.

Like the World Bank, all three NGOs used the term ‘accountability’ in the 1990s and early 2000s to refer to the integrity or probity of the organisation. To be ‘accountable’ meant to demonstrate that the organisation had handled its finances without waste or corruption. This meaning emerged initially



**Figure 9.** Prevalence of ‘accountability’ across the academic, NGO, and World Bank literatures.





**Figure 10.** Prevalence of 'accountability' across the three NGOs.

in the post-Cold War era when Western donors in particular became bolder in identifying and denouncing corruption (Brass, 2016).

As time went on, all of the NGOs focused more on *to whom* the NGO was accountable: donors, beneficiaries, the public, or, in the case of evangelical Christian World Vision, God (King, 2019). World Vision and BRAC increased mentions of accountability over time, while Save the Children's references were more sporadic, including a spike in the late 1990s after a national scandal over its mismanagement of child sponsorship (Figure 10). Much of World Vision's growing attention to accountability came in the form of their 'citizen voice and action' model, a social accountability tool for improving public service delivery, first used in 2005 (World Vision, 2012). BRAC used accountability in another sense: as an external democratic goal. Specifically, BRAC referred to accountability in the late 2000s and onward as a desirable feature of local governance that it attempted to cultivate. The 2012 report described training members about the Bangladeshi Right to Information Act and how to measure plots of land – information that would allow citizens to hold local governments accountable.

Academic discussion of accountability incrementally increased between 1990 and 2014. The topic (Figure 1) was also particularly dynamic in the 1990s. Writers conceptualised accountability in many ways in the academic literature early in the 1990s, anticipating ways that the Bank and NGOs themselves would use the concept later on. First, scholars used it in the sense of managerial excellence and 'demonstrated probity.' But other articles used accountability in a second way, democratic accountability, to describe the role of NGOs vis-à-vis the state. Discussing accountability in this manner drew on the political science perspective on NGOs as part of civil society and a bulwark against the state. In these instances, authors portrayed NGOs as catalysts for greater accountability between government and citizens. This sense of 'accountability' persisted through the quarter-century of academic articles. In contrast, NGOs did not use the term in the same way – BRAC didn't begin using 'accountability' in this sense until the 2010s, and Save the Children and World Vision never did.

A third sense of 'accountability' emerged in the interim. Academic articles on NGOs began to discuss the term the same as the World Bank began to use it in the mid-1990s: as an organisation's responsibility to demonstrate not just financial integrity but broader efficiency and effectiveness in its work. These discussions minimised the importance of 'outputs' and focused more on processes and 'outcomes,' thereby broadening the standards by which to evaluate NGOs.

#### 4. Discussion

There are three points to take away from the analysis about the relative timing and levels of usage of buzzwords across donors, NGOs, and academics. First, there is little evidence here supporting the argument that donors drive the development rhetoric of NGOs. The NGOs we examine here do not seem to follow the World Bank's lead. Only in the use of the term 'accountability' do the NGOs lag behind and then accelerate in their use of the buzzword to catch the World Bank. This finding pushes back against the popular perception of cash-strapped organisations reverse-engineering their

programming around the whims of donors, suggesting that at least the large, international NGOs we examined retained independence from one of the most significant donors.<sup>7</sup> Yet we note the limits of this finding: we cannot rule out that internal documents for the Bank might adopt buzzwords sooner, and that it takes more time for them to filter into annual reports, once the Bank has ‘proof of concept.’ Evidence of donor influence might also exist in funding lines or requests for proposals structured around development ‘fads.’ Future research might also give greater attention to pairwise donor-NGO relationships and patterns of discourse.

Second, the academic literature is more likely to lead the World Bank in the adoption of buzzwords than vice versa. The academic literature had higher rates of each buzzword at the beginning of the observation period and maintained that leadership role for at least a decade. In every case, the World Bank later increased its use of the buzzword and in some cases surpassed the use rates of academic articles on NGOs in international development. The story of the term ‘participatory’ is particularly revealing. Debates abounded in the academic literature, and the Bank adopted and then abandoned the term, but the NGOs basically never used it. One possible interpretation for this pattern is that the concept was a taken-for-granted part of the NGOs’ work that did not require explicit statement. Furthermore, as these are large NGOs, they did not need to use the buzzword to gain legitimacy.

Third, we find that the coupling between academic and World Bank usage of buzzwords is strongest for ‘reproductive’ and ‘participatory.’ In the case of ‘gender,’ the Bank developed its own application of the term, as both an ends and a means of development, which then led to a far greater rate of usage than among academics. In contrast, academics used the term ‘accountability’ much more frequently through the 1990s, with the Bank only achieving comparable levels from the early 2000s onwards. This particular pattern suggests parallels with the Bank’s adoption of the concept of ‘social capital,’ which came following interactions between senior staff and political scientist Robert Putnam, with those staff then using the term strategically to better incorporate social relations into the Bank’s agenda (Bebbington et al. 2004).

## 5. Conclusion

Finally, we offer several broader conclusions about the fates and functions of buzzwords. External events and other critical junctures – major international agreements and crises – are crucially important in the life cycle of some buzzwords. The analysis showed an effect of the Cairo conference on the concept of reproductive health and the Beijing conference and MDGs on gender. We interjected with an analysis of the term ‘HIV/AIDS’ to demonstrate how a development ‘emergency’ led to the eclipse of a buzzword (reproductive health) in a far more dramatic way than did other intellectual currents. The apparent absence of a relationship between critical junctures and the buzzwords ‘participatory’ and ‘accountability’ suggests that these more complex terms about how to implement and evaluate programmes invited greater discussion and debate, thus buffering them from momentary crises.

We also note the steady usage of some buzzwords and believe normalisation and continuation of development concepts can create path dependencies. Specifically, donors, NGOs, and academics ultimately used both ‘gender’ and ‘accountability’ at higher rates than at the beginning of the time period examined, suggesting these terms may have, at least for now, entered a more fixed part of the development lexicon.

We also provide evidence that not all buzzwords are as buzzy as popular dialogue suggests, nor do they seem to have the same function. ‘Reproductive health’ might be viewed as a buzzword that failed, but also one that facilitated ‘working misunderstandings’. Practitioners coined the term strategically with hopes of gaining support from diverse stakeholders for new, progressive norms on health policy related to sex and reproduction. Yet its momentum among academics, the World Bank, and NGOs was halted as the HIV/AIDS crisis demanded attention and resources, and as organisations used it as a synonym for ‘family planning’ without the progressive connotations. The buzzword ‘gender’ for a time allowed old ideas (from ‘women in development’) to gain new traction.

It later became something more like a fuzzword, at least at the World Bank, where it was appended onto a number of themes in the Bank's work.

However, some buzzwords do not become 'fuzzwords' – they remain something like contested concepts whose separate meanings can be discerned. The term 'participatory' did not seem to have a discernible 'moment in the sun' among NGOs before setting. But the term had multiple, unambiguous meanings among academics and in the World Bank, in some cases suggesting a process and in other cases suggesting a goal. Similarly, 'accountability' had three broad meanings from 1990 to 2015: as the obligation of a development agency to manage resources with integrity; as the ability of NGOs to demand responsiveness from the state; and as the obligation of NGOs to deliver development results. In the case of these multivalent concepts, the multiple meanings seem to emerge first in the academic literature and migrate out towards the World Bank and NGOs. Over time, NGOs and the World Bank came to adopt the definitions of the term that were most advantageous to their overall agendas – for the World Bank, an obligation for development actors to show results, and for NGOs, the obligations of the state towards the public.

The different fates and functions of buzzwords suggest that 'buzz' itself should not be grounds for critique. Instead, when a term reaches buzzword status, it suggests that donor organisations, NGOs, and academics should all be assessing whether development interventions are actually improving the wellbeing of those in the buzzword's sphere.

## Notes

1. <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/which-awful-devspeak-words-should-we-ban-your-chance-to-vote/>
2. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/civil-society#2>
3. In addition to development work, many NGOs provide humanitarian relief following natural or human-made disasters.
4. <https://www.unfpa.org/sexual-reproductive-health>
5. Note that the World Bank uses the term, but in its own way (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/communitydrivendevelopment>).
6. In their linguistic analysis of the Bank's annual reports, Moretti and Pestre (2015) note an increase in the word 'partnership' after the mid-1990s.
7. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this language.

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