The language of change: rethinking development from the ground up

Terms such as “sustainability” have become somewhat of a buzzword within the development space, eventually shaping policy and practice. But what happens to the words and concepts that emerge from local communities, spoken in local languages? What do we lose when we prioritise universal terminology over context-specific language? And what might we gain if we let local concepts inform the global development lexicon? These are some of the questions I reflected on during my fieldwork days in Triangulo y Manantial, a neighbourhood in Bogota, Colombia resisting state eviction and environmental injustice. My exploration led me to the concept of **minga**, an Andean Indigenous traditions. It prompted me to reflect on how knowledge, language, and power intersect in development processes.

Minga is a community-driven process of collective transformation aimed at improving quality of life through shared planning, action, and evaluation. Historically, the *minga* has enabled communities to build essential infrastructure such as roads, schools, and churches especially in areas neglected by the state . In contexts like Colombia, where the state has historically marginalized indigenous populations and “where institutionalism has shown its absence, the *minga* has been present as an effective and efficient model of well-being and development” (Obando, 2017).

I first heard the term during a transect walk around the neighbourhood led by Hector, a community leader. Initially my assumption was that this indigenous term would be oft repeated by residents during our interviews. To my surprise, it came up just once and only after my peer and I brought up the concept during the interview. This left me puzzled. However, by the fifth day of fieldwork and after dozens of interviews and discussions with local interns and development practitioners, I came to understand the complex nature of enacting local concepts against state marginalization and broader capitalist forces at play.

Later, when I spoke to Tatiana Ome, a researcher at DPU, I learnt that the residents of Truangulo y Manantial were a mix of families from rural and urban backgrounds. Those families from a rural background were more likely to be familiar with terms such as *minga*, both as a concept and as a social indigenous practices rooted in reciprocity, collective labour and mutual care. Meanwhile, those from a poorer urban background were unlikely to be familiar with the term even if they had participated in communal practices of some form. As we continued our fieldwork, it became clear that *minga* even when unnamed continued to animate local conversations. This reminded me of polyculture, a regenerative method of farming, in which multiple different plant species grow together in mutually supportive relationships that enriches the ecosystem (Fiolhais 2023). In contrast to monoculture, polyculture fosters social, political and ecological restoration. The adoption of indigenous concepts, whether through terminology or practice can also be seen as a form of resistance to the one-size-fits-all models often imposed by

dominant development frameworks. For me, the coexistence of these diverse experiences and cultural memories within the territory pointed to critical insights from political ecology.

It reminded me that language is never neutral. It is well known that developmental institutions operate on universalising frameworks with a tendency to flatten difference and obscure alternative ways of knowing (Escobar 1995). Within this context, *minga* is not simply a term. It embodies a system of values grounded in reciprocity, solidarity, and shared responsibility. These are principles that rarely appear in technocratic development frameworks, which tend to value efficiency and measurable outcomes. Moreover, from a complexity theory perspective, this difference is not just semantic; it reflects fundamentally different worldviews. Complexity theory argues that social systems are adaptive, non-linear, and emergent, constantly evolving through feedback loops and collective agency. *Minga*, in this light, is part of an emergent repertoire of practices that help communities respond to marginalisation, negotiate precarities, and regenerate through mutual aid. It is not a relic of the past, but a living and dynamic system that continually reorganises itself in response to shifting conditions.

I was also reminded that terminologies that encapsulate alternative epistemologies and resilience to systemic exclusion are not unique to the Andes. Around the world, similar concepts articulate communal labour and relational ontologies: *Ubuntu* in Southern Africa, a value system which affirms the interconnectedness of individuals with their surroundings. *Bayanihan* in the Philippines, where communities come together to carry physical and social burdens; *Gotong Royong* in Indonesia, a form of mutual cooperation deeply tied to local governance and rural life. More closer to home in the UK is the idea of *commoning*. Commons are not simply “resources used or governed by groups of heterogeneous users through agreed-upon institutional arrangements” but also involves the social practices, relationships and values that sustains those commons (Kashwan et al. 2021, Agrawal, 2023). Minga can be argued to be a form of *commoning* rooted in mutual care and collective obligation. Coming across the term *minga* also helped me to critically reflect on terms I was familiar with. Replacing minga with “volunteering,” for example, which can be considered transactional and individualised, strips the concept of its embedded obligations, spiritual underpinnings, and cultural significance.

Viewed through the lens of panarchy, these aforementioned practices demonstrate how communities adapt across scales and cycles navigating growth, collapse, renewal, and reorganization (Holling, 2021). *Minga*, *ubuntu*, *gotong yoyong*, and *bayanihan* are part of the adaptive capacity that allows communities to persist under pressure while transforming in the process. Indeed, Escobar (1995) notes that at the local level, an interesting phenomena takes place. In his consideration of Afro-Colombian farmer, Escobar notes that farmers, once rooted in local, relational knowledge systems, began to adopt the vocabulary of "efficiency" and "planning" as markers of improvement after

exposure to development programs and modern agronomic practices. Over time communities tend to hybridise i.e. adopt some elements of technical knowledge while retaining many of the beliefs and practices from former times. In this case, farmers learned to use pesticides but also continued to "speak to" and "caress" the land. Similarly, in my fieldwork, some residents were certainly engaging in organised labour and appreciated its value without using or recognising traditional terms such as *minga*. Some had adopted the phrasing "bioengineering" to describe traditional nature-based solutions. This hybridity reflects the idea that global concepts are not simply imposed but are reshaped, resisted, and re-signified at the local level. In this way, communities like Triangulo y Manantial demonstrate a form of living knowledge that draws strength from diversity, collaboration, and adaptability.

This raises a critical ethical dilemma: as researchers, are we attentive to these practices in spaces where the local and global, technical and relational, modern and ancestral intermingle? Looking back, it seems to me that I was almost willing the community to use and own local terms because it would fit with my internal understanding of how indigenous living and being takes place in practice. My desire to hear the community name *minga* perhaps also reflected my own need to see indigeneity in a form I could recognise. Ultimately, asking what *minga* means to the people who live it is not just an ethnographic question, it is a political and ethical act. It re-centres development discourse around local worldviews and relational ontologies, rather than Western notions of progress. This is the work of decolonising development: not simply translating Western concepts into local languages, but beginning with the concepts, values, and practices that already exist within communities. It is about listening deeply, resisting the urge to reduce complexity, approaching knowledge as a shared and contested commons and a willingness to let communities define what development means on their own terms.

Going back to the questions I posed at the start of this piece, I wonder what might change in policy and practice if we allowed local epistemologies to lead the way. If I were to guess, it might start with earnest researchers and practitioners learning to slowing down, to listen attentively and view dominant paradigms through the lens of *minga*, *ubuntu*, *bayanihan*, *gotong royong*, and other relational ways of being. In doing so, we may begin to see that what is lost in translation is not just linguistic nuance, but entire worlds of meaning, modes of relating, and ways of organising life. And what we might gain is profound: a development practice that is more rooted, ethical, and alive to the complexity of lived experience. One that moves beyond metrics and toward reciprocity, and collective flourishing. Perhaps then, development would no longer be the imposition of dominant frameworks, but a co-created process grounded in the traditions and aspirations of communities themselves.

Words: 1,420

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