

HOW TO SPEAK ABOUT AFRICA TODAY

A practical dictionary for more accurate, responsible language about the continent.

»» June 2026



A Welcome Note

The way the continent is described matters.

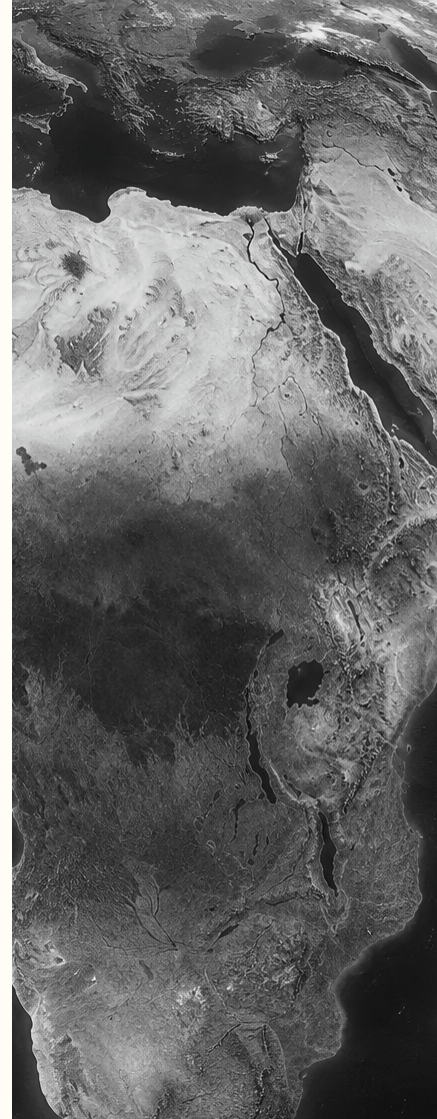
Too often, we rely on lazy shortcuts, outdated stereotypes, and sweeping generalisations that reduce a complex continent to crisis, conflict, poverty, or dependency. Repeated often enough, these words shape perception. They make it harder to see progress and diminish what is actually happening across the continent.

Changing how the continent is described is part of changing how it is understood.

This dictionary reframes some of the most used terms about Africa that are often reductive, misleading, or simply inaccurate. We are using language to move from generalisation to specificity, from deficit framing to context, and from stereotype to evidence. Changing the story starts with changing the words we reach for – and choosing language that is more accurate, more responsible, and more aligned with reality.

We are not policing language. Our intention is to leave you with better words and phrases that are more accurate, specific, and grounded in evidence. Each entry explains what is problematic about the term, uses evidence where possible to challenge the stereotype, and offers a clearer alternative.

We hope you find it useful.



Quick References

All terms and recommended alternatives at a glance

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Africa is/Africa needs

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Use the continent / name the specific country or region

Example: Kenya needs more investment in infrastructure. OR Several African countries need more investment in infrastructure.

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Africa is/Africa needs collapses 55 countries into a single story, treating Africa as if it speaks with one voice, has one experience, and shares one fate. It also allows the challenges of one country to be projected onto the entire continent.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

The continent has 55 sovereign states and thousands of cultures and political systems.



African proverb / music / food / fashion

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Be specific. Name the culture, country, or tradition of origin

Example: Igbo proverb, Swahili proverb, Senegalese cuisine, Wolof fashion, Zulu proverb, Amapiano, Afrobeats



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Attributing cultural expressions to “Africa” as a whole ignores the rich diversity of the continent’s 54 nations and thousands of distinct cultural traditions. It flattens extraordinary specificity into vague generalisation and robs individual communities of their creative identity.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Amapiano emerged from South Africa’s townships; Afrobeats has roots in West Africa; Swahili cuisine reflects centuries of East African coastal trade. No single “African” food, music, or fashion tradition exists – and this diversity is precisely the point.

Aid dependent

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Diversified funding base



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This term frames African nations primarily as recipients of external charity, obscuring the complex reality of how countries finance themselves. It reinforces a donor-recipient dynamic that systematically undermines perceptions of African agency, fiscal capacity, and institutional strength.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Many African economies have diversified their financing through domestic revenue collection, sovereign bond markets, diaspora remittances, and bilateral partnerships. The continent raised over \$1 trillion in domestic resources in 2021 alone – far exceeding total aid flows in the same period.



Authoritarian regime

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Restricted civic space



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

While authoritarian governance is a legitimate concern, applying this label broadly without specificity misrepresents governance structures and homogenises vastly different political situations. Precision enables accountability; generalisation obscures it.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Political landscapes across Africa vary enormously. Some countries have restricted press freedoms while maintaining competitive elections; others face one-party dominance alongside a functioning civil society. A single label obscures these critical distinctions and makes meaningful engagement harder.

Brain drain

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Talent mobility

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This term frames the movement of skilled African professionals as purely a loss for the continent, denying individuals' agency and ignoring the economic value of diaspora networks, knowledge transfer, and remittances that flow back to communities and institutions.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

African diaspora remittances exceeded \$100 billion in 2023, surpassing official development aid in many recipient countries. Many diaspora professionals actively invest, mentor, build businesses, and innovate across borders – creating value in multiple directions simultaneously.



Conflict zone

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Politically disputed area



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Applying this broad label to entire countries or regions ignores that conflict is almost always localised and specific in its causes and geography. It discourages investment, tourism, and engagement across entire nations on the basis of instability in one area.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Most conflict on the continent is highly localised. Labelling an entire country as a “conflict zone” based on unrest in one region distorts reality and imposes a collective burden on millions of people living far from the affected area.

Corruption

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Misconduct



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Corruption exists in every country in the world. Using it as a defining label for African governance conceals the specific institutions, actors, and systems involved, making accountability harder – not easier – while reinforcing a stigma that is rarely applied with the same consistency elsewhere.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

The Corruption Perceptions Index consistently shows transparency failures across all regions globally. When corruption is named precisely – bribery in procurement, undue political influence, corporate misconduct – it becomes easier to address, attribute, and resolve.

Crisis prone

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Vulnerable to crisis



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Describing a country or region as “crisis-prone” creates a fatalistic narrative suggesting instability is inherent or inevitable. It strips away causation, obscures accountability, and transforms specific, addressable challenges into seemingly natural conditions.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Most crises have identifiable, addressable causes such as drought price shocks, political transitions, commodity price shocks, governance failures, or infrastructure gaps. Naming these precisely creates accountability and opens space for targeted solutions rather than blanket despair.

Democratic backsliding

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Democratic shifts



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This term implies a linear decline in democratic progress without acknowledging the complexity of political transitions. It flattens nuanced and evolving political dynamics into a single negative trajectory that can obscure what is actually happening on the ground.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Political change in Africa often reflects contested processes of democratic development rather than simple regression. Transitions can involve constitutional reform, coalition politics, new civic activism, and changing relationships between citizens and institutions.

Demographic time bomb / Youth bulge

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Youth force



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

These terms frame Africa's young population as a threat rather than an asset. They reflect anxious external projections rooted in historical fears about African population growth, rather than evidence of what a young, dynamic, and educated workforce can achieve.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Africa's median age is around 19 – the youngest major region in the world. Rather than a threat, this represents one of the largest emerging workforces in human history: a potential driver of economic growth, technological innovation, and global productivity for decades to come.

Digital divide

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Digital inequality

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

While access gaps are real, framing them as a “divide” presents digital inequality as a static, binary condition – either connected or not – rather than a dynamic, rapidly changing gap that is narrowing at remarkable pace across the continent.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Africa is home to the world’s fastest-growing mobile internet market. Mobile money innovations like M-Pesa originated in Africa and have reshaped global fintech. The gap is real but narrowing, and African innovation is actively driving that change.



Education crisis

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Education challenge

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Framing education across the continent as a “crisis” ignores meaningful and measurable progress in enrolment, literacy, and tertiary education growth. It presents a deficit narrative that erases achievement and undermines the work of students, teachers, and institutions making real gains.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Primary school enrolment rates in sub-Saharan Africa have risen dramatically over the past two decades. Countries including Rwanda, Ghana, and Ethiopia have significantly expanded access. Higher education enrolments are growing faster in Africa than in any other region in the world.



Electoral violence

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Contested election

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This term can make violence seem synonymous with African elections, stigmatising democratic participation, and obscuring the important fact that the vast majority of elections across the continent are conducted peacefully, with genuine civic engagement and institutional integrity.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

The majority of elections held across Africa are peaceful. Where disputes occur, they typically involve legal challenges, civic protest, constitutional processes, and institutional arbitration — not widespread violence. Most citizens participate and demand accountability through legitimate means.



Ethnic tensions

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Resource access disputes

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Framing disputes as “ethnic tensions” essentialises identity and implies that conflict is rooted in culture or tradition rather than in political decisions, economic inequalities, or governance failures that have identifiable causes and solutions.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Most tensions attributed to ethnicity are driven by structural factors: land access disputes, political exclusion, competition over resources, or the deliberate political mobilisation of identity by actors with specific interests. Identity is often a tool, not a root cause.



Failed state

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Complex state

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This term is often used loosely and pejoratively, suggesting that governance has entirely collapsed. It ignores the functional institutions, communities, civil society organisations, and economic systems that persist and serve people even in states under significant stress.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Even in countries facing major governance challenges, local governments, businesses, civil society, and community institutions often continue to operate effectively. Complexity is not failure. Labelling it as such failure negates millions of people's lived realities and the institutions that serve them.



Food insecurity

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Food systems pressures



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This term can obscure the structural, political, and economic causes of hunger, framing it as a natural or permanent condition rather than the result of specific governance decisions, market distortions, infrastructure gaps, or climate pressures that are identifiable and addressable.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Africa holds approximately 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land. Food challenges are driven by infrastructure gaps, input costs, market access failures, and climate stress, not inherent incapacity. The continent has the resources to feed itself and beyond, given the right conditions.

Frontier markets

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Growth markets

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Stock exchanges in Nairobi, Lagos, Johannesburg, Casablanca, and Accra are increasingly integrated into global capital markets. Several African economies are among the world's fastest growing. The continent is not on the frontier of global markets, it is at the centre of emerging global growth.

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

While used as a technical finance term, “frontier markets” implies peripheral, pre-modern economic status; markets not yet ready for full participation. It understates the sophistication of African capital markets and the depth and dynamism of regional economies.



Informal economy

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Majority economy



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Describing the majority of African economic activity as “informal” frames it as marginal, outside the norm, or economically secondary. In reality, this sector is the backbone of African economies; the space where most people work, trade, innovate, and sustain their families.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

The informal economy accounts for 85% or more of employment in many African countries. It drives livelihoods, enables trade, and supports families across the continent. It is not a gap in the economy; it is the economy, and it demands recognition and investment, not marginalisation.

Kleptocracy

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

State capture



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

While state capture is a real and serious governance challenge, applying the label “kleptocracy” broadly conflates specific, identifiable governance failures with systemic condemnation of entire states. It is imprecise and counterproductive for the accountability it claims to seek.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

State capture involves specific webs of political patronage, corporate interest, institutional weakness, and regulatory failure. Naming these dynamics precisely – naming actors, sectors, and mechanisms – supports accountability far more effectively than a label that forecloses analysis.

Militant groups

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Armed groups

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

“Militant” is a vague and value-laden descriptor that can obscure the nature, objectives, and context of armed actors. It makes it harder to understand the underlying political, economic, or social dynamics driving insecurity, and therefore harder to address them.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Armed groups across the continent vary enormously in motivation, ideology, structure, and behaviour. Some are politically motivated; others criminal; some are community defence forces. Specificity about who they are and what drives them is essential for analysis, policy, and effective response.



Political crackdown

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Political restrictions

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

While political restrictions are a legitimate concern, “crackdown” implies disproportionate force without engaging with the specific institutional, legal, or political context involved. Precision about what is actually happening matters for accurate reporting and meaningful accountability.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Government responses to political dissent vary widely in nature, severity, and legality. Describing the specific restriction; limits on press freedom, restrictions on assembly, political detentions, enables more accurate journalism and more targeted accountability than a blanket term.



Power grab

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Political manoeuvre

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This emotive term implies illegitimacy without engaging with the specific political and constitutional dynamics at play. It flattens complex and contested political transitions into a single pejorative judgment that forecloses rather than encourages analysis.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Changes in political power often involve constitutional ambiguity, coalition realignment, judicial interpretation, institutional negotiation, or negotiated transitions; all of which deserve more nuanced description than “grab,” a word that presupposes the conclusion.



Resource curse

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Resource value gap



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

The “resource curse” idea frames Africa’s extraordinary natural wealth as inherently problematic, placing blame on the resources themselves rather than on the governance structures, extraction models, and global pricing dynamics that determine how resource wealth is captured and distributed.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Resource wealth has driven development in many economies globally. For Africa, the core challenge is not the resources but the value chain: extraction terms, local processing capacity, transfer pricing practices, and revenue governance. These are solvable structural problems, not curses.

Rigged election

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Election irregularities

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Alleging that an election was “rigged” without evidence dismisses institutional processes and can delegitimise electoral bodies that are operating in complex environments and making genuine efforts to ensure credible, transparent, and accountable outcomes.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Electoral disputes across the continent increasingly go through courts, independent electoral commissions, and international observer processes. These institutions deserve engagement and scrutiny – not wholesale dismissal through a label that presupposes the conclusion before the process has run.



Slum

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Informal settlement



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This stigmatising term reduces the complex, dynamic, self-built communities where tens of millions of Africans live to conditions of poverty and lack. It erases the social vitality, entrepreneurship, community organisation, and cultural richness that characterise these spaces.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Informal settlements are home to an estimated 40% of Africa's urban population. They are also sites of extraordinary social innovation, economic activity, and community solidarity; not simply places of deprivation to be pitied or cleared, but living, vital communities.

Subsistence farming

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Smallholder agriculture

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This term implies that African farming is rudimentary and barely survival oriented. It ignores the growing commercialisation of smallholder farming, the sophistication of African agricultural knowledge systems, and the sector's critical role in feeding and sustaining the continent.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Smallholder farmers produce 70% of Africa's food supply. The sector is increasingly technology enabled, commercially oriented, and market linked. Young farmers use precision agriculture apps, access regional markets, and attract significant private investment and innovation.



Third World country

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Low-income country



→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

The term “Third World” originated in 1952 to describe non-aligned nations during the Cold War geopolitical contest. That context no longer exists. Today the term has no meaning beyond implying inferiority and lack, and that is reason enough to retire it permanently.

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This Cold War-era term has no contemporary analytical meaning and carries strong connotations of inferiority, backwardness, and hierarchy. It is both factually outdated and deeply pejorative in its implications for the countries and people it describes.

Tribal conflict

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Structural tensions



→ WHY THIS MATTERS

Describing conflict as “tribal” reduces complex political, economic, and social tensions to primitive identity disputes. This framing is routinely applied to Africa in ways it would never be applied to Europe or North America, where similar identity-linked conflicts are described very differently.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Most conflicts labelled “tribal” are driven by structural factors: land access, political exclusion, economic inequality, and competition over resources. Identity is typically mobilised by specific political actors for specific purposes, it is rarely the root cause of the conflict itself.

War-torn

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE

Conflict-affected

→ WHY THIS MATTERS

This emotive term makes chronic conflict seem inevitable and total, erasing the reality that the vast majority of Africa is peaceful, stable, and growing. It strips ordinary people of agency and dignity in their own contexts, reducing complex lived realities to a single image of destruction.

→ EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Only a small number of African countries experience active conflict at any given time. For most people across the continent, peace, economic growth, and stability are everyday realities. “War-torn” misrepresents a continent where calm and progress are the norm, not the exception.



About Africa No Filter

Africa No Filter is an advocacy organisation that is shifting stereotypical narratives about Africa by supporting storytelling that reflects a dynamic continent of progress, innovation and opportunity. We exist because many stories about Africa still lazily revolve around the single story of poor leadership, poverty, corruption, disease, and conflict, failing to portray the other more progressive side of Africa and collectively perpetuating the narrative that Africa is broken, dependent and lacks agency. Through community building and advocacy, we support storytellers to help shift these stereotypes because they impact the way the world sees Africa and how Africa sees itself. We are a donor collaborative.

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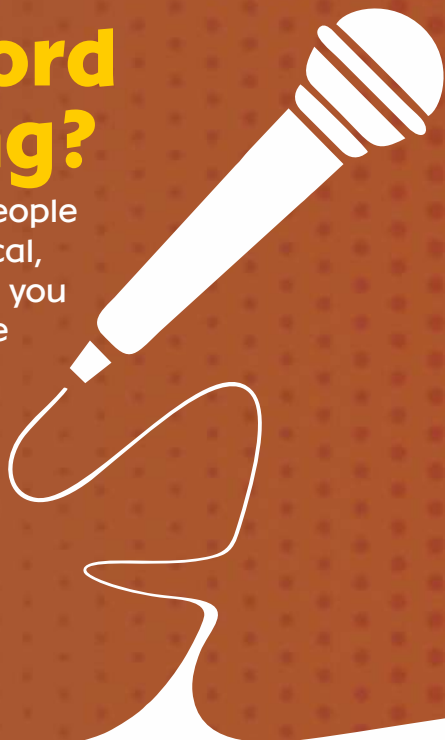


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Spotted a word we're missing?

This dictionary grows with the people who use it. Suggest a stereotypical, over generalised, or biased term you keep seeing, and a clearer, more responsible way to say it.

A white line drawing of a microphone on a brown background with a pattern of small dots. The microphone is tilted diagonally, and a squiggly line extends from its base, forming a shape that resembles a speech bubble or a drop.

Add your word at

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