

Community Member or Citizen?
Some reasons to choose carefully.

Sara S. Moore
Pacific Environment Russia/ Policy Program Associate
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There was a time, in distant history, when *citizen* meant exclusively a person who could trace his ancestorship back to the original inhabitants of the State. That was Ancient Greece: haven't we modern people yet broadened the word to mean "everyone in a State"? Or even, "everyone with political value in a State"? The sad answer is no, not yet.

Citizen, widely used in activist writing, is still more limited in its meaning than many might think. Understanding its limitations, especially in the human rights context, activist writers should use *citizen* with care.

There are at least two generally-accepted, legitimate histories to this word; two different keys in which you can hear the overtones of *citizen*. One is a history of political upheaval, where an imperial State was put into question and a new, populist State's member was made to feel empowered by being addressed as *Citizen*, as in the French Revolution (i.e. "Please help me burn this flag, *Citoyen Marat*"). This also happened with the word *comrade* in the Russian Revolution, as it became the formal term of address for members of the newly empowered underclass (i.e. *tovarishch*, instead of the imperial word with overtones of "god's servant" – *gospodin*). I can hear the overtones of the Russian *tovarishch* and the French *citoyen* in reading the modern activist use of *citizen*, where what is intended is a broad, empowering meaning that designates someone, no matter how small, as a participant in the political process of any State, regardless of that State's legitimacy. Certainly no conscious exclusion of any underclass is typically intended in the use of *citizen* by progressive activists.

However, the audience for the term includes those who are (or are working in service to) displaced, persecuted, and otherwise Stateless people struggling to gain the legal status of refugee, the first step in the long process that leads to the elusive status of *citizen*. To those people's ears, it is hard to hear any inclusiveness in that word. This brings me to a second history of the word: that of a State-recognized property owner who takes part in a State's economic life (as in the German *Burgher* or the Russian *Boyar*): the only recognized bearer of social rights within a State. After the Greeks stopped requiring their people to trace their ancestry to the State founders, they still only offered citizenship to free males. As Greece became overrun with foreigners, many working to buy their freedom from slavery, the struggle to keep out those who were unsavory to the State was played out in the stories of how people attained – or failed to attain – citizenship. It was a matter of preserving property in the hands of those presumed loyal

to the State. This struggle to keep power—to keep citizenship— out of the hands of those perceived as unsavory continues in many modern countries today, including the US.

Currently, in the post-9/11 US, immigrants can lose their hard-won citizenship for a first-offense misdemeanor, such as failing to return rented videotapes, depending on the whim of the judge. Dissidents such as Russia's environmental whistle-blower Grigory Pasko have lost their full rights of citizenship—in Pasko's case, his crime was refusing to confess to spying for the Japanese government. Now he is barred from voting.

So, in its second sense, *citizen* does not refer to all the members of a community. It does not refer to all the people who are affected by a country's policies and practices. And, most importantly in an activist context, it does not refer to all the people who may seek redress for environmental or human rights violations that take place on a country's soil.

Taken in a strict human rights context, *citizen* definitively excludes a number of categories of people. Consider these following ten categories as ten reasons to not assume that everyone in an affected constituency is a rights-bearing citizen. **Non-citizens, or those deprived full rights of citizenship, may be:**

1. People of indeterminate or a non-State-recognized nationality or race (including minority indigenous peoples).
2. Roma (Gypsies) and other nomadic people who may refuse on the basis of their cultural identity to carry government-issued ID cards.
3. People under the age that determines "adulthood" in a country.
4. People of indeterminate or a non-State-recognized gender identity. (Many States do not recognize gender reassignment, and so someone undergoing such a procedure loses status within that State.)
5. HIV positive people and/ or AIDS patients, or people living with another legally-stigmatized disease or disability (i.e. sight or hearing disability, which in some countries is cause for a person to be made a ward of the state).
6. Convicted prisoners, or people who have been imprisoned (on any pretext, convicted or not).
7. Displaced people or refugees forced from other States or disputed territories.

8. People disenfranchised or profiled as being enemies of the State because of their actual or perceived race, class, language, religion, political affiliation, national origin, ethnic or cultural identity, gender identity, or sex. (In some States a woman can only achieve citizenship through marriage.)
9. People working in a stigmatized sector of business, i.e. unregistered NGOs, labor unions, and the sex industry. Or indentured, enslaved or “trafficked” workers.
10. Undocumented people, i.e. those held in detention or forced to live without government protection for not having documents that identify them as having legal status in the country where they reside. (Barriers to having “documents” include but are not limited to the status-conditions listed above. Adult children of those who fall in some of the above categories can sometimes be considered not only undocumented but *undocumentable*.)

It is important to include these categories of people in the community / NGO / State / industry equation, as they are not only impacted by State and industry rights violations, but are typically **more** impacted because of their lack of avenues of redress and lack of options for avoiding risk in the first place.

While progressive activists, in our community-empowering hearts, want **all** these people to be included in *citizen*, to the ears of many in State-enforced-limbo and their supporters, *citizen* can never be an inclusive term. When thinking of the audience for a piece of writing, progressive activists should be aware that non-citizens and partial-citizens the world over are organized and fighting for their rights, and deserve activists’ solidarity, if only in the words chosen to express what *public* it is that activists are working to protect, in the name of the public interest.

Here are some helpful replacement terms a writer may use to exhibit solidarity with the many non-citizens in the global environmental and human rights movements:

Nouns:

Community member
Individual
A state’s people/ population
Civil society member
Resident or inhabitant (of *x* affected community)
Stakeholder

Adjectives:

Community
Local / grassroots

In one sense it is just a matter of semantics—the political-revolutionary semantic versus the economic-State-recognized-taxpayer semantic. But progressive activists are bound to work for the rights of all the people, including and especially the most disenfranchised—and so should remember to address the non-citizens.

There are appropriate times to be exclusive and specific when choosing between *citizen* and *community member*. These are the times when the subject matter concerns a voter initiative or another instance that would not apply to non-citizens. Not the subject matter of social and environmental impacts, say, of resource extraction projects (which do not discriminate); but the subject matter of government programs, government initiatives, government contracts. Just as those using Instant Messenger do not “see” someone on IM who is not registered with Instant Messenger, the government does “see” non-citizens. So, any initiative that enquires the government’s legal recognition of a person is certainly a *citizen* initiative.

Otherwise, especially in a human rights context, it is most precise to speak of impacts on a State’s people, not its *citizens*. In fact, if the environmental disaster you are writing about is bad enough and taking in a place where only disenfranchised populations would live, that disaster may not, in fact, affect many *citizens* at all.

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Some quick facts on non-citizens and partial-citizens:

According to the 2000 US Census, there are over 30 million immigrants in the US: 11 percent of the total population.

http://www.nilc.org/immspbs/research/pbimmfacts_0704.pdf

The United States currently has the highest prison population rate in the world, some 701 per 100,000 of the national population, followed by Russia (606), Belarus (554), Kazakhstan and the US Virgin Islands (both 522), the Cayman Islands (501), Turkmenistan (489), Belize (459), Bermuda (447), Suriname (437), Dominica (420) and Ukraine (415).

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r234.pdf>

In the US nearly 5 million people are unable to vote because they have been convicted of a felony— defined as any crime that carries a sentence of a year or more in prison.

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20031124/perl> (2003)

Historically, many States adopted the patriarchal position that a woman’s legal status is acquired through her relationship to a man—first her father and then her husband.

- *Women, Nationality and Citizenship* (2000)

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/jun03e.pdf>