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Everything counts in large amounts: A systemic discourse analysis of official texts related to the UN's sustainable development goals

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ABSTRACT

Since 2015 and its adoption by the United Nations (UN), the sustainable development goals (SDGs) program and its 17 SDGs have been a source of inspiration for numerous sectors, in order to reach the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In sectors as diverse as industry, human rights, ecology, or education, several institutions, organizations, and stakeholders have used the opportunity offered by the SDGs to make sustainable choices or apply specific policies. Yet it is also true that the sheer application of the SDGs have triggered grounded criticism, insofar as it offered readymade templates to reproduce inequalities or foster wrong decisions. In this sense, the 2030 agenda has raised some concern regarding a new form of colonialism it seems to rely on, its permanent links to an economy of growth and non-decent work, or the pervasive impacts on education and social inequalities. Such critical points have motivated scholars to work on a reinterpreted application of the SDGs, underline the positive evolution of the SDGs in comparison to the millenium development goals, and call for an adaptation of the SDGs regarding climate change and planetary limits. As a linguist, my approach regarding the 17 SDGs is rooted in systemic discourse analysis-an applied discourse study that simultaneously draws on critical discourse analysis, corpus studies and lexicometric analysis, which I will define later in the present chapter. My goal is to analyze every official text published in order to present and encourage the application of each of the 17 SDGs, thus building a corpus by extracting texts from official sources published on the Internet website of the UN, dedicated to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In this sense, a link is made between discourse structures, social structures, and social representations.

Keywords: SDG, discourse analysis, lexicometrics, language, narratives, corpus

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Since 2015 and its adoption by the United Nations (UN), the sustainable development goals (SDGs) program and its 17 SDGs have been a source of inspiration for numerous sectors, in order to reach the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In sectors as diverse as industry (Wynn & Jones, 2020), human rights (Kaltenborn et al., 2020), ecology (Kish & Quilley, 2023), or education (Shulla et al., 2020), several institutions, organizations and stakeholders have used the opportunity offered by the SDGs to make sustainable choices or apply specific policies. Yet it is also true that the sheer application of the SDGs have triggered grounded criticism, insofar as it offered readymade templates to reproduce inequalities or foster wrong decisions. In this sense, the 2030 agenda has raised some concern regarding a new form of colonialism it seems to rely on (Ziai, 2016), its permanent links to an economy of growth and non-decent work (Frey, 2017), or the pervasive impacts on education and social inequalities

(Kopnina, 2020). Such critical points have motivated scholars to work on a reinterpreted application of the SDGs (Montesano Montessori & Lautensach, 2024), underline the positive evolution of the SDGs in comparison to the millenium development goals (MDGs) (Fukuda-Parr, 2016), and call for an adaptation of the SDGs regarding climate change and planetary limits (Kotzé et al., 2022).

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development and its 17 SDGs have also been thoroughly analyzed through critical discourse analysis, in order to unravel the social and political representations they actually rely on. Such scholarly works have notably studied the political and social implications regarding knowledge (Cummings et al., 2018), the lack of perspective regarding the evolution from MDGs to SDGs (Briant Carant, 2017), or the instrumental role of education (Mitter & Brissett, 2017) or health promotion (Spencer et al., 2019) in the process, even leading several scholars to state that a number of countries actually use SDGs to achieve other political gains than an actual implication of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (Essa & Harvey, 2022, p. 9). In other words, as any official political agenda published by

international or national institutions, the SDGs have allowed a lot of scholars, across various disciplines, to investigate the framing and practical implications of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, and to provide interesting perspectives and results in order to call for change and adaptation in the light of postcolonial studies, climate change and the global economic model of development.

As a linguist, my approach regarding the 17 SDGs is rooted in systemic discourse analysis—an applied discourse study that simultaneously draws on critical discourse analysis, corpus studies (Baker, 2006) and lexicometric analysis, which I will define later in the present chapter. My goal is to analyze every official text published in order to present and encourage the application of each of the 17 SDGs, thus building a corpus by extracting texts from official sources published on the internet website of the UN, dedicated to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In this sense, I do believe in a productive link between discourse structures (Biber et al., 2007) and social structures (Baker, 2010) and define discourse as follows (Wagener, 2019, p. 39):

‘Discourse’ is defined as any language phenomenon (therefore not exclusively textual) whose purpose is the construction, exchange, and transformation of meaning that is socially situated and structuring, potentially politically significant, and necessarily anchored in an essential intersubjectivity, whether intentional or not. In other words, it is produced and received by subjects who may express themselves individually or collectively about shareable objects. In this sense, discourse is not exclusively linguistic, communicational, or social: it is simultaneously at the core and on the margins of these dimensions, while uniting them.

This definition of discourse draws both on the tradition of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2005; van Dijk, 1993), as well as on what is called the *analyse de discours à la française* or French discourse analysis (Charaudeau, 1995; Cislaru & Sitri, 2009), who all share the same epistemological roots regarding the French theory of the 1970’s (Pêcheux, 1975).

In this perspective, the goal of this study is to explore the discursive construction of sustainable development within the official texts produced by the UN in support of the 2030 agenda and its 17 SDGs. While these texts are often considered neutral policy instruments, this research investigates the underlying ideological, political, and epistemological frameworks that shape their content and structure, through discourse analysis. In this sense, I wish to analyze to what extent do the official discourses surrounding the SDGs reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant paradigms of development, sustainability, and global governance. By applying a systemic discourse analysis to the full corpus of official UN texts related to each of the 17 SDGs, the study seeks to identify patterns of lexical choices, semantic clusters, and representational hierarchies that may reveal implicit assumptions or contradictions.

The underlying hypothesis is that, despite their global and inclusive ambition, the SDG-related discourses reproduce dominant neoliberal and anthropocentric narratives that prioritize economic growth, managerial approaches, and

institutional legitimacy, while sidelining alternative paradigms such as degrowth, intersectionality, or ecocentrism. Through the combination of quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative critical interpretation, this research offers a critical linguistic perspective on the performative role of institutional discourse in shaping global policy agendas.

SYSTEMIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSITION

The difference between critical discourse analysis and systemic discourse analysis mostly resides in a digital and statistical analysis of linguistic forms, before relying on critical discourse analysis *per se*. In this sense, it uses software which offer preliminary findings regarding textual occurrences and collocations, including a first analysis of the definition of words and their use in specific contexts. In this sense, it offers a quantitative approach which adds a relevant layer of analysis to qualitative discourse analysis by drawing on the corpus as a central point for discourse studies (Pollach, 2012), while comparing giving access to the representational spaces that actually structure the texts (Bendinelli, 2011, p. 110):

Representational spaces provide an original key to interpreting the speech acts that underpin them, as they allow us to “see” the world the speaker constructs and the relationships they maintain with its components. Along the way, they offer the possibility of identifying part of the knowledge mobilized during interpretation. [...] The resulting figure reconstructs a prototype of the considered productions, subsuming their most representative elements, independently of thematic variations.

These spaces can be accessed through the following steps:

- (1) a thorough construction of the corpus as a research object (Mayaffre, 2005),
- (2) the use of softwares that will calculate the frequency of words and collocations in order to give access to the representational spaces (Marchand, 1998; Martinez, 2012), and
- (3) specific algorithms that are actually able to cross-reference semantic definitions of words, actual textual collocations and contexts of use (Reinert, 1990).

In order to apply these operations, I have been choosing the software Iramuteq (Ratinaud, 2014) in order to study large corpora of texts, insofar as it provides satisfying results regarding the preparation of discourse analysis in a systemic and ecosystemic perspective (Jacques, 2016; Wagener, 2022).

More precisely, this methodological proposition suggests to take a look at the collocations, the relations between the clusters of collocation, and the narratives developed by these clusters—and the relations between these narratives. These four steps are applied to the corpus in general, then to each SDG as a sub-corpus of official texts presenting its objectives and applicational targets. The goal is to understand how each SDG carries social and political presentations and specific

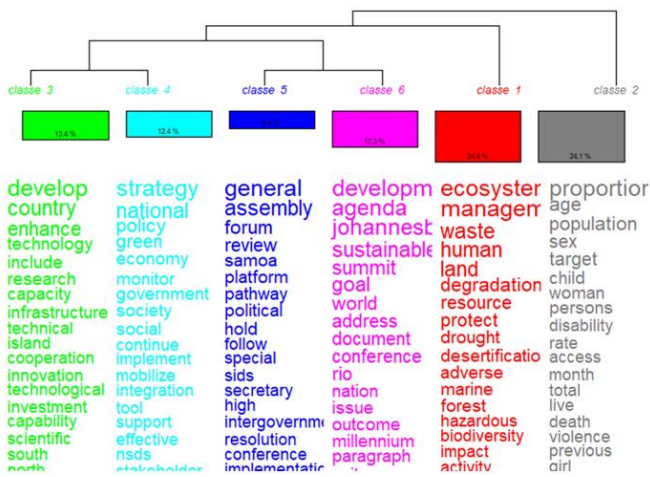


Figure 3. Main narratives of the SDG corpus (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

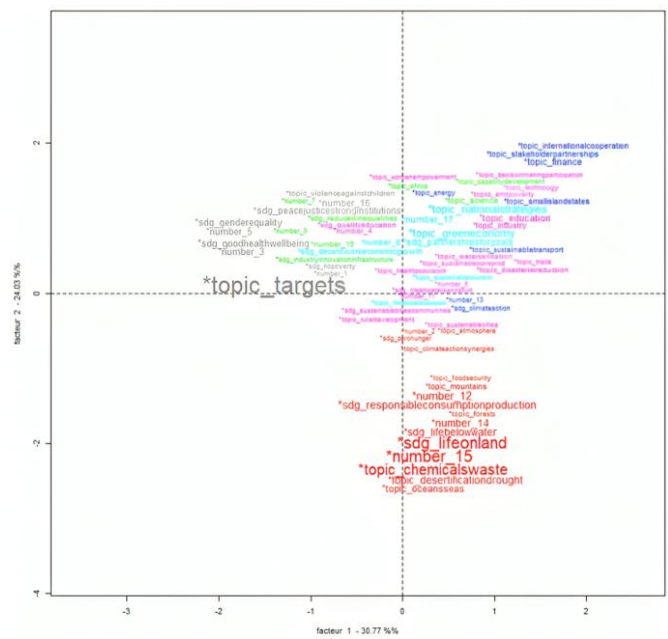


Figure 5. Map of correspondence between SDGs and narratives in the SDG corpus (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

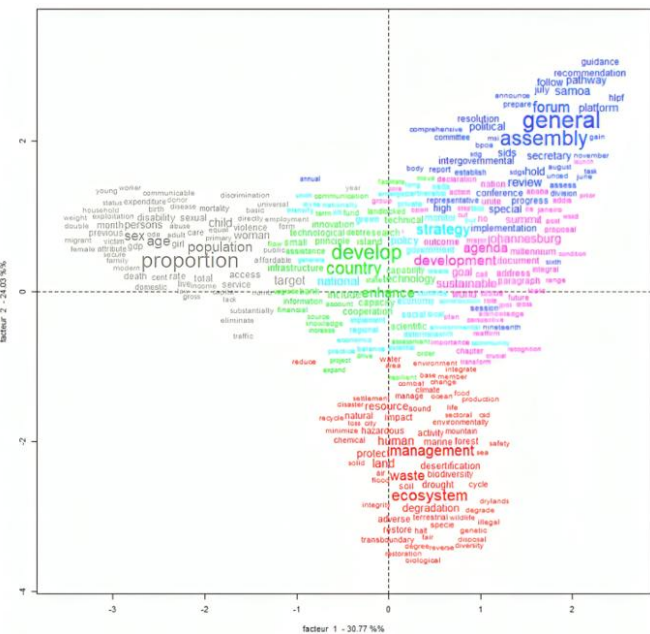


Figure 4. Map of correspondence between narratives of the SDG corpus (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

the international context which fosters the 17 SDGs. Both class 5 and class 6 depict the strong institutional context which tries to strengthen and promote the 2030 agenda for the whole world: they represent 23.7% of the corpus-almost a quarter of it.

The weight of the narrative classes represents one very interesting element of the analysis, yet it is even more interesting to see how the corpus is structured around these narratives. In this perspective, Figure 4 show that the whole corpus actually revolves around the classes 3 (development as a target) and 4 (national strategies for development), thus showing that the main focus of the 17 SDGs seems to rely on development *per se*, while sustainability is not in the center of the corpus at all. In other words, development seems to matter much more than sustainability, which appears to represent a mere excuse to foster development. Both central classes are mainly linked to class 6 (international context) and 5 (institutional actions), which highlights the role of the UN in the process. It is interesting and also a little bit worrying to

notice that class 1 (environmental issues) and 2 (human vulnerability) are not only peripheral in this context, but also disconnected from each other, while we know that they are heavily linked, especially in the context of climate crisis. The fact that both narratives are not central in Figure 4, while they are often depicted as essential to the very existence of those 17 SDGs, really underlines the fact that the 2030 agenda for sustainable development is more concerned with its institutional functioning and strategic impacts regarding development indicators than it could be with actual environmental and humanitarian issues, for instance. Yet this first interpretation needs to be confirmed; in fact, each SDG conveys its own sets of representations.

This new version of the map of correspondence shows how SDGs are represented in each narrative class, thus depicting a more precise visualization of the corpus in terms of lexicometric statistics (Figure 5). The list of correspondence is as follows:

- class 1 (environmental issues) encompasses SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 14 (life below water), and SDG 15 (life on land),
- class 2 (human vulnerability) is tied to SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions),
- class 3 (development as a target) gathers SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities),
- class 4 (national strategies) is linked to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals),
- class 5 (institutional actions) draws on SDG 13 (climate action), and



Figure 6. Lexical network for SDG 1 (Source: Author's own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

- class 6 (international context) is rooted in SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities).

This last step of the corpus analysis as a whole speaks numbers about the way certain topics are framed within the official texts published by the UN. Indeed, it shows for instance that SDG 2 (zero hunger) is mainly treated as an environmental matter, while it obviously heavily impacts issues regarding human vulnerability. Moreover, certain issues seem to be regarded as environmental matters (such as SDGs 12, 14, and 15), while others are oddly disconnected from these matters; how is it, for instance, that SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), and SDG 13 (climate action) are not related to environmental issues, while they could obviously be connected to them? Why are industrial innovation (SDG 9) and the reduction inequalities (SDG 10) both mainly treated as developmental targets, while innovation and industrial matters are not necessarily linked to the reduction of inequalities? Furthermore, why are certain topics mostly linked to international actions (quality education, clean water and sanitation, sustainable cities and communities), while others seem to remain at the national level (decent work and economic growth, partnerships for the goals)? These differences clearly imply that a targeted analysis of each of the 17 SDGs is necessary in order to understand the specific representations that are conveyed in the official texts.

TARGETING THE 17 SDGS THROUGH SYSTEMIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

SDG 1. No Poverty

It is not a surprise to notice that poverty is the central topic of SDG 1, yet it is interesting to understand its network of meaning. Poverty is indeed linked to specific targets that are

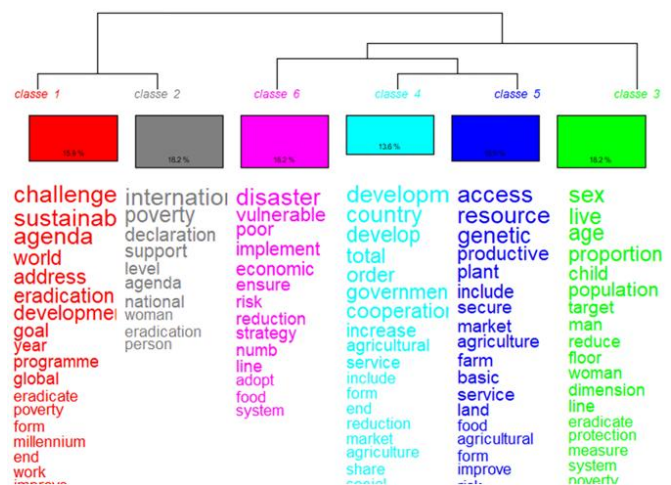


Figure 7. Narratives of SDG 1 (Source: Author's own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

to be reached in terms of food production and agriculture, income, and vulnerable populations (including women and children). It is, however, intriguing to see these targets linked to genetic plants in terms of food production. Moreover, poverty is also tied to national strategies, institutional declarations (and the mention of millennium development goals, social and economic factors, and general politics of inclusion. The reduction in poverty should also, according to **Figure 6**, rely on cooperation in order to reach the targets. To sum it up, according to the official texts, SDG 1 should be reached by working on food production and agriculture, economic and social factors, and the inclusion of vulnerable populations in general. Yet economic and social factors, if not linked to a robust and precise national political strategy, may appear a bit vague in this context.

The reduction of poverty is linked to 6 narrative classes (**Figure 7**). Class 1 (15.9%) represents the agenda and its challenges in itself, which is linked to class 2 (18.2%), comprising international declarations regarding poverty. Class 6 (18.2%) implies the reduction of disasters and risks in order to protect vulnerable populations, and class 3 (18.2%) deals with social and demographic categories of populations. Finally, class 4 (13.6%) targets the development path of countries in terms of general political choices, while class 5 (15.9%) includes the access to food as a resource that needs to be produced through specific means. In the corpus, genetic diversity is quoted insofar as it is important to 'maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species', to foster 'the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge' and to secure 'genetic resources for food and agriculture (...) in either medium or long term conservation facilities'. In this sense, genetics are addressed regarding the importance of agricultural biodiversity (Feliciano, 2019)–yet other economic or social issues are not treated with the same level of precision.

The reduction of disasters and risks to reduce poverty (class 6) is central in the corpus, and it appears to be closely linked to the international context of declarations regarding poverty (class 2). This interesting connection highlights the importance of international action regarding the reduction of risks and disasters, which can be seen as a positive trait. On the

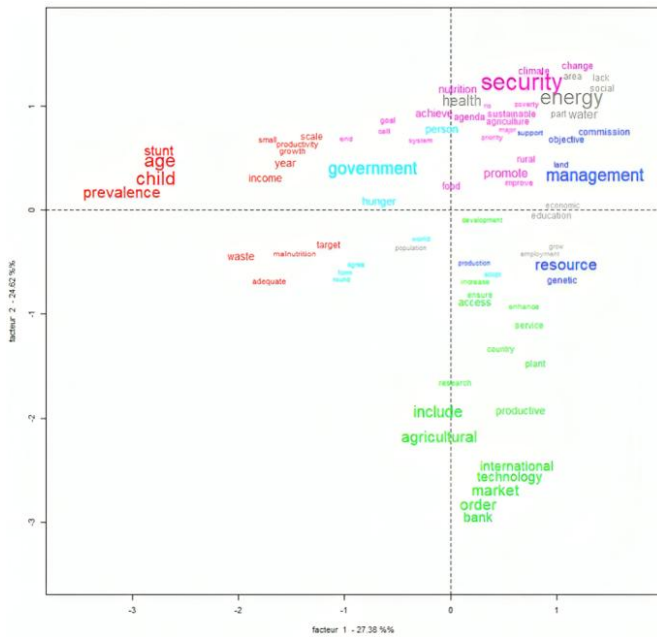


Figure 11. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 2 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

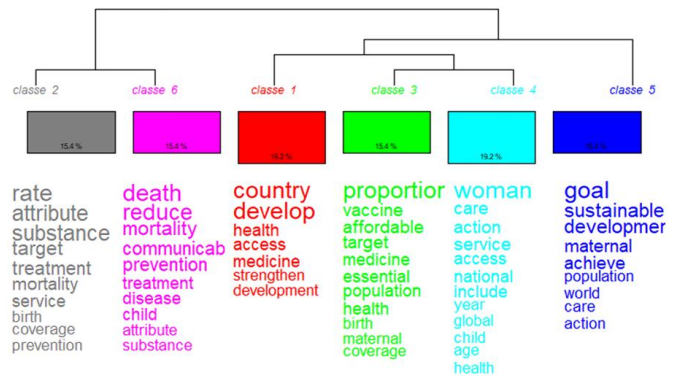


Figure 13. Narratives of SDG 3 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

choices are made within the same model which permits hunger as a global and local phenomenon, the risk is to keep this SDG at a sheer strategic and managerial level. This scope is obviously caused by the institutional and organizational nature of the official texts (Figure 11).

SDG 3. Good Health and Well-Being

Health is a central topic within the 2030 agenda, since it is also mentioned in SDG 1 and SDG 2 related to poverty and hunger, respectively. On this map, health is linked to specific targets regarding mortality and birth, death reduction, pollution and traffic injuries. Of course, health is also tied to the prevention and treatment of diseases, access to health, and strategic development agendas in general. It is interesting to notice that specific topics are indeed treated through health, while managerial and strategic agendas seem to be less present than in previous SDGs. The presence of clear targets is also noticeable, while there is no mention of the economic and social models that could indeed help to reduce health risks-including, for instance, access to healthcare in countries that need it the most (Olaniyi et al., 2022) (Figure 12).

Class narratives of SDG 3 shows what kind of representations are actually conveyed within the official texts regarding health. While class 1 (19.2%) focuses on country development, class 2 (15.4%) deals with health metrics, including mortality, birth, treatment of diseases and prevention. Class 3 (15.4%) encompasses medicine as a tool and policy regarding health, and class 4 (19.2%) comprises target populations, notably women and children, in order to develop the right policies. Class 5 (15.4%) is dedicated to the achievement of SDG 3, and class 6 (15.4%) is linked to the reduction of mortality. Many classes actually echo with each other, which shows that health seem to be conceived as an integrative and cohesive strategy that needs to be implemented for the good of human beings, with a focus on the most vulnerable ones (Figure 13).

The center of the map of correspondence seems to be a little weak, with several topics circulating around it. Health issues (class 2) and the reduction of mortality (class 6) can be seen of the right-hand side of the map, yet they seem to be disconnected from the achievement of SDG 3 (class 5), medical policies and instruments (class 3), and country development (class 1). The fact that country development seems to be inevitably linked to medical policies is noticeable-so is also the

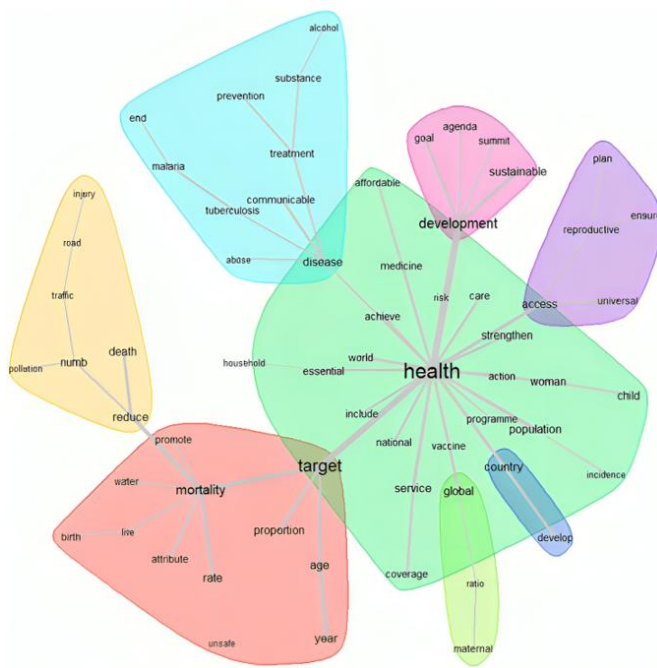


Figure 12. Lexical network for SDG 3 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

While food clearly appears at the center of the map of correspondence, food security (class 6), socio-political topics (class 2) and the management of resources (class 5) represent a strong cluster that show how concrete actions could help reduce hunger. This managerial stance seems to be prevalent in the corpus, and it remains strongly disconnected from economic and technological innovations (class 3), as well as from the victims of hunger themselves (class 1). In fact, these victims should be at the center of the corpus, but it is governmental policy (class 4) accompanies the topic of food. In this perspective, hunger reduction obviously needs strong managerial, economic and political choices; yet if these

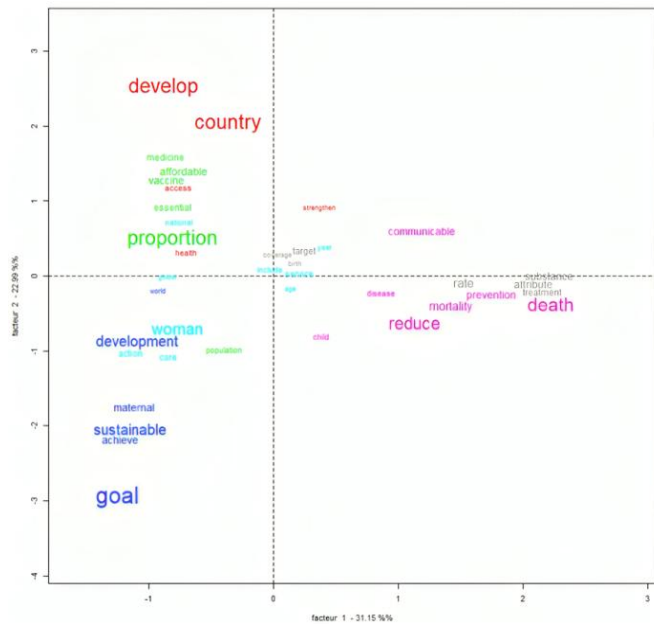


Figure 14. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 3 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

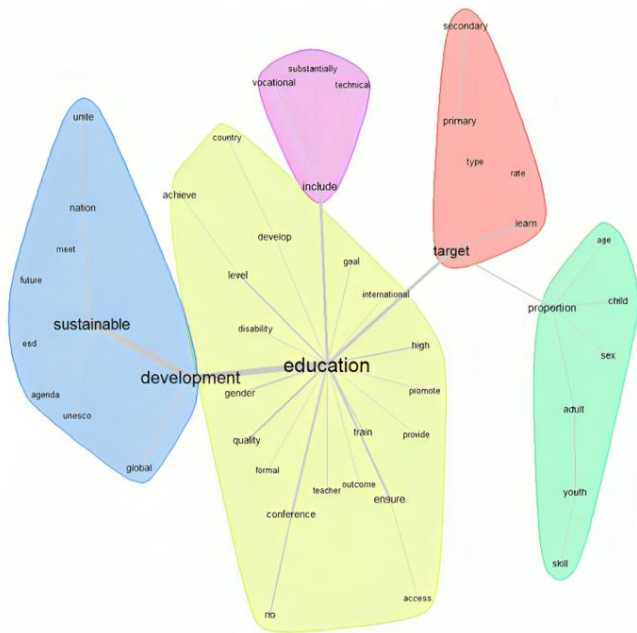


Figure 15. Lexical network for SDG 4 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

fact that the only narrative class to be found in the center of the corpus is linked to the targeted populations (class 4). This fact is interesting and probably a good opportunity to assess that it is important to keep beneficiaries of SDG policies at the center of efforts, preoccupations and agendas. In this perspective, official texts related to SDG 3 seem to fulfil this purpose (Figure 14).

SDG 4. Quality Education

Within the corpus, education seems to be regarded as a key target related to sustainable development. It is merely linked to inclusion, sustainable development itself, targets in general, and targeted populations. Yet again, this sub-corpus

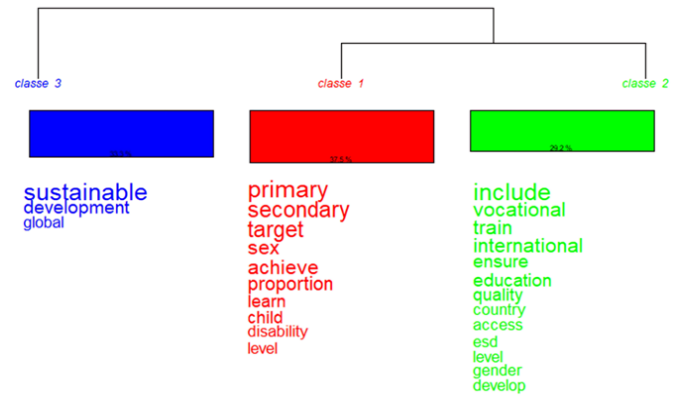


Figure 16. Narratives of SDG 4 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

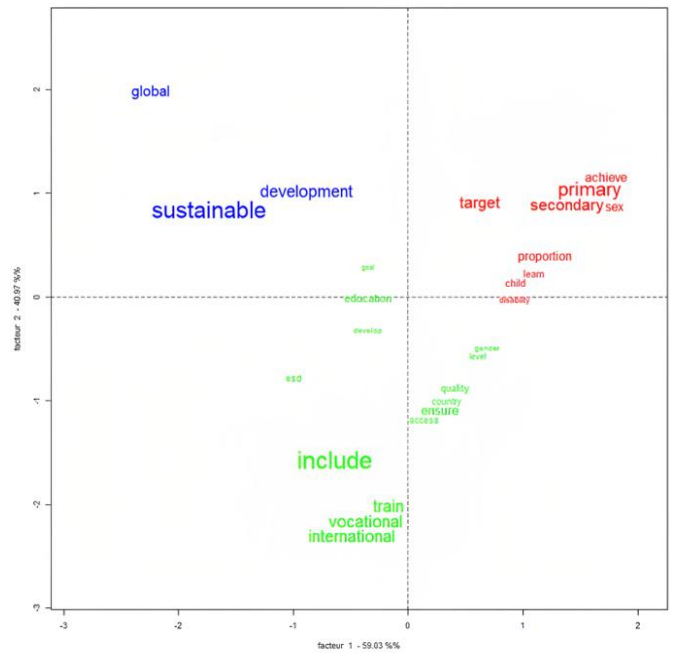


Figure 17. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 4 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

for SDG 4 seems very general, which appears odd when it comes to the gaps and stakes regarding education in a lot of countries throughout the world-including skills and knowledge, differences between boys and girls as well as rural and urban situations, without mentioning the fact that social and economic differences depending on the family remain a key issue regarding access to education (Webb et al., 2017) (Figure 15).

The fact that only 3 narrative classes are isolated in the sub-corpus when it comes to education says a lot about its generic treatment. Class 1 (37.5%) is dedicated to target populations and their access to primary and secondary education, class 2 (29.2%) describes the vocations and skills of educators and teachers, while class 3 (33.3%) is linked to the global aspect of SDG 4 in itself (Figure 16).

Even in the context of a small corpus, connections and disconnections can be obvious when it comes to lexicometric analysis (Figure 17). In this case, education is well-positioned at the center of the graph, yet educators (class 2), target populations (class 1) and global sustainable development

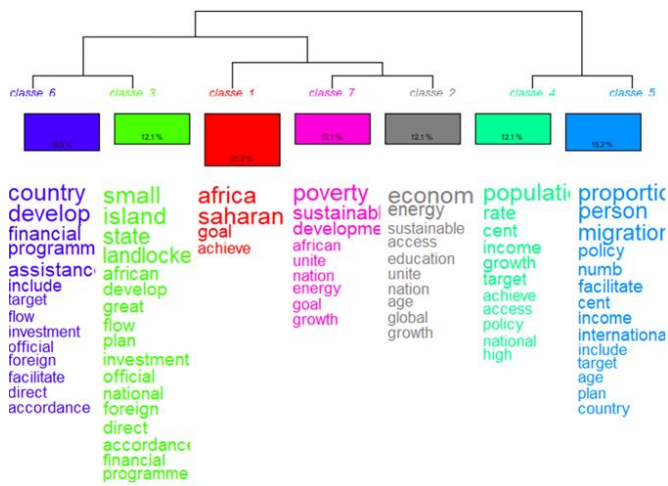


Figure 26. Narratives of SDG 10 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

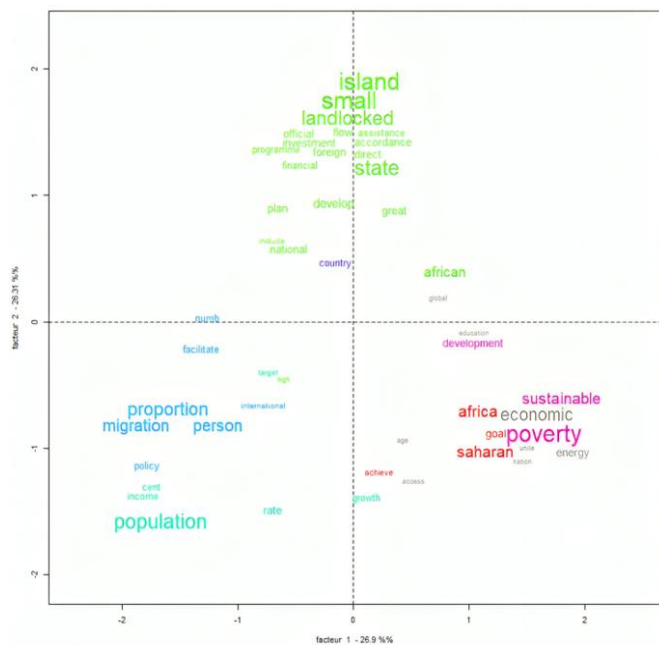


Figure 27. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 10 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

The narrative classes of the corpus are particularly interesting when it comes to understanding possible policies regarding the reduction of inequalities. Class 1 (21.2%), a fifth of the sub-corpus, exclusively deals with Africa and the Sahara. Class 2 (12.1%) is a global topic regarding sustainability, while class 3 (12.1%) details specific regional and local situations. Class 4 (12.1%) is linked to population demographics, while class 5 (15.2%) offers information regarding migration policies and their international stakes. Finally, class 6 (15.2%) encompasses development programs for specific countries, and class 7 (12.1%) addresses poverty in itself, which shows evident links to SDG 1 (Figure 26).

There is no clear topical center within the SDG 10 sub-corpus, which is probably rooted in the fact that this SDG actually tackles many other SDGs, and that the reduction of inequalities is far more complex than textual indications, since it would remain difficult to achieve without fundamental questions regarding the actual international economic system

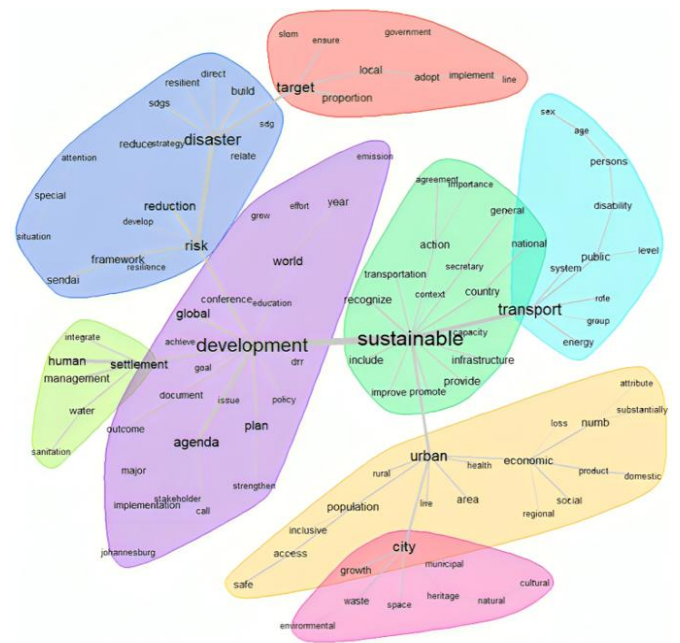


Figure 28. Lexical network for SDG 11 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

and their geopolitical implications-not to mention the fact that climate change impacts the situation (Campagnolo & Davide, 2019), since the chances that the Paris agreement is met are now close to zero. The situation of specific countries (class 6) appears sufficiently close to the center, yet three main topics remain disconnected from each other. First, Africa (class 1), poverty in Africa (class 7) and global sustainability regarding various topics (class 2) show the specific situation of a whole region of the world. Local and regional situations (class 3) and, more lightly, development programs (class 6) are treated independently from the African situation, while other places in the world also suffer from important inequalities. Finally, demographics (class 4) and migration policies (class 5) are also distant from the two other clusters. However, the fact that demographics is treated in relation to migration already represents a particular stance, but the situation of Africa does not seem to be treated by relying on migration issues. Moreover, the fact that most of the sub-corpus deal with Africa, could also show how the SDGs also encompass neocolonial reflexes that are still heavily present in the official texts (Langan, 2018) (Figure 27).

SDG 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities

The sustainability of cities and communities is treated through the following clusters, namely: the reduction of disaster risk, the implementation of global development agendas, the management of human settlements, the organization or urban areas, city management (including natural and cultural heritage), public transport systems, sustainability in general, and the implementation of local targets. This network really seems to address the complexity of the situation regarding urban settlements and their particularities, especially in a world where more than half of the population actually lives in large cities (Ritchie et al., 2018-2024). Obviously, this reality is more than central if one wishes to address sustainable development at both international and local levels (Figure 28).

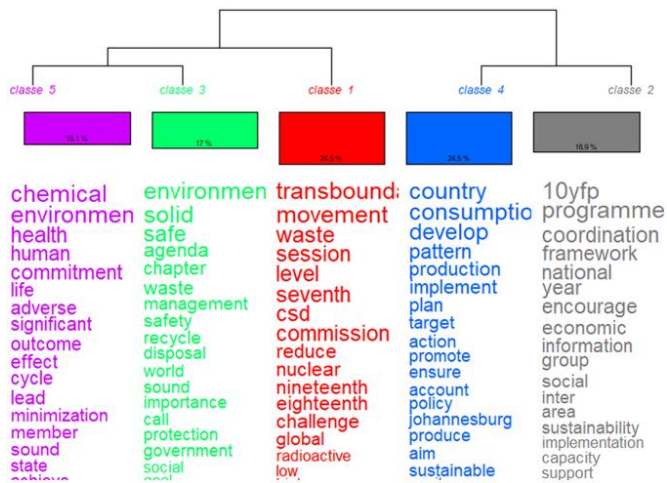


Figure 32. Narratives of SDG 12 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

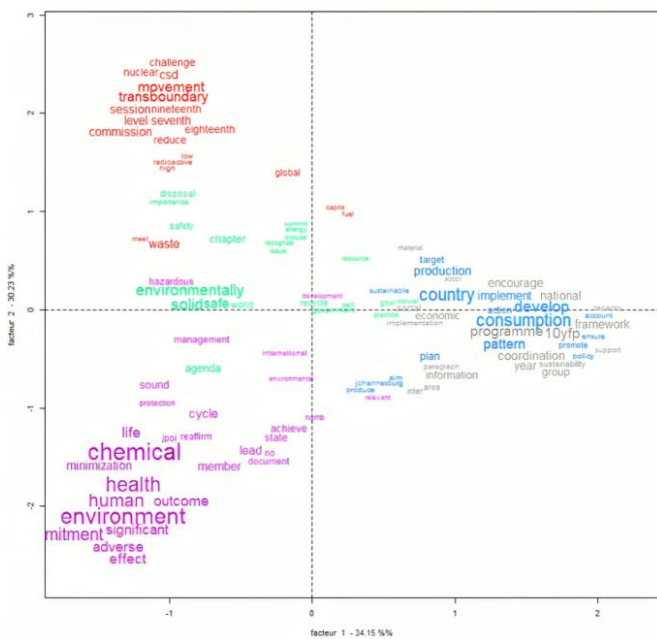


Figure 33. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 12 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

encourage the evolution of the global consumption and production model. It is interesting to see that consumption comes first in the program, while it is production that actually weighs the most regarding climate issues, environmental problems and carbon emissions, despite the concept of shared responsibility (Lenzen et al., 2007). Class 3 (17%) deal with environmental issues, class 4 (24.5%) is linked to countries’ development patterns and the local implementation of specific programs, while class 5 (15.1%) describes the impact of chemicals on the environment and human health (Figure 32).

Unsurprisingly, the words ‘recycle’ and ‘development’ remain at the center of the map, which also underlines the role of recycling and reusing in order to build a new consumption and production model. However, the fact that the word ‘government’ is also central in the sub-corpus might highlight the role of public laws and governmental decisions in order to propose incentives for both consumers and producers alike.

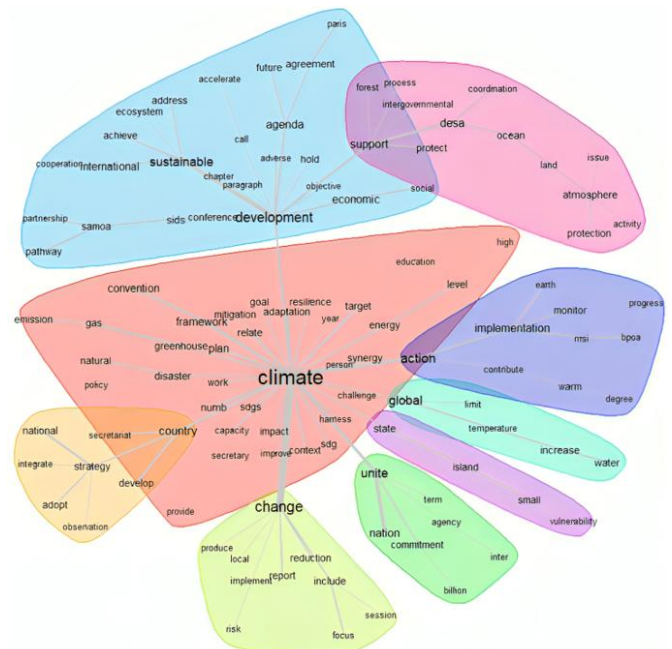


Figure 34. Lexical network for SDG 13 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

Environmental issues (class 3) is the most central narrative of the sub-corpus and actually manages to build links with other narrative classes. The management of chemicals and their impact on human health and the environment (class 5), on the bottom-left side of the map, is also very present of the corpus, while waste management (class 1), which represents a quarter of the sub-corpus, occupies the top-left side of the corpus. This combination of issues linked to chemicals, waste management and environmental stakes really gets to the point when it comes to sustainable consumption and production. However, the disconnection with the 10YFP (class 2) and development patterns chosen by countries (class 4) seems to show how difficult it is to transform environmental issues into concrete policies. This difficulty may be linked to the fact that there is, indeed, no balanced shared responsibility between producers and consumers-notably because consumers are not a cohesive whole and because they do not always share the same social, economic or regional specificities (Figure 33).

SDG 13. Climate Action

Obviously, climate action appears to be pivotal in order to foster the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In fact, within SDG 13, climate change is linked to national strategies, local vulnerability, UN agencies, concrete actions, global temperatures, resilience, greenhouse gas emissions, disasters and impacts. In the top of the network, sustainable development is tied to institutional matters, agendas, partnerships, and the support of the UN department of economic and social affairs (DESA) in terms of ocean, land and atmosphere protection. In this perspective, it seems that the impacts of climate change are accurately described, and that the sustainable development policy is drawing on the role of the DESA, which is interesting: the economic and social situation needs to be considered when it comes to climate action (Figure 34).

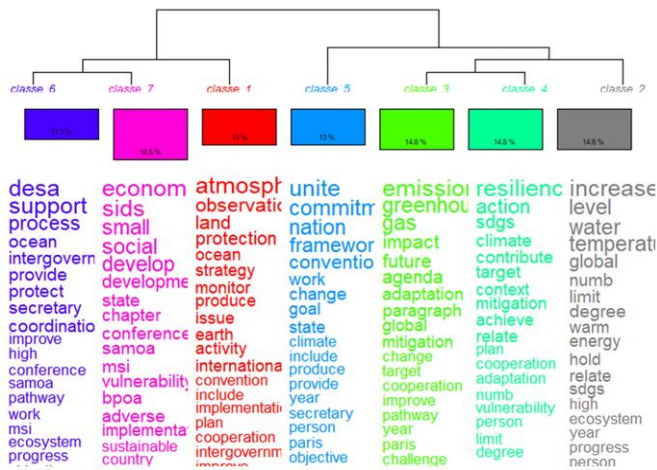


Figure 35. Narratives of SDG 13 (Source: Author's own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

SDG 13's narrative classes are emblematic of the way climate change is treated through sustainable development issues, and probably also echoes the way the conference of the Parties functions regarding the treatment of climate issues (Wagener, 2024). Class 1 (13%) deals with environmental observations and measures, class 2 (14.8%) is dedicated to the impacts of climate change and particularly the increase of water levels on the planet, while class 3 (14.8%) is linked to greenhouse gas emissions. Class 4 (14.8%) deals with resilience and mitigation in the context of vulnerabilities caused by climate change, and class 5 (13%) exposes the UN' institutional implications. Finally, class 6 (11.1%) highlights the role of the DESA to support vulnerable countries, while class 7 (18.5%) is dedicated to the small islands developing states (SIDS), the small islands developing states, which are particularly threatened by climate change. In other words, both classes 6 and 7 show how economic instruments can help these countries in the face of the rise of sea levels throughout the globe (Figure 35).

The center of this map encompasses a cluster of several different narratives, including: the UN' commitment regarding climate change (class 5), the DESA's support (class 6), as well as the SDGs actions and resilience propositions (class 4). The role of both the UN and the DESA is notably linked to the economic support of the SIDS (class 7), yet the link with environmental observations and measures (class 1) seems to be a bit loose-probably because it is important to focus on actions regarding the consequences of climate change for specific regions of the world. Greenhouse gas emissions (class 3) and the impacts of climate change regarding the rise of sea levels (class 2) also seem to be a bit more disconnected from the center of the corpus. More surprisingly, a thorough look at Figure 36 actually shows that environmental observations (class 1), greenhouse gas emissions (class 3) and the impacts of climate change (class 2) all appear on opposite sectors of the map, which implies that the SDG 13 sub-corpus divides these topics, while they should really remain tied together in order to highlight a clear understanding of climate change-how we measure it, what causes it, and what implications are linked to it. These disconnections and the focus on institutional instruments and strategies reveals the treatment of climate issues according to the UN: dealing with the consequences of

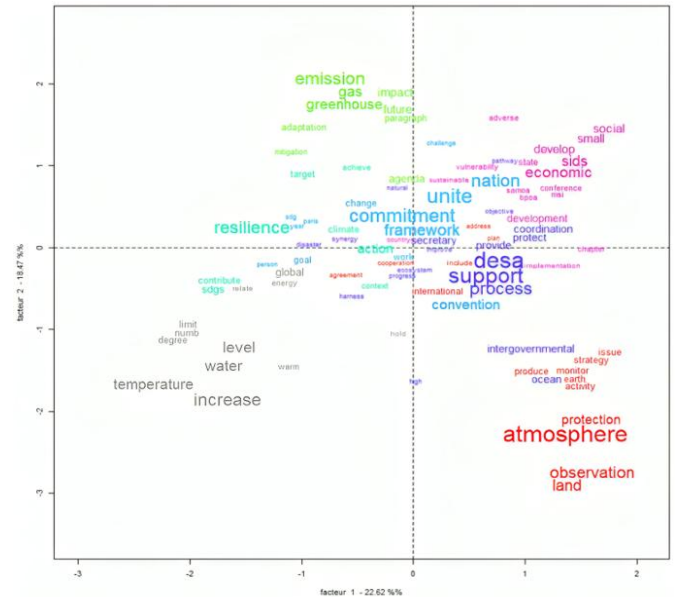


Figure 36. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 13 (Source: Author's own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

climate change, not with the causes, which are linked to economic, financial and industrial factors. Of course, treating the causes is important-but without efficiently treating the reasons, the SDG will always be playing catchup with foreseeable catastrophes.

SDG 14. Life Below Water

Life below water is linked to marine impacts of pollution, marine life as a resource that needs to be preserved, and ocean conservation. For once, the role of human activity and contribution to the preservation and evolution of marine ecosystems is clearly highlighted, which also means that every actor needs to mobilize in order to reach SDG 14. Sustainable development targets are also mentioned, particularly regarding the regulation of fish population and the recognition of small fishery, and the use of technology and research to preserve marine life. Yet again, the targets of SDG 14 mostly seem aspirational (Cormier & Elliott, 2017) and would need more details regarding concrete implementations-not to mention the definition of marine life as a resource that has to serve the human species, and not just as living beings that should be protected even if they do not serve any economic or social purpose (Adelman, 2018).

The SDG 14 sub-corpus offers 6 narrative classes. Class 1 (14.8%) mentions the management of human activity in marine environments, class 2 (18.5%) deals with countries with small fishery activities, especially islands, and class 3 (22.2%), the largest one, highlights the role of the UN regarding ocean conservation. Class 4 (14.8%) is dedicated to the environment, class 5 (14.8%) shows the services provided by the environment to human life and marine ecosystems in general, while class 6 (14.8%) defines marine life as resources needed by human societies. These narratives actually validate the hypothesis elaborated under Figure 37: marine life is first and foremost described as a resource that can provide services to human beings and that has to be sustainably managed. Of course, the lack of management would make smaller

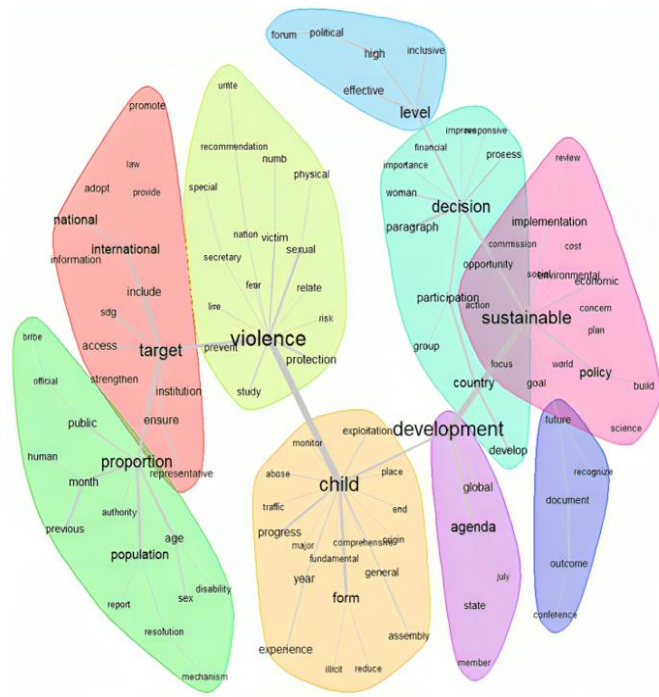


Figure 43. Lexical network for SDG 16 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

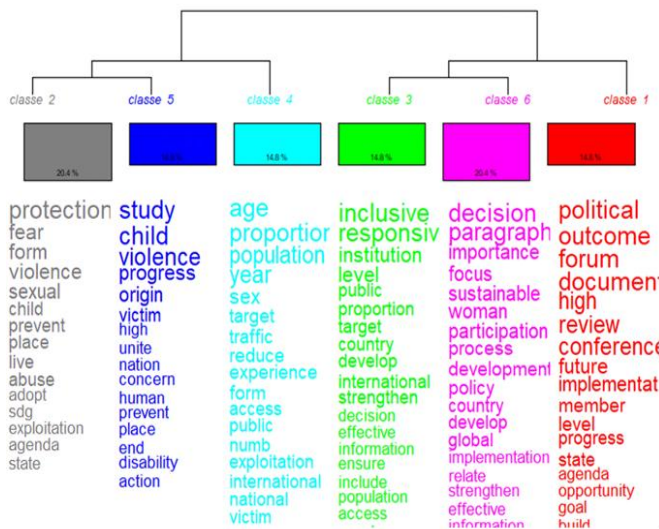


Figure 44. Narratives of SDG 16 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

the weight of institutional discourse seems to be much more important than expected (Figure 44).

There is no clear center regarding SDG 16, which objectively raises some concern. In fact, all 6 narrative classes seem to occupy 4 corners of the map, which indicates an important disconnection between the sub-corpus’ topics. In this perspective, 4 clusters occupy the map: social characteristics (class 4) on the bottom-left corner, violence (class 2) and its progress (class 5) on the top-left corner, political and institutional outcomes (class 1) on the top-right corner, and finally the need for inclusive and responsive institutions (class 3) and official policies (class 6) on the bottom-right corner of the map. This poly-opposition is striking indeed, disconnection between violence, the social

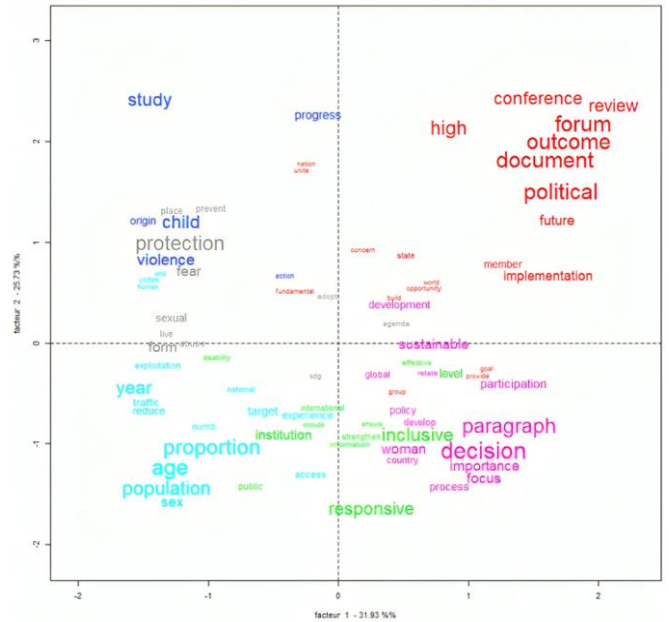


Figure 45. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 16 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

characteristics of people targeted by violence, the need for more inclusive institutions and political outcomes shows the lack of cohesive discourse regarding the need for peace, justice and strong institutions. It is as if all the ingredients for an ambitious policy were present in the official texts, without being interconnected in order to build up a clear and pragmatic strategy (Figure 45).

SDG 17. Partnerships For the Goals

This analysis of each SDG ends with the lexical supernova of SDG 17, with an explosion of separate clusters that need to be described in order to understand what is at stake regarding the needed partnerships for sustainable development. It seems as if the lexical clusters are thrown in in bulk within the text, thus gathering the implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, the level of participation of each actor, the mobilization of both the private and public sector, the capacity to build strong collaborations, national strategies, global situations, science and technology, and also the inclusion of social, economic, and environmental issues. Furthermore, the SDG 17 sub-corpus also comprises inclusion, business markets, domestic targets in different countries, financial needs, health, governmental programs, and general development-notably regarding smaller island states and countries from the global South. To sum it up, SDG 17 encompasses a galaxy of potential stakeholders, as well as a huge number of various topics that do not appear to be linked to each other (Figure 46).

SDG 17 proposes 6 narrative classes. Class 1 (14.1%) is first and foremost linked to financial needs and resources that could foster the achievement of SDGs, and class 2 (19%) is dedicated to the SDGs. Class 3 (15.7%) addresses technical coordination and enhancement, including science, finances and innovation, while class 4 (16.5%) comprises the necessary targets to achieve in order to foster the development of countries. Class 5 (19%) is dedicated to the 2030 agenda for



Figure 46. Lexical network for SDG 17 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

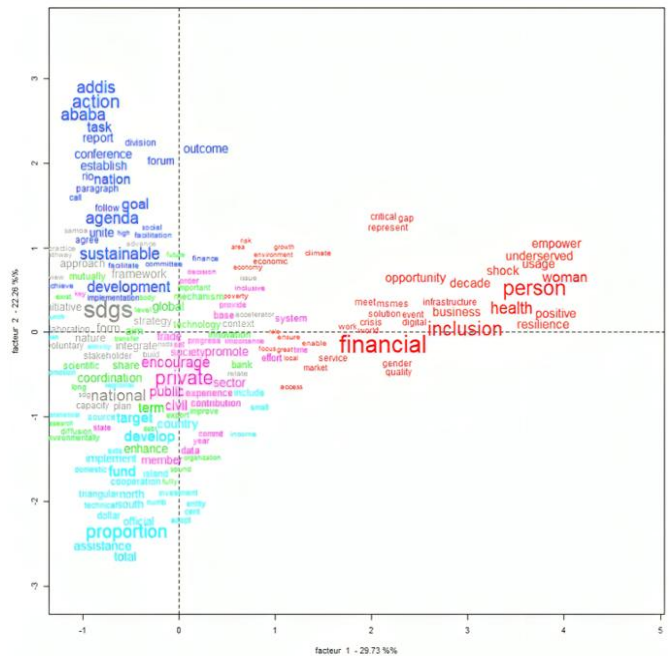


Figure 48. Map of correspondence between narratives of SDG 17 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

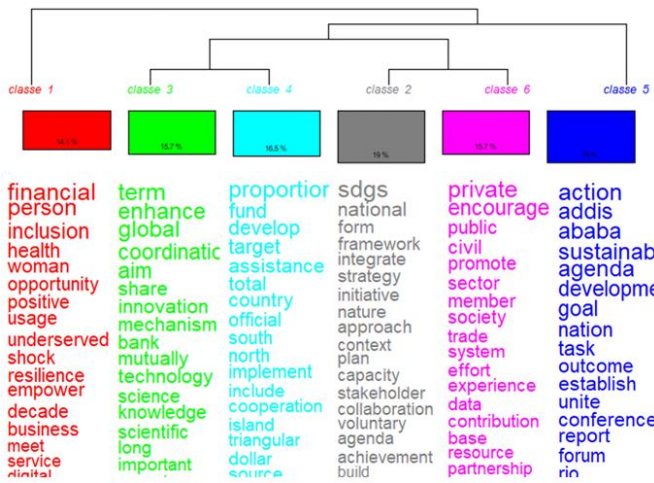


Figure 47. Narratives of SDG 17 (Source: Author’s own elaboration, using Iramuteq software)

sustainable development, and class 6 (15.7%) highlights the promotion of partnerships between the public and the private sector. The main stakes of SDG 17 appear to be technical, inasmuch as it seems to serve as a basis for the implementation of all other SDGs in order to fulfil the 2030 agenda. However, partnerships are mostly drawing on financial needs and support, with the addition of science, innovation and technology (Figure 47).

The promotion of partnerships between the public and private sector (class 6) occupy the center of the map, with tight links to innovation, technology and science (class 3), as well as the SDGs themselves (class 2). In this sense, the way these three narrative classes are interconnected represent a definition of the way the UN see the necessary partnerships that are needed in order to fulfil the SDGs: an alliance of public and private sectors, innovation, technology and science-while social approaches are completely absent. Two more narratives

revolve around the center, namely the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (class 5) on the top-left side, and the necessary means to reach the 2030 agenda’s targets (class 4) on the bottom-left side. The fact that the partnerships need to be rooted in the 2030 agenda’s targets is obviously interesting, yet the loose connection with financial needs and support (class 1), especially for the other SDGs (infrastructure, work, gender equality, resilience, economic growth, etc.), raises some concern. In fact, how can partnerships help reach the SDGs’ targets? Is the relationship between the public and private sector mainly linked to financial reports, how and why? (Figure 48).

DISCUSSION: THE LIMITATIONS OF THE SDGS’ GENERIC FRAMING

First, it is important to walk through the main findings and analytical critics that have to be voiced regarding each SDG, in order to structure a systemic discourse study of the corpus.

SDG 1 (no poverty) seems to treat poverty mainly through the management of agriculture, while economic and social factors remain underdeveloped in the official texts. SDG 2 (zero hunger) is also centered around management, this time regarding resources, energy strategies, political choices and health issues that impact food policies and agricultural choices in general. SDG 3 (good health and well-being) are more centered around health and medical strategies than well-being, yet keep targeted populations at the center of discussions, which is a positive thing to notice. SDG 4 (quality education) seems to be poorly treated in terms of targets and measures, despite its pivotal role in the development of societies and countries and its importance for building a sustainable future for all. SDG 5 (gender equality) seems to

erase other minorities from the agenda (especially LGBTQI+ citizens), which seems to be a problem regarding the links between progressive policies regarding women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights. SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), however, appears to be one of the rare SDGs to actually encompass both the national and international levels and the need for coordinate actions regarding water issues, especially in the face of climate change. SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) encompasses a lot of clear issues and applicable actions, probably due to its technological, industrial and economic potential which makes it easier for various stakeholders to act accordingly. SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) shows how complex it is to promote sustainability and a greener economy within a financial and economic system that heavily draws on non-sustainable activities that represent a threat to worker's rights.

SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) may offer a naïve view of the role of industries in terms of workers' rights and also mentions technologies without explicitly stating that modern innovations, such as AI, represent a threat to climate change mitigation. SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) heavily focuses on Africa, as if inequalities were not present in other regions; moreover, it seems to treat migration as a side effect of inequalities, without addressing the economic roots implemented by our capitalist world-system. SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) offers a managerial approach regarding cities and larger urban areas, with a take on sustainability that slightly sets risk reduction aside and does not really shed a light on sustainable communities that would live outside urban centers. SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) is centered around waste management, environmental and health issues as well as the impact of chemicals, yet these issues seem to remain distant from the 10YFP which is necessary to build a new production and consumption model, where the shared responsibility of actors would not mostly rely on consumers, thus ignoring the economic and social differences between them.

SDG 13 (climate action) heavily focuses on resilience and mitigation, in order to address the dramatic consequences of climate change, particularly linked to SIDS—yet it appears that the causes are not mentioned in the official texts, and the treatment seems to be importantly tied to economic compensation alone, through the role of the UN DESA. SDG 14 (life below water) highlights the way the UN, through the SDGs, define non-human life as a mere resource that need to be preserved because they provide services to human societies—not just because they are to be recognized as life, without any purpose-oriented ideology. Surprisingly, SDG 15 (life on land) offers different representations: while resource management still lies at the center of the sub-corpus, the connections with climate change, land degradation, biodiversity and concrete targets are clearly highlighted—which clearly shows that representations regarding life below water and life on land seem to be completely different in official texts.

SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) shows its incantatory nature, without being able to connect the stakes and issues linked to violence on the one hand, and the necessary concrete political actions that need to be implemented on the other hand; this discursive and

argumentative situation is almost, in itself, a concentrated form of what critics traditionally object when describing the lack of political consistency of international institutions. SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals) offers an interesting overview of the way partnerships are represented in the official texts, in order to reach the 2030 agenda for sustainable development: the risk here is also to drown social, ethical and environmental issues in a multi-stakeholder approach where the need for financial resources is so high that the private sector can see the public sector as a business opportunity (Cruz, 2023), which may erase some of the SDGs' aspects and hinder the necessary and constructive criticism of the economic and political systems that actually make the world unsustainable.

Clearly, the SDGs prioritize economic growth and institutional frameworks, often sidelining core issues like environmental and social equity; the SDGs lean heavily on current economic and political systems, particularly partnerships with private stakeholders, which risks perpetuating inequalities and diluting transformative ambitions. For instance, 'development' frequently dominates the discourse, while sustainability is treated as secondary or instrumental, which is frequently the case for sustainable development, in order to soften the tensions linked to the factors that cause our societies to be unsustainable (Krieg-Planque, 2010). Furthermore, key interconnected issues (e.g., poverty and hunger, climate action and economic policies) are addressed in isolation, leading to disjointed narratives. In fact, this risk of general disconnection is rooted in a managerial approach with vague or generic targets, which creates a gap between declarative statements and actionable policies.

This disconnection is even more visible in the analysis of SDG 13 (climate action), which separates environmental observations, greenhouse gas emissions, and impacts—while climate issues are one of the roots of the need for sustainable development. Moreover, the SDGs often treat non-human life (e.g., marine and terrestrial biodiversity) as resources for human benefit, rather than recognizing their intrinsic value. Regarding social aspects, gender equality (SDG 5) marginalizes broader intersectional concerns, such as LGBTQI+ rights. On another note, textual aspects regarding countries from the global South, especially for the African continent, risk reinforcing neocolonial narratives rather than addressing global systemic inequities.

Since 2030 will probably see the emergence of new goals in a world that is getting more and more unstable, it would be interesting for the future of SDGs to reframe sustainability as central rather than auxiliary, in order to escape the dominance of economic narratives. In this perspective, alternative development paradigms could be considered, such as degrowth or solidarity economies, which could challenge the prevailing growth-centric model—a model that is indeed incompatible with SDGs. Moreover, the SDG multi-stakeholder may indeed mask the fact that corporate influence might override public interests, while public-led initiatives also exist and prioritize equity and sustainability, in a world where financial interests can threaten the fulfilment of the 2030 agenda. In fact, this multi-stakeholder approach is not sufficient; it is important to link the SDGs together and integrate them, which is probably the main flaw of the 2030 agenda. For example, it would be relevant to link SDG 13's

focus on climate resilience with SDG 12's calls for sustainable consumption and production, emphasizing shared systemic causes and solutions.

Furthermore, the 2030 agenda seems disconnected from current social and societal issues. In this sense, SDG 5 could benefit from a more intersectional approach of gender equality, in order to explore the broader implications of excluding marginalized groups. Contemporary concepts could also be needed to avoid the neocolonialism present in SDG 10: it is important to unravel the historical patterns of resource exploitation and global inequities perpetuated by international frameworks (Newell, 2005), which is also the case for the 2030 agenda, in a certain way (Gruber & Scherling, 2020). Moreover, SDGs 14 and 15 suffer from an anthropocentric logic and could benefit from an eco-centric perspective that values ecosystems independently of human utility (Davidson, 2013).

Of course, official texts regarding the SDGs, when published on the UN internet websites, are here to offer general guidelines for stakeholders, in order to share a general spirit for the 2030 agenda. In this sense, one could argue that it is not the purpose of such texts to advocate for a change of paradigm or for new social organizations. Yet there is no such thing as a harmless and neutral text, even in institutional discourse: the way narratives are framed in the SDGs obviously show that there is a general will to make the world a better place, yet it would be naive to believe that a change can be made by keeping the same paradigms, economic structures and social orders that led the world to what it has become. Addressing the consequences without addressing the causes, or turning a blind eye to the industrial, financial and technological issues that make the world a less sustainable place, without even questioning the culture and philosophical model that fuel the representations of non-human life perceived as a mere resource, is a mistake that will make the SDGs unattainable—or only partially. Discourse is never only a matter of words or semantics: it is a matter of viewpoints that are particularly important when it comes to texts that are to be shared globally, for every country, every stakeholder, and every human being that wants to play their part in the 2030 agenda.

CONCLUSION: DISCOURSE MATTERS WHEN IT COMES TO SUSTAINABILITY

By examining the full corpus of texts related to the 17 SDGs through both lexicometric tools and critical discourse analysis, this research shows that despite the stated inclusivity and universality of the agenda, the discourse often privileges a managerial, economically driven, and institutionally centered worldview. The dominant narratives emphasize development over sustainability, and global institutional frameworks over local complexities. These discursive tendencies risk reinforcing existing geopolitical hierarchies and economic paradigms, rather than fostering the structural change the SDGs ostensibly call for.

Moreover, the analysis highlights the fragmentation of themes across different goals—environmental and social issues

are frequently decoupled, while fundamental intersections (e.g., between poverty and ecology, or gender and climate) are downplayed or left implicit. The use of technical vocabulary and policy-oriented formulations contributes to a depoliticization of pressing global challenges, reducing them to targets and indicators rather than framing them as part of larger systemic transformations.

By proposing a methodological framework that combines corpus-based linguistic tools with critical discourse theory, this study contributes to the growing field of critical sustainability studies. It calls for greater attention to the performative and ideological dimensions of global policy discourse. Future research could compare institutional discourses across languages or regions, analyzing the reception and reinterpretation of the SDGs in local contexts, or investigating the role of non-state actors in reshaping sustainability narratives.

Ultimately, discourse matters—not only as a reflection of institutional priorities but as a powerful instrument in defining what is thinkable, desirable, and actionable on a global scale. As we approach 2030, the challenge is not only to implement the SDGs, but to question the very language through which they are imagined, framed, and justified.

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