

Beyond the Buzzwords: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals

**Prosper Komolafe^{2, 7}, Sara Abdul Qader^{1, 7}, Uyai-Abasi Edem^{3, 7}, Devyanshi Devyanshi^{2, 7},
Rika Onyenso^{4, 7}, Kalkidan Tafese^{4, 7}, Nkechinyere Irabor^{6, 7}, Olha Bilaniuk^{5, 7}, Wajed
El-Halabi⁷**

¹ Faculty of Science, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

² Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

³ Faculty of Arts, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

⁴ Faculty of Science, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

⁵ Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

⁶ Faculty of Arts and Science, Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, Canada

⁷ Alberta Council for Global Cooperation, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become the dominant global framework through which development priorities are articulated, evaluated, and governed. Framed as a universal and integrated agenda, the SDGs claim to offer a shared moral and policy roadmap for addressing poverty, inequality, health disparities, environmental degradation, and institutional fragility by 2030. While widely celebrated for their inclusivity and ambition, the SDGs also operate as a powerful discursive project that shapes how global problems are understood, who is positioned as responsible for addressing them, and which forms of intervention are rendered legitimate. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and operationalizing Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this paper examines the SDGs as a unified corpus of global governance

discourse rather than as a collection of discrete policy goals. Through a close reading of the official SDG texts, the analysis demonstrates that the framework simultaneously advances normative commitments to equity, sustainability, and human well-being while reproducing technocratic, depoliticized, and market-compatible logics that constrain transformative change. By tracing how language constructs development as measurable, manageable, and consensual, this study contributes to critical scholarship in global development and public health by illuminating the ideological work performed by the SDGs and the implications of this discourse for justice-oriented policy and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Since their formal adoption in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have come to occupy an unparalleled position within global development governance (United Nations [UN], 2015). They inform national development strategies, guide donor funding priorities, structure institutional reporting mechanisms, and increasingly shape academic research agendas across disciplines ranging from economics and public health to environmental science and political sociology (Engberg-Pedersen & Zwart, 2018; Sianes et al., 2022; UN, 2015). The SDGs are frequently invoked as evidence of an unprecedented global consensus on shared challenges and responsibilities, using the ideas of universality, integration and partnership (UN, 2015).

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals approaches, global attention has increasingly focused on measuring progress through targets and indicators. When discussing their objectives, more focus tends to fall on the goals themselves rather than on the specific words and phrases used to express them. In academic contexts, analyzing the language used to communicate goals can reveal underlying assumptions, values, and power dynamics that might otherwise be overlooked (Fairclough, 1992). The language used also helps assess the clarity and

persuasiveness of the communication; if the articulation is vague or overly complex, the goals may lose impact or be misinterpreted. On the other hand, clear and precise language promotes shared understanding and effective collaboration. Thus, giving greater focus to the language through which goals are articulated enriches the discussion and leads to more thoughtful and effective implementation. Rather than evaluating whether the SDGs have been achieved, this analysis evaluates how the language of the goals shapes what kinds of actions are seen as possible, which ones are given priority, and which tend to be overlooked or hidden. The SDGs are frequently approached as neutral policy instruments, but in reality, they are active constructs that structure political priorities. Their language defines problems, delimits acceptable solutions, and shapes how responsibility, success and failure are understood across governments, institutions and communities. For example, if the language emphasizes economic growth, policies might favour business development over environmental protection. If the goals use technical or broad terms, some crucial social issues might be ignored because they don't fit neatly into the categories defined by the language. By foregrounding discourse, this analysis contributes to ongoing debates about why SDG progress often appears visible without being transformative. We argue that without revisiting the language through which global goals are framed, future development agendas risk reproducing the same tensions that currently limit the SDGs' capacity to deliver meaningful and equitable change.

METHODS

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), guided by Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1992; Alasiri, 2024), to examine the Sustainable Development Goals as global policy discourse. CDA was chosen because it demonstrates how language reflects power, shapes social meaning, and influences what kinds of action are

considered possible.

The data used for this study are the SDG goals and targets as outlined in the original United Nations' 2015-2030 Goals for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Our analysis occurs at three levels: first, the textual analysis examines word choice, repeated verbs, vague terms, passive constructions and rhetorical patterns. Particular attention is given to terms such as “ensure,” “promote,” “strengthen,” “resilience,” “inclusion,” and “sustainability.” Second, the discursive practice analysis considers how the SDGs function as consensus-based global policy texts shaped by negotiation and institutional priorities. Third, the social practice analysis connects these language patterns to broader structures such as global inequality, neoliberal governance, colonial histories, and political economy.

The SDG texts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, omissions, and areas of ambiguity. Special attention was given to missing or underdeveloped issues such as redistribution, corporate accountability, debt, colonialism, and structural inequality.

Because the study relies only on publicly available policy documents, no human participants were involved, and no ethics approval was required. Reflexivity remains important, as the analysis is informed by critical perspectives in global health, development studies, and social justice.

ANALYSIS

SDG One: No Poverty

SDG 1 frames poverty as a universal and urgent global problem. The goal, “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” (UN, 2015), uses totalizing language through words such as “all,” “everywhere,” and “for all.” This creates moral urgency, but it also obscures uneven historical

and geopolitical responsibilities for poverty's persistence. Poverty is presented as a shared global condition rather than as an outcome shaped by colonial histories, unequal trade systems, debt, and global wealth concentration.

The targets rely heavily on measurement. For example, **Target 1.1**, which calls “to eradicate extreme poverty...” (UN, 2015), is tied to income thresholds such as the international poverty line. This makes poverty easier to track, but it also narrows poverty to a quantifiable economic indicator. The World Bank's Multidimensional Poverty Measure shows that poverty rates increase significantly when education and basic infrastructure are included, which highlights the limits of income-based measurement (World Bank, 2024). While multidimensional measures are more expansive, they can still fall short if they do not engage with the political and historical forces that produce inequity

A recurring pattern in SDG 1 is directive language such as “ensure,” “implement,” and “build.” These verbs make equality appear achievable through policy action, but they often leave responsibility unclear. **Target 1.3**, which calls to “implement nationally appropriate social protection systems” (UN, 2015), shifts responsibility to individual states, even though poverty is deeply embedded in global economic structures. The phrase “nationally appropriate” (UN, 2015) is also vague, leaving unanswered who defines adequacy and how such systems will be funded.

Target 1.5 also emphasizes “resilience” for poor and vulnerable populations (UN, 2015). While resilience is important, this language can frame poverty as something people must adapt to rather than a condition produced by unjust systems. Vulnerability becomes something to be managed rather than transformed. Overall, SDG 1 frames poverty as measurable and solvable through policy intervention, but avoids directly addressing wealth concentration, historical extraction, debt, and structural redistribution.

SDG Two: Zero Hunger

SDG 2 combines humanitarian language with agricultural and economic development discourse. The goal, “end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” (UN, 2015), links hunger closely with agricultural production. This framing can make hunger appear mainly as a production problem, even though hunger is also deeply connected to distribution, poverty, land ownership, conflict, and unequal trade systems (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations et al., 2025).

Target 2.1 calls to “end hunger and ensure access” to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food (UN, 2015). The phrase “ensure access” acknowledges that food availability alone is not enough, but it does not explain why access remains unequal despite sufficient global food production (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d.). The language suggests logistical or infrastructural gaps more than structural inequalities in purchasing power, land control, or global food markets.

The goal strongly emphasizes productivity through **Target 2.3**, which calls to “double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers” (UN, 2015), and **Target 2.4**, which emphasizes sustainable food production systems and resilient agricultural practices (UN, 2015). This creates a discursive assumption that increasing output is central to solving hunger. However, this sits uneasily beside the reality of food waste and distribution failures. If large amounts of food are wasted between production and consumption, the issue is not simply producing more food, but restructuring how food is distributed, stored, transported, and valued (Goodwin, 2025; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2024). SDG 2 also uses the language of investment and international cooperation, especially in **Target 2.a**, which emphasizes investment in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services,

technology development, and plant and livestock gene banks (UN, 2015). While these can be useful, this frames development as dependent on financial and technological inputs, often from external actors. It can position the least developed countries as recipients of external support rather than as communities with their own agricultural knowledge and local solutions.

The goal also frames hunger as a barrier to productivity. Language about hunger producing “less productive individuals” (UN, n.d.) reflects a utilitarian view of health, in which people are valued partly for their economic contributions. Overall, SDG 2 is well-intentioned, but its discourse prioritizes productivity, resilience, and investment while underemphasizing distribution, corporate control of food systems, food waste, and structural inequality.

SDG Three: Good Health and Well-Being

SDG 3 frames health through universal and outcome-oriented language. The goal, “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” (UN, 2015), presents health as a global objective. However, it does not fully address the unequal conditions that shape health across populations and regions. The phrase “for all at all ages” (UN, 2015) reinforces universality while masking differences in health systems, social determinants, and access to care.

The targets rely heavily on quantifiable outcomes, such as **Target 3.1**, which seeks to reduce maternal mortality; **Target 3.3**, which calls for ending major communicable disease epidemics; **Target 3.4**, which addresses premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases; and **Target 3.b**, which addresses access to vaccines and essential medicines (UN, 2015). This creates an epidemiological and metric-oriented discourse, where health is represented through indicators that can be tracked. While useful for monitoring, this framing risks reducing health to statistical improvement rather than addressing the socio-economic and environmental causes of illness.

For example, communicable diseases are targeted directly, but the language does not fully integrate the conditions that produce them, such as poverty, unsafe drinking water, poor housing, food insecurity, and underfunded infrastructure. Evidence suggests that these interconnected social and environmental determinants are fundamental drivers of infectious disease transmission, with inadequate water, housing, sanitation, and poverty reinforcing cycles of illness and limiting prevention efforts (Sadiq, 2025). For instance, overcrowded housing with poor ventilation can facilitate the spread of disease such as tuberculosis, while inadequate access to clean water and sanitation increases the risk of waterborne diseases like cholera, demonstrating how living conditions directly influence health outcomes rather than disease occurring in isolation (Sadiq, 2025). Similarly, **Target 3.8** defines universal health coverage through “financial risk protection,” “essential services,” and “affordable medicines” (UN, 2015). However, the goal does not clarify how these will be funded, governed, or protected from privatization and unequal pharmaceutical markets.

Target 3.c also calls to strengthen the health workforce, particularly in developing countries (UN, 2015). This acknowledges capacity gaps, but it does not explain why shortages exist or how working conditions, wages, migration patterns, and global investment disparities shape them (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). In 2023, the International Council of Nurses reported that the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and Germany relied significantly more on nurse migration, with the UK recording 24,000 new nurses between September 2021 and 2022 (Buchan & Catton, 2023). Despite the vulnerability of low-income countries to health crises, active recruitment is still on the rise (Buchan & Catton, 2023). The discourse of SDG 3 obscures these structural drivers, framing workforce shortages as technical problems that can be addressed through capacity building rather than as a consequence of global

economic and political inequalities.

Mental health is also limited in the discourse. It appears under **Target 3.4**, which calls to “promote mental health and well-being” (UN, 2015). However, it is narrowly measured through extreme outcomes such as suicide rather than broader experiences of distress, availability of and accessibility to support, stigma, and prevention (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2025). Overall, SDG 3 presents health as universal and measurable, but it separates health outcomes from many of their root causes. The discourse prioritizes monitoring, access, and system capacity while leaving deeper structural determinants underdeveloped.

SDG Four: Quality Education

SDG 4 frames education as both a universal right and a tool for development. The goal, “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015), uses inclusive and rights-based language. However, the targets focus more on connecting education to employment, skills, and economic productivity, creating tension between education as a public good and education as human capital.

The language repeatedly emphasizes access, completion, affordability, and quality. **Target 4.1** calls for all children to complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, while **Target 4.3** calls for equal access to technical, vocational, and tertiary education (UN, 2015). While this highlights participation, it does not fully address differences in educational quality, curriculum, language, infrastructure, colonial histories, or social barriers that shape whether students can actually learn and thrive.

The word “quality” is especially important because it is used frequently but not clearly defined. Progress is often measured through indicators associated with **Target 4.1**, including

completion rates and minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics (UN, 2015; UN DESA, 2025). These indicators make education comparable across countries, but they narrow education to what can be counted. Being in school does not necessarily mean meaningful learning is happening.

Target 4.4 also emphasizes “relevant skills” for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship (UN, 2015). This reflects a human capital discourse that positions learners as future workers rather than as citizens, knowledge producers, or rights holders. While employment matters, this framing can sideline the social, cultural, psychological, and democratic purposes of education.

Like many SDGs, responsibility is often unassigned. The targets outline what should happen, but are less clear about who must fund, implement, and sustain these changes. References to “developing countries” also position some regions as recipients of intervention rather than equal participants. Overall, SDG 4 promotes access and inclusion, but its discourse often prioritizes measurable participation and labour-market readiness over deeper transformation of educational systems.

SDG Five: Gender Equality

SDG 5 uses strong normative language to address gender inequality. The goal, “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (UN, 2015), is reinforced by **Target 5.1**, which calls to “end all forms of discrimination,” and **Target 5.2**, which calls to “eliminate all forms of violence” against women and girls (UN, 2015). The repeated use of “all” creates a broad and morally powerful commitment, but it can also flatten differences among women and girls across intersectionalities such as race, class, disability, sexuality, geography, and legal status.

The targets, particularly **Targets 5.1 and 5.3**, rely heavily on legal and institutional change. Discrimination is assessed through legal frameworks (UN DESA, 2025), while harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation are addressed through efforts to eliminate them (UN, 2015). Legal reform is important, but the discourse often assumes that the presence of laws translates into meaningful change. It does not sufficiently address enforcement, cultural resistance, informal power dynamics, or the gap between legal rights and lived realities.

Target 5.5 also emphasizes representation through women's participation in leadership and managerial positions (UN, 2015). This is important, but representation alone does not necessarily transform the institutions women enter. The language of SDG 5 frames empowerment as inclusion within existing systems rather than their redesign, suggesting that participation alone can achieve equality. This results in a failure to fully confront patriarchy, unpaid care systems, workplace discrimination, and unequal access to resources. **Target 5.4** recognizes unpaid care and domestic work, but focuses on recognizing and valuing this work rather than clearly redistributing or compensating it (UN, 2015). Similarly, violence is measured through reported incidents, which can underrepresent harm because disclosure depends on safety, stigma, trust, and access to reporting systems. Overall, SDG 5 identifies major dimensions of gender inequality, but its discourse prioritizes legal frameworks, representation, and measurable indicators.

SDG Six: Clean Water and Sanitation

SDG 6 frames water and sanitation as essential resources requiring access, governance, and management. The goal, “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” (UN, 2015), combines universal access with a technocratic management

discourse. Water is presented as a resource to be optimized and delivered, but less often as a contested political issue shaped by ownership, privatization, pollution, and unequal power.

Target 6.1, which calls to achieve “universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water” (UN, 2015), emphasizes equity, but does not address who controls water systems or how affordability is determined. Water is framed mainly as a service rather than as a right shaped by political economy. Sanitation is similarly addressed through access, but the goal provides limited detail about infrastructure financing, maintenance, and governance.

Target 6.3 calls to improve water quality by reducing pollution and minimizing hazardous chemicals (UN, 2015). However, responsibility for pollution is not clearly assigned. The language avoids directly naming industrial, agricultural, or corporate actors whose activities contaminate water systems. This weakens accountability and turns pollution into a general problem rather than one produced by identifiable systems.

Targets 6.4 and 6.5 also emphasize water-use efficiency and integrated water resources management (UN, 2015). These terms reflect a managerial logic focused on optimization, coordination, and technical planning. While efficiency matters, it can obscure unequal consumption patterns and the fact that scarcity is often socially and politically produced through growing demand, unequal access, and decisions about how water resources are allocated and managed (Liu et al., 2017). For example, regions may experience water scarcity not because water is physically unavailable, but because rapid population growth, economic development, poor governance, or pollution limit equitable access to safe water despite existing water resources (Liu et al., 2017). Overall, SDG 6 constructs water as a technical management issue while underemphasizing power, ownership, privatization, and corporate accountability in water access and distribution.

SDG Seven: Affordable and Clean Energy

SDG 7 presents energy through a technocratic and modernization-oriented discourse, meaning that energy challenges are framed primarily as problems to be solved through technological innovation, infrastructure expansion, investment, and improved system efficiency rather than through political, social, or rights-based approaches. The goal, “ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all” (UN, 2015), recognizes energy as essential to development, but frames access primarily through infrastructure, technology, investment, and efficiency rather than as a guaranteed right.

The phrase “for all” suggests universality, but qualifiers such as “affordable,” “reliable,” and “modern” show that access is mediated through economic and infrastructural systems. Energy is not presented as something people are entitled to by default, but as something to be achieved through system expansion and modernization.

The targets emphasize renewable energy shares through **Target 7.2**, energy efficiency through **Target 7.3**, and infrastructure and technology upgrades through **Targets 7.a and 7.b** (UN, 2015). For example, **Target 7.3** calls to “double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency,” while **Target 7.2** calls to “increase substantially the share of renewable energy” (UN, 2015), framing progress through measurable performance indicators. These are important, but they do not fully address who benefits from energy transitions, who pays for them, and whose communities are affected by new infrastructure.

Target 7.a also emphasizes international cooperation and access to clean energy technology (UN, 2015). This can reinforce a top-down development model where innovation flows from wealthier or more technologically advanced regions to less developed ones. Local knowledge, decentralized energy systems, and community-led solutions receive less attention.

Overall, SDG 7 frames energy transition as a matter of modernization, investment, and system optimization. While this supports renewable energy expansion, it risks overlooking energy justice, community participation, the unequal distribution of energy access, and environmental burdens.

SDG Eight: Decent Work and Economic Growth

SDG 8 places economic growth at the centre of development by presenting increased production, investment, and market expansion as the primary pathways toward improving social well-being. Within this framework, economic growth is tested not only as an economic objective but also as a mechanism for achieving broader development outcomes, including employment creation, poverty reduction, and improving living standards. The goal, “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UN, 2015), assumes that continuous growth can be compatible with inclusion, sustainability, and decent work. The repeated pairing of “sustained,” “inclusive,” and “sustainable” makes growth appear universally beneficial, without fully examining the contradictions between expansion, labour rights, and ecological limits.

This is reinforced by **Target 8.1**, which calls to sustain per capita economic growth and achieve at least 7 percent GDP growth in least developed countries (UN, 2015). GDP becomes a central measure of success, even though GDP does not show who benefits from growth, whether work is secure, or whether environmental harm is increasing. The discourse normalizes growth rather than questioning whether growth-based development is always equitable or sustainable.

The goal also emphasizes productivity, diversification, technological upgrading, entrepreneurship, and innovation through **Targets 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4** (UN, 2015). These terms reflect a modernization discourse where productivity is treated as inherently positive. However,

productivity gains can also involve automation, labour restructuring, precarious work, and exploitation within global supply chains (International Labour Organization & United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). These tensions are not fully addressed.

SDG 8 includes important language on decent work through **Target 8.5**, equal pay through **Target 8.5**, safe working environments through **Target 8.8**, and ending forced labour through **Target 8.7** (UN, 2015). However, “decent work” is not clearly defined across contexts, and enforcement mechanisms remain vague. It is possible for GDP and employment rates to improve while many workers remain underpaid, insecure, overworked, or excluded from legal protections.

In 2025, the United Nations Statistics Department reported a decrease in the global employment rate, alongside the persistence of informal employment and youth unemployment. The data shows the limits of this growth-focused discourse. Informal work is addressed in **Target 8.3**, which promotes development-oriented policies that support productive activities and decent job creation (UN, 2015), but the goal does not fully address why informal economies persist or how global economic systems rely on insecure labour. Overall, SDG 8 seeks to make the existing economic model more inclusive and efficient, but it does not fundamentally challenge the growth-based system that often produces inequality and environmental strain.

SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

SDG 9 frames development through infrastructure, industrialization, and technological advancement. The goal, “build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation,” (UN, 2015) positions industrial growth as necessary and compatible with sustainability. This reflects the assumption that economic expansion and environmental responsibility can coexist through better technology and planning.

Target 9.1 connects infrastructure directly to economic development and human well-being (UN, 2015). The ordering of “economic development” alongside human well-being subtly centers growth as the main objective. **Target 9.2** measures industrialization through industry’s share of employment and GDP (UN, 2015), reinforcing a traditional development model where industrial output becomes a sign of progress.

The goal also emphasizes access to finance for small-scale enterprises through **Target 9.3**, research and technological capabilities through **Target 9.5**, and technological upgrading and innovation through **Target 9.4** (UN, 2015). These are useful tools, but they frame inequality mainly as a lack of access to capital or technology rather than as a result of unequal ownership, intellectual property regimes, supply chains, and global market power.

Sustainability in SDG 9 is often framed as resource-use efficiency. The goal encourages doing more with less, but does not ask whether the overall scale of production, extraction, or consumption should be reduced. This allows industrial expansion to continue as long as it becomes more efficient.

SDG 9 also risks positioning Global South countries as recipients of technology and capacity-building, reinforcing a developmentalist narrative where progress means catching up to Global North models of industrial growth. Overall, SDG 9 constructs development as technologically driven and growth-oriented. It seeks to reduce harms within industrial systems rather than fundamentally rethinking production, extraction, ownership, and environmental limits.

SDG Ten: Reduced Inequalities

SDG 10 directly addresses inequality, but its language is careful and non-confrontational. The goal, “reduce inequality within and among countries” (UN, 2015), is broad and avoids

naming the systems or actors that produce inequality. Its discourse frames inequality as a gap to be reduced through inclusion, regulation, and gradual improvement rather than as a structural outcome of wealth concentration, colonialism, racism, global capitalism, or unequal political power.

Target 10.1 calls to “progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population at a rate higher than the national average” (UN, 2015). This focuses attention on the bottom 40 percent without naming the top 10 percent or 1 percent who often hold disproportionate wealth and power (Chancel et al., 2022). By avoiding explicit discussion of wealth concentration, redistribution, taxation, or elite power, the goal treats inequality as manageable without directly challenging the structures that produce it.

Target 10.2 calls to promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all (UN, 2015). Inclusion is important, but the language assumes that existing systems can become fair if more people are included within them. It does not ask whether those systems themselves are built on exclusion. From a sociological perspective, inclusion can become a substitute for redistribution.

Target 10.5 addresses financial systems through language such as “improve regulation,” “monitoring,” and “strengthen implementation” (UN, 2015). These verbs suggest that existing systems are mostly valid and only need adjustment. The goal does not fully address how global financial markets, tax avoidance, debt, and capital mobility contribute to inequality (Chancel et al., 2022).

Target 10.7 frames migration as “orderly, safe, regular and responsible” (UN, 2015). This language prioritizes management and control, but it can obscure the realities of conflict, displacement, restrictive immigration policies, and mobility injustice. Overall, SDG 10

recognizes inequality but softens its structural causes. It emphasizes inclusion and regulation while avoiding stronger language around power, redistribution, historical responsibility, and economic transformation.

SDG Eleven: Sustainable Cities and Communities

SDG 11 frames urban challenges as problems of planning, design, infrastructure, and service delivery (UN, 2015). Terms such as “inclusive,” “safe,” “resilient,” “sustainable,” and “urban planning and management” dominate the discourse. This creates a managerial approach where cities can be improved through better governance, transportation, housing, public spaces, and disaster preparedness.

These goals are important, but the language often focuses on physical and practical improvements while underemphasizing the political economy of cities. **Target 11.1** frames housing through access to adequate, safe, and affordable housing (UN, 2015), but the goal does not fully confront land markets, housing commodification, financialization, gentrification, or displacement. Without addressing ownership and profit in urban development, affordability remains difficult to achieve.

The emphasis on resilience also raises questions. Resilience can help communities prepare for disasters, but it can also shift responsibility onto vulnerable communities to adapt to conditions they did not create. Instead of directly challenging the forces that make some groups more vulnerable, resilience language can normalize coping.

Targets 11.2 and 11.7 promote sustainable transportation and inclusive public spaces (UN, 2015), but they do not fully address who controls urban planning decisions or whose needs are prioritized. Cities are not neutral spaces; they are shaped by class, race, migration status, disability, policing, and unequal access to land and services.

Overall, SDG 11 presents urban sustainability as a matter of better planning and management. While this supports important infrastructure improvements, it does not go far enough in confronting land ownership, displacement, housing inequality, and the economic systems that shape urban life.

SDG Twelve: Responsible Consumption and Production

SDG 12 focuses on sustainable consumption and production patterns (UN, 2015). Its language frames overconsumption and overproduction as issues that can be addressed through efficiency, awareness, reporting, and responsible behaviour. This creates a managerial and market-oriented discourse where existing consumption systems are not fundamentally challenged, but made more sustainable.

The goal includes **Target 12.2** on the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources, **Target 12.3** on reducing food waste, and **Target 12.5** on reducing waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse (UN, 2015). However, there is tension between SDG 12 and SDG 2. SDG 2 emphasizes increasing agricultural productivity, while SDG 12 emphasizes reducing waste and improving consumption. Together, they frame the food problem both as insufficient production and inefficient consumption, without fully prioritizing distribution and systemic reform.

Target 12.6 calls to “encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices” and include sustainability information in reporting (UN, 2015). The word “encourage” is significant because it softens responsibility. Companies are invited to act rather than required to change. This reflects a voluntary approach that may limit accountability, especially when sustainable practices conflict with profit incentives.

The goal also calls to support developing countries in strengthening their scientific and

technological capacity (UN, 2015). This language can reinforce a hierarchy where Global North countries are positioned as knowledge leaders and Global South countries as recipients of support. It overlooks the fact that many communities in less wealthy countries already practice forms of sustainability out of necessity and local knowledge (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES], 2019).

Target 12.c on fossil-fuel subsidies uses technical language such as “rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies,” “remove market distortions,” and “restructure taxation” (UN, 2015). This sounds precise, but it can make the issue less accessible and frame environmental harm primarily as an economic problem. Overall, SDG 12 constructs sustainability as shared responsibility, but relies heavily on voluntary corporate action, technical language, and market-based solutions. It calls for better consumption and production without fully challenging the systems that drive overconsumption.

SDG Thirteen: Climate Action

SDG 13 identifies climate change as an urgent global threat (UN, 2015), but its language emphasizes resilience, adaptation, capacity-building, education, and policy integration more than binding emissions reductions or fossil fuel phase-out. The goal calls for “urgent action,” yet **Targets 13.1, 13.2, and 13.3** focus heavily on resilience, policy integration, education, and institutional capacity rather than directly holding major polluters accountable.

The discourse is strongly shaped by resilience and risk management. **Target 13.1** calls to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity, **Target 13.2** calls to integrate climate measures into policies, and **Target 13.3** addresses education, awareness, and institutional capacity (UN, 2015). These are important, especially for communities already facing climate impacts. However, this framing can shift attention toward coping with climate change rather than confronting the

economic systems that drive it.

By focusing on adaptive capacity, the goal risks placing the burden on vulnerable countries and communities to prepare for extreme weather, heat, food insecurity, and displacement. It does not clearly name fossil fuel industries, high-emitting countries, corporate actors, or consumption systems as responsible for the crisis. This lack of accountability weakens the transformative potential of the goal.

Progress under this discourse can be measured through strategies and plans under **Target 13.2**, as well as awareness and institutional capacity under **Target 13.3** (UN, 2015; UN DESA, 2025), even while emissions and extraction continue. This creates a gap between discursive progress and material environmental change. Planning and education matter, but they do not automatically reduce emissions.

Overall, SDG 13 frames climate action as a governance and capacity-building challenge. While this supports preparedness, it underemphasizes structural accountability, fossil fuel phase-out, climate justice, and the need to transform the economic systems that sustain environmental harm.

SDG 14: Life Below Water

SDG 14 addresses oceans, seas, and marine resources, but frames marine sustainability largely through management and regulation. The goal, “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development” (UN, 2015), contains an immediate tension. It calls for conservation, but also for use. The ocean is framed both as an ecosystem to protect and as a resource to utilize for development.

Target 14.1 calls to reduce marine pollution, **Target 14.2** addresses the protection of marine ecosystems, and **Target 14.4** calls to regulate harvesting, end overfishing, and address

destructive fishing practices (UN, 2015). These are important commitments, but responsibility is often diffuse. For example, marine pollution is linked to “land-based activities,” but this broad phrase does not directly name plastic producers, industrial agriculture, shipping, consumer markets, or weak waste systems. The passive construction obscures accountability for large-scale harm.

SDG 14 is more direct when it names overfishing and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. However, it does not fully address the role of industrial fishing fleets, subsidies, global seafood demand, and enforcement gaps in international waters (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2024). The target to prohibit “certain forms” of fisheries subsidies also leaves ambiguity around which subsidies will be eliminated and who will enforce these changes (UN, 2015).

Target 14.7 also calls to increase economic benefits for small island developing States and least developed countries from sustainable marine resource use (UN, 2015). While economic benefits matter, this language still values oceans partly through their usefulness to human development. It risks reinforcing the commodification of marine ecosystems.

From a health perspective, SDG 14 is also connected to nutrition, toxins, microplastics, and community livelihoods (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2024; UNEP, 2021), but the discourse remains mostly ecological and economic. Overall, while SDG 14 is well-intentioned, its language is frequently inconsistent and fails to hold responsible actors accountable.

SDG Fifteen: Life on Land

SDG 15 focuses on terrestrial ecosystems, forests, desertification, land degradation, and biodiversity loss (UN, 2015). Its main statement uses strong action verbs: “protect,” “restore,”

“combat,” “halt,” and “reverse” (UN, 2015). This gives the goal a more urgent tone than some others. However, it also combines protection with “sustainable use,” which creates a tension between preservation and continued utilization.

This tension matters because not all land use is the same. Communities may rely on land for food, housing, medicine, and culture, while corporations or states may use land for large-scale extraction. SDG 15 does not always distinguish between subsistence and community-based land use and industrial exploitation. Treating all “use” under one broad category can hide unequal responsibility.

Target 15.2 calls to sustainably manage forests and halt deforestation, **Target 15.3** addresses land degradation and restoration, and **Target 15.5** addresses biodiversity loss (UN, 2015). However, the drivers of degradation are not always clearly named. Industrial agriculture, mining, logging, urban expansion, and global consumption patterns are major causes of habitat destruction (IPBES, 2019), but the language often frames degradation as mismanagement rather than as an outcome of extractive economic systems.

Target 15.7 also emphasizes ending the poaching and trafficking of protected species (UN, 2015). This is important, but it can shift attention toward illegal activity while leaving legal but destructive activities less visible. Large-scale deforestation, mining, and land conversion may be legal but still ecologically harmful.

A health-centred reading shows that SDG 15 is also connected to disease prevention. Habitat destruction and biodiversity loss can increase the risk of zoonotic spillover by bringing humans, livestock, and wildlife into closer contact (United Nations Environment Programme & International Livestock Research Institute, 2020). Yet, the goal does not strongly frame ecosystem protection as a public health intervention.

Overall, SDG 15 uses strong ecological language, but still relies on management and sustainable-use discourse. It avoids naming the economic and political systems that drive land degradation and biodiversity loss. A stronger framing would distinguish community land use from extractive exploitation and assign clearer responsibility to corporate, state, and global consumption systems.

SDG Sixteen: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

SDG 16 addresses governance, justice, peace, and institutions (UN, 2015). The goal, “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions” (UN, 2015), frames stability and governance as prerequisites for development. Its discourse is procedural, institutional, and normative.

Target 16.1 calls to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere” (UN, 2015). While morally strong, the phrase is vague. “Significantly” is not clearly defined, and “all forms of violence” can include many different forms of harm with different causes. The target does not fully address root causes such as inequality, political instability, colonial histories, militarization, or economic exploitation.

Target 16.3 calls to promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice (UN, 2015). This assumes that legal systems are neutral tools for justice. However, laws and institutions can reproduce inequality, especially for marginalized populations. The discourse treats the rule of law as a universal standard without fully examining whose laws are enforced, whose interests they protect, and who has real access to justice.

Institutional accountability is emphasized through **Targets 16.6 and 16.7**, using terms such as “effective,” “accountable,” “transparent,” “responsive,” “inclusive,” and “representative”

(UN, 2015). These are positive values, but they often function as abstract ideals rather than operational mechanisms. The goal does not clearly define how institutions will be held accountable or how unequal political power will be addressed.

Global governance is addressed through the participation of developing countries in international institutions (UN, 2015). This acknowledges imbalance, but frames the solution as inclusion within existing structures rather than redistribution of power. Similarly, targets on illicit financial and arms flows identify major global issues but do not clearly name the financial networks, political alliances, or economic interests that sustain them.

Overall, SDG 16 promotes important ideals, but often frames justice and governance in abstract and procedural terms. It emphasizes better institutions without fully engaging the structural inequalities and power relations that shape institutions themselves.

SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

SDG 17 positions partnership as the enabling mechanism for all other SDGs. Its goal, “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development” (UN, 2015), frames development as a matter of cooperation, financing, technology, trade, capacity-building, and data. The dominant discourse is global coordination.

Partnership language can be useful because global challenges require collective action. However, SDG 17 often privileges coordination over accountability. Cooperation is presented as positive by default, but partnerships can reproduce power imbalances when donor countries, corporations, or international institutions control resources and agendas.

Target 17.1 calls for strengthening domestic resource mobilization and improving tax collection capacity in developing countries (UN, 2015). This recognizes the need for resources, but frames the issue as domestic capacity. It can overlook global tax avoidance, illicit financial

flows, debt, unequal trade relations, and multinational extraction. If countries lose resources through global financial structures, the problem is not only domestic governance.

Official development assistance is also emphasized in **Target 17.2**, which addresses the commitments of developed countries regarding official development assistance (UN, 2015). While aid can be important, the discourse of assistance can position wealthy countries as generous helpers rather than as actors connected to historical and ongoing inequality. Without debt justice, fair trade, technology sharing, and structural reform, aid can reproduce dependency.

Technology cooperation is framed more broadly through **Targets 17.6 and 17.7**, including North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation, which is more balanced than a one-way transfer model. Still, SDG language often treats technology and innovation as resources flowing from powerful knowledge centers to countries in need, potentially undervaluing local and community knowledge.

Target 17.18 also calls to increase high-quality, timely, and reliable disaggregated data (UN, 2015). This is important because inequality can remain hidden without data. However, data can become technocratic if it is collected without community control, context, or accountability. Including marginalized communities does not automatically empower them.

Overall, SDG 17 frames implementation as partnership and cooperation, but cooperation without accountability can preserve the inequalities the SDGs claim to challenge. A more transformative discourse would move beyond partnership language and directly address debt, extraction, global governance, corporate power, and unequal bargaining power between countries and communities.

Across the Goals

Across all seventeen goals, a consistent discursive pattern emerges. The sustainable

development goals construct global challenges through language that is universal, technical and action-oriented, yet often deliberately non-confrontational. As outlined in the introduction, this analysis set out to examine not whether the SDGs succeed, but how their language shapes what kinds of solutions become imaginable. In doing so, it becomes clear that the SDGs rely heavily on verbs such as “ensure,” “promote,” “strengthen,” and “improve,” (UN, 2015), which present development as manageable through policy intervention while frequently leaving responsibility diffuse and enforcement unclear. Structural drivers of inequality, such as global wealth concentrations, colonial histories, corporate power, and unequal trade systems, are consistently underarticulated or absent, even in goals explicitly addressing poverty, inequality, and justice. Instead, the discourse emphasizes inclusion over redistribution, resilience over transformation and efficiency over systemic change. Across environmental goals, sustainability is often framed as compatible with continued economic growth and resource use, while social goals are framed as compatible with continued economic growth and resource use, while social goals frame equity as access within existing systems rather than a reconfiguration of those systems. This reinforces the broader argument introduced at the outset that the SDGs function not only as policy tools but as discursive frameworks that shape global priorities while limiting the scope of structural critique. As a result, progress can be measured, reported and even achieved within the terms of the SDGs without fundamentally altering the conditions that produce inequality and environmental degradation. Ultimately, without critically revisiting the language that underpins global development agendas, future frameworks risk producing the same tensions between visibility and transformation that continue to define the SDGs today.

Looking to the Future

As young people who will live with the long-term consequences of today’s development

decisions, we believe future global development frameworks should move beyond technical targets and place greater emphasis on structural justice, accountability and community participation. While the SDGs have succeeded in creating a shared global agenda, their language often prioritizes consensus over confronting the systems that reproduce inequality and environmental degradation. Future iterations should not only define what outcomes are desirable, but also identify the political, economic, and historical forces that prevent those outcomes from being achieved.

A revised framework should adopt stronger accountability language by clearly identifying the responsibilities of governments, multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and high income countries. Throughout the SDGs, responsibility is frequently expressed through broad verbs such as “promote,” “encourage,” and “strengthen,” leaving unclear who is responsible for implementation or how commitments will be enforced. Future goals should move beyond voluntary commitments by incorporating measurable accountability mechanisms, including transparent reporting, independent monitoring, and consequences for failing to meet agreed upon targets. Naming responsible actors would shift development from a shared aspiration to a framework of shared but differentiated responsibility. Future frameworks should also place greater emphasis on the structural determinants of health, poverty, and environmental sustainability. Rather than addressing issues such as hunger, disease, or water scarcity primarily through technical interventions, developmental agendas should explicitly recognize how colonial histories, unequal trade relationships, debt, corporate concentration, and political power shape these outcomes. Addressing these upstream determinants would encourage policies that prevent inequities rather than simply managing their consequences. In doing so, sustainable development would become more transformative by

tackling the systems that produce injustice rather than focusing primarily on improving their outcomes.

Finally, youth and community voices should play a much greater role in shaping future global development agendas. As young people, we are not only future beneficiaries of sustainable development but also active participants in creating it. Future frameworks should be developed through meaningful engagement with youth, indigenous communities, local organisations, and populations most affected by poverty, climate change and inequality. Community knowledge should be treated as equally valuable to technical expertise, ensuring that development priorities reflect lived experience alongside scientific evidence. A more participatory approach would strengthen both the legitimacy and effectiveness of global development efforts by producing goals that are more responsive to local realities while remaining globally coordinated.

By shifting the discourse from technical management toward accountability, equity and shared decision-making, future sustainable development frameworks would be better equipped to address the root causes of global challenges rather than their symptoms. Such a shift would move sustainable development beyond measuring progress toward creating the structural conditions necessary for lasting social economic and environmental justice.

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