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How tick list sustainability distracts from actual sustainable action: the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' lays out 17 Sustainable Development Goals to address a range of global issues related to the future of the planet and human well-being. Critics, however, argue that the Agenda, a complex product of multi-stakeholder governance, in its drive to accommodate many competing voices, is overloaded with weakly defined, overlapping and contradictory issues, concepts and buzzwords. These serve to gloss over actual concrete global problems and forces, concealing an underlying free-trade ideology. In this paper, using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, we draw attention to the nature of the documents used to communicate the Agenda. These documents comprise an edifice of self-referential texts that rely heavily on infographics, bullet points, charts and tables. Such formats appear to helpfully simplify, distil information and break things down into workable components. But, we show, through the affordances of these formats, the the vagueness of buzzwords, contradictions and lack of clear causalities can be glossed over, presenting the Agenda as a highly technical, engaging, and above all moral process. These formats are important, therefore, for the legitimization and rhetorical power of the Agenda, necessary for its take-up by governments and organizations around the world.

KEYWORDS

Sustainability; critical discourse analysis; multimodality; affordance; organizational communication; environment; United Nations

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations presented its resolution 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. This provided a 15-year plan to address a range of global issues related to the future of the planet and of human well-being. The Agenda lays out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are comprised of 169 targets. The aim is to 'transform the world' where 'no one is left behind' (https://sdgs.un.org/goals). The SDGs provide ways to approach, understand and measure the process of transformation. In each member society, all institutions, private companies, organizations and even individual workers are to demonstrate how they are working in ways aligned to the goals. The SDGs, in their iconic multi-colored 'building block'

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design (Figure 1), are found across websites, in entrance halls, adorned on building exteriors and at public events across member countries, as organizations proudly show they are working ethically and playing a role in saving the planet.

The SDGs have, however, received extensive criticism. It is argued that they lack clarity and are awash with weakly defined buzzwords and overlapping, contradictory concepts (Fukada-Parr and McNeill, 2019). And the drive to create a global, one-size-fits-all, set of goals and targets, has led to a highly ethnocentric view of the world that is fragmented and ignores the actual forces that create the very situations they claim to address (Weber, 2017; Telleria and Garcia Arias, 2022).

In this paper, we are interested in the SDG documents from a language and communication perspective, about which little has been written. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, we show how the forms of communication used in the documents play an important part in their rhetorical power and legitimation – necessary for their take-up by governments, institutions and organizations around the world. The SDGs are carried by an ever-expanding, interlocking, and mutually self-referential body of documents – over 1300 at the time of writing. Such document infrastructures have been observed to be highly typical of the kind of multi-stakeholder governance of which the Agenda is a product (Power, 2009). In such a system of governance, with many competing voices who each have their own priorities, performance will be codified and measured by a range of indicators that represent a kind of collective compromise between

Figure 1. UN building blocks for sustainability.

stakeholders, such as member governments, NGOs, industrial sector organizations, civic and rights groups, banking and regulation (Gleckman, 2018).

Of relevance to the present analysis is that this interlocking and mutually self-referential body of documents relies heavily on bullet lists, tables, charts, diagrams and infographics, all of which carry smaller chunks of texts, graphics and images. Such formats, it has been shown (Ledin and Machin, 2020), appear to bring a sense of simplification, of distilling complexity down to core points, of presenting matters in a systematic and technical manner that facilitates clearer and more focused action. But upon closer inspection, it reveals something quite different, where key issues, actors and causalities may be set aside, conflated or changed in meaning.

While the shortcomings of the SDGs are well documented in the research literature, in this paper we are interested in *how* they are communicated. The formats of chunks of text, bullet points, tables, charts, diagrams and infographics are one way that weakly defined buzzwords, contradictions and lack of clear causalities can be glossed over, presenting the Agenda as a highly technical, engaging, transparent and, above all, moral process. These formats are important, therefore, for the legitimization and rhetorical power of the Agenda, and necessary for it being accepted. They are also one important way by which the underlying ideology of the SDGs, aligned clearly with increased production and global free trade, are glossed over.

The problem of defining sustainability

Observers have shown that the term 'sustainability' has never been clearly defined at a scientific, political or policy level (Bolis et al., 2017; White, 2013). And since it entered policy in the 1980s with *The Brundtland Report,* varied organizations with vested interests have shaped the notion in terms of different ideas, priorities, models and standards of monitoring (Arena et al., 2009). As a concept, therefore, sustainability lacks clear meaning and has become overburdened with a proliferation of objectives, goals and weakly defined buzzwords (Cornwall, 2007). There is no clarity as to how these are to be brought about or measured (Lindsey, 2011), if one means a trade-off against others (Aguirre, 2010), nor how these hang together into a coherent whole (Risku-Norja and Muukka, 2013).

One reason for this proliferation of weakly defined terms is the need to produce strategies that will be endorsed by all and where conflicting views can be contained (South Centre, 2002: 15; Gleckman, 2018). The UN Agenda came about through a form of governance, having its roots in the 1980s, where policy making is of a fundamentally different nature than previously carried out by central state governments (De Angelis, 2003). Formerly, policy would have been based more on clearly defined objectives and means. For example, unemployment could be addressed by an increase in public spending to create jobs. Frameworks such as the SDGs are produced, rather, through a newer form of governance, where policy making has been devolved to a proliferation of competing stakeholders, which can include groups from across the civic, private and public sector, each with different priorities (Gleckman, 2018). The resulting policy frameworks, therefore, become a product of struggles to define what policy should be about and what should be addressed, rather than simple solutions through defined actions. The result can be that policies tend to overcomplexity, and may be overburdened with vaguely defined

terms as a way to garner broader agreements. Here the process of policy making is not a contained event, but is an ongoing process that tends towards growing burdens of issues and flourishing of concepts (De Angelis, 2003).

Measuring sustainable action

The SDGs are based on the idea that saving the planet and improving the quality of all human life are to be accomplished by a form of performance management, itself emerging and interrelated with the stakeholder forms of governance (De Angelis, 2003). Member governments and their national institutions, companies and other organizations, are to be evaluated and ranked in terms of meeting a list of performance indicators. However, it has been argued that this leads to several problems.

There is a process of reductionism associated with performance indicators (Merry, 2011; 2019). In the case of the Agenda, this has resulted in complex issues, which come in many varied forms across different societies and regions in the world, to become represented by simplified, one-size-fits-all, goals and targets (Fukada-Parr and McNeill, 2019). These, it has been argued, are built on arbitrary, ethnocentric and vaguely definead notions such as 'justice', 'equality' and 'redistribution' (Diaz-Martinez and Gibbons, 2014), which gloss over huge methodological problems of measuring and data gathering around the world (Fukada-Parr and McNeill, 2019). Yet, the process of producing quantifications can reify weakly defined terms and fragmented issues into facts. These abstractions then become the basis of organizational shifts, new patterns of work, or policy change (Merry, 2011), finding their way into new documents, planning and thinking (Lewis, 2015).

Another problem with performance indicators is that they tend to fragment issues and processes into separate goals, where the connections, causalities, tensions and contradictions between and within them are lost (Adelman, 2017; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017). In the case of the SDGs, notions such as economic development, climate change and poverty are presented in such a fragmented way, suppressing their fundamental interrelationships (Weber, 2017). This process of fragmentation arguably leads to the most important criticism of the Agenda: the actual forces in different contexts that tend to create poverty, instability, inequality, and lack of justice, or which most threaten the environment, are set aside. The Agenda excludes geopolitical competition for resources, the power of transnational corporations across all of the major industries, global financial markets, as well as regional political relations and conflicts (Zhou et al., 2020; Weber, 2017). This process of fragmentation means that things like economic development become dealt with in a way where they are disconnected from other goals such as climate action, or poverty (Weber, 2017), without any sense of how this may involve tensions or contradictions (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017). As Carroll and Jarvis (2015) make the case that economic growth, as represented in the Agenda, is not only represented as compatible with these other goals, but that solutions are to be mainly found within market forces and development. The SDGs, therefore, are infused with the priorities of capitalism and neoliberalism (Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019).

Finally, Jary (2002) has argued that, for organizations and individual workers, meeting performance indicators can become a kind of gaming or performativity. In other words, the need to demonstrate that targets are being met can take the place of actual

meaningful and useful action (Schick, 2001). Sustainable action, especially in the face of targets that are fragmented and based on arbitrary and weakly defined buzzwords, becomes a kind of empty tick-list activity (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017; Fukada-Parr and McNeill, 2019).

Theory and methods

This paper carries out Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin and Mayr, 2023) of a selection of documents from the Agenda. Aligning with the broader concerns of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), MCDA is interested in the role of language and communication in the functioning of society and politics (Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard, 1996; Flowerdew and Richardson, 2017). Following a social semiotic approach to communication (Van Leeuwen, 2005), MCDA draws on a range of tools developed in multimodality and in CDA to carry out a detailed analysis of the semiotic choices used in texts. This can include the choices made in language or grammar (Fairclough, 1992; Van Leeuwen, 2008). And it can mean choices in visual communication, such as those of color, graphic shapes, and photographs (Van Leeuwen, 2005; Flowerdew and Richardson, 2017).

Analysis of such choices has the aim of revealing how elements such as things, persons, events, issues, processes and causalities are represented in texts (Ledin and Machin, 2018). These elements comprise what Van Leeuwen (2008) would call 'discursive scripts'. This draws on Foucault's (1978) notion of 'discourse', used to describe the knowledge and understandings that tend to dominate thinking in a society. 'Discursive scripts' describe the 'goings on' that comprise such discourses. In the case of the Agenda, we would be interested in the discursive scripts where things like problems, causalities, processes, participants and settings are laid out for addressing issues such as poverty, inequality and climate change. For Van Leeuwen (2008), this would mean identifying where any of these elements are less than clear, abstracted, left out, where they are substituted for other things, or where sequentiality has been altered.

An important part of MCDA is drawing attention to the affordances of the 'materials' used in the process of communication Ledin and Machin (2018). Such materials could include an A4 sheet of paper to write a letter, a social media platform, a monument, or a flow chart. Each of these materials shapes the bounds of what takes place as communication and comes with particular affordances, i.e. what can and cannot be done. And each material sets up both the kinds of social and interpersonal relationships involved, and creates a kind of stance or attitude. In the case of the Agenda, the materials of communication take the form of a kind of interlocking 'information infrastructure' (Bowker and Star, 1999), which draws extensively on the affordances of bullet points, tables and diagrams.

Two further concepts provide a basis for the analysis in this paper. First is Fairclough's (1992) notion of 'technologization'. This accounts for changes in how we communicate relating to the increase in commodification or marketization throughout society from the last part of the twentieth century. This technologization involves a drive for the standardization and codification of the resources of communication (Cameron, 2000), where organizations take more detailed control over how language is used to serve their aims.

A second concept is that of 'integrated writing' or 'new writing' (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Ledin and Machin, 2018). Whereas formerly, documents would communicate through

running texts, perhaps accompanied by a picture for illustration, they now tend to be comprised of smaller chunks of texts, bullet points, tables, images, infographics and diagrams, presented in ways that are highly integrated. For Ledin and Machin (2018), this shift to 'integrated writing' is important, particularly in regard to how the rules for representing identities, classifications, causalities and relationships have shifted. These integrated designs may be highly engaging and appear systematic and technical, yet tend towards the symbolic and to abstraction. This paper draws on the tools presented by Ledin and Machin (2018, 2020) for the analysis of this kind of integrated writing.

The examples we analyze in this paper are drawn from a collection of 1362 documents published in the UN system on the SDGs. These include policy reports, statements, guidelines, handbooks, webpages, information cards, summaries, etc. Our aim is to indicate how the affordances of diagrams, bullet points, tables and infographics play an important part in glossing over the vagueness, contradictions and ideology of the SDGs and legitimizing the Agenda.

Diagrams: the building blocks of sustainable development

Figure 1 shows the iconic building-block diagram used to display the SDGs found at the start page of the UN SDGs website and across their documents. This building-block design, in itself, has immense rhetorical power, due in part to its iconicity. It is seen on websites, at fairs and events, where public institutions, companies and other organizations signal their alignment with saving the planet and working for justice. The 17 SDGs blocks can be found presented in different combinations or arranged into different patterns. In Figure 2, for example, we see the design shown as lights adorning a Swedish government building. In Figure 3, we see them presented as the 'building-blocks of sustainable development' on a university campus.

A closer look at the semiotic choices made in the design allows us to consider how this design works as part of communicating a particular discursive script about sustainable action. Importantly, on this design, the SDGs are represented as different, but also of the same order. Both have ideological significance.

Difference is communicated by an SDG having its own specific color and where each has its own icon. These icons and colors then run through the chains of interconnected

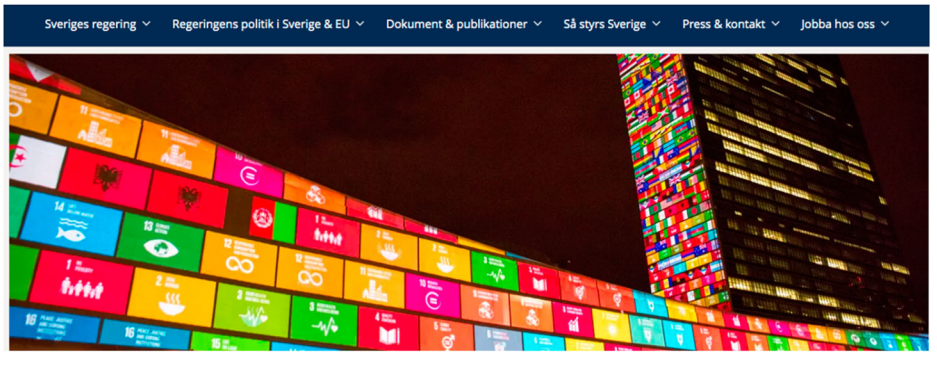

Figure 2. Buildings adorned with SDGs from Swedish government website.

Figure 3. The SDGs as building blocks on a university campus,

documents in the Agenda that deal with each SDG. For example, a chain of documents related to poverty will carry a specific color as well as the icon of the row of people holding hands, as seen for SDG 1. Difference is also communicated where each SDG is set in its own box, framed off from the others. The boxes do not overlap or merge in any way. They are represented as discrete elements, each framed with a narrow white border between itself and its neighbors. Wider borders may have symbolized greater separation, or difference between each (Van Leeuwen, 2005). We find neither overlaps, nor arrows or lines creating links or symbolizing causalities between boxes. For example, there are no arrows suggesting a link between 'economic growth' and 'inequalities' or 'climate action'. This is important since from this entry point, the discursive script is one where we approach saving the planet in regard to discrete and isolated elements. These are to be dealt with individually or in combinations, but not in terms of interrelationships. We could imagine a different kind of 'infographic' as a starting point, which foregrounded causalities and interrelationships. Here, in this discursive script, we are looking at separate and distinctive elements that can be dealt with individually or in any combination. In the case of the building-blocks shown on the university campus, we also see this sense of the blocks as discrete elements, as physical bullet points, to be dealt with individually, or in any combination.

Moving on to how the SDGs are represented as being similar on the building block design, this is communicated where each element is placed in the same sized and shaped box. On a different design, hierarchies or 'difference' could be symbolized by differences in shape and size. One element could be in the largest box to suggest its salience. Here the SDGs are equal in this sense. And the icons carried in each box are of the same style, where each element is simplified in the same way. The colors too, while different for each element, carry the same qualities. They are all bright and pastel and form a coherent palette, one which is bright and optimistic, to be used on web pages and at events.

This classification of SDGs as of the same order helps to communicate that they are to be worked on in the same way. Certainly, it does not foster a view of complexity, uniqueness, nor of tensions or contradictions. We can imagine the effect if one SDG, for example for economic development, was set apart with a jarring color, perhaps one which was bold and glossy, to symbolize difference from the rest.

We also see the kind of reductionism taking place to which critics of the SDGs point (Fukada-Parr and McNeill, 2019). Individual boxes carry hugely complex things. For example, the box 'Poverty' claims to 'erase all forms of poverty everywhere'. So diverse and complex situations around the world, each rooted in specific historical, economic, sociological and geopolitical contexts, can be represented as one simple thing – here represented by the icon of a row of people of different ages holding hands. The box for 'Reduced inequality' also involves the same level of reductionism. This is symbolized by a ' = ' sign sitting in a circle of reducing width. Critics observe that the Agenda, and the notion of sustainability more generally, is dense with vague and broad concepts such as 'equality', 'justice', 'redistribution' and 'poverty', which all simplify, gloss over and distract from the nature and complexity of specific localized issues (Diaz-Martinez and Gibbons, 2014; Merry, 2011).

We can also ask what elements might be missing from the 17 building-blocks. What is excluded from this discursive script? As critics observe, the SDGs exclude 'inconvenient' issues. There is no box for geopolitical competition for resources. Excluded are the forces of international trade organizations and treaties, global banking, transnational corporations and the massive power of supermarkets, as well as other industries including fashion and petrochemicals, all of which fundamentally shape our contemporary world and human life. The symbolism of the building blocks here suggest simplicity in the sense of a toy for small children, where actual cases of things like poverty, hunger and climate damage may be deeply entwined in localized geopolitical tensions and histories.

Bullet points and tables: systematically transforming the world

Each of the SDGs has a list of targets and performance indicators presented as two columns of bullet points embedded into a table. Here we find the core 'doings' of this discourse: what is to be achieved and how this is to be measured. And each SDG, whether it is poverty, economic development or good health and wellbeing, is to be treated in the same way, commodified and codified into a small number of targets and indicators.

In Figure 4 we see targets and indicators for SDG 1: Poverty. The targets are placed in the left column and the indicators in the right column. Bullet points and tables have a number of affordances that are important to how the SDGs are legitimized.

Bullet points have the affordance of communicating a technical process of breaking things down into the core issues, in an easily digestible way that is clearly transparent (Ledin and Machin, 2015). They draw on the affordances of lists, which means they claim to represent a paradigm, which is a set of things of the same, culturally agreed upon, order. We should not find things in lists that do not belong in that paradigm – in a wine list there should be no automobiles. The use of bullets (in the form of dots, or in the form of other symbols and icons such as ticks), can also reinforce a sense of these being separate and discrete components of the same order and status in the

Goals and targets (from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development)	*Indicators*
Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere	
1.1 By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day	1.1.1 Proportion of the population living below the international poverty line by sex, age, employment status and geographic location (urban/rural)
1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions	1.2.1 Proportion of population living below the national poverty line, by sex and age
	1.2.2 Proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable	1.3.1 Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, newborns, work-injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable
1.4 By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance	1.4.1 Proportion of population living in households with access to basic services
	1.4.2 Proportion of total adult population with secure tenure rights to land, (*a*) with legally recognized documentation, and (*b*) who perceive their rights to land as secure, by sex and type of tenure
1.5 By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters	1.5.1 Number of deaths, missing persons and directly affected persons attributed to disasters per 100,000 population
	1.5.2 Direct economic loss attributed to disasters in relation to global gross domestic product (GDP)
	1.5.3 Number of countries that adopt and implement national disaster risk reduction strategies in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030
	1.5.4 Proportion of local governments that adopt and implement local disaster risk reduction strategies in line with national disaster risk reduction strategies

Figure 4. Targets and performance indicators for poverty.

paradigm. The lists of targets and indicators for the SDGs draw on these affordances. So, they are presented as an agreed upon list of the individual components for bringing about transformations for each SDG.

The affordances of the table are also important in helping to represent this as a technical, logical, and again transparent, process. Tables have the affordance of representing each column as a distinctive paradigm where there are clear and consistent relationships between them (Ledin and Machin, 2015). Each column will be a different order of paradigm from the others. Relationships can then be compared across columns – for example, in a left-hand column we might have types of cars and then, in the columns to the right, speed and fuel-economy. Tables can also symbolize that there is a temporal or causal movement from left to right. So a left-to-right sequence might include targets, and then indicators suggesting a process of moving things along.

The use of bullet points and tables here brings a sense that we are dealing with a carefully thought-through, logical process, even though in the first place we are dealing with what critics argue are broad and fragmented concepts and issues. Looking at the contents, however, we find what Ledin and Machin (2015) might call 'false lists' or 'false tables'. And while these appear as highly technical they gloss over what researchers

have observed as unnevenness and incompleteness in regard to how indicators measure in relation to the actual goals themselves (Merry, 2019).

In the left-hand bullet list the targets all take the grammatical form of imperatives. Imperatives issue commands, calls for action, and sound direct, urgent, forceful and confident. We find the imperative verbs: 'eradicate', 'reduce', 'implement', 'ensure' and 'build', all suggesting material processes (Van Leeuwen, 2008) and therefore acting upon the world. We do not find conditional moods as in 'We should eradicate', or lower modality assertions, as in 'we will try to eradicate'. Therefore, the technical breakdown of the targets, stripping back the complexity of addressing all poverty everywhere into five bullet points, is represented grammatically through a sense of agency and go-getting. And here, we see a lack of clear sense of who the 'we' is in each case, which has been argued to be a characteristic of the Agenda as a whole, which most notably allows governments themselves and business to avoid obligations (Spangenberg, 2016).

Rather, looking across the list of five poverty targets we find that this sense of urgency and confidence communicated through the imperatives is oriented to targets that are inconsistent and unclear. For example, target 1.1 is to 'eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere', whereas target 1.2 is to 'reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions'. On the one hand the two appear to carry repetition. On the other it is not clear how they are to form a consistent plan, where the two are formulated in slightly different ways, one seeking to eradicate *all* poverty everywhere, and the other, at the same time, *halve*.

The explanation for this repetition/reformulation lies in the kind of multi-stakeholder governance creating these frameworks and the different priorities, concerns and definitions that must therefore be negotiated and contained. Here specifically, we see that the SDGs need to have global targets, expressed in 1.1. But, at the same time, they need to show respect for local contexts as we see in 1.2. These two commitments are written into the Agenda in declarations 63 and 5 respectively.

Looking at the performance indicators for each of these targets 1.1.1 and 1.2.1, we can see that the international and national indicators are to be measured in parallel. At no point is there any account of whether there will be any tensions between international and national coding systems. And it has been argued that there are huge problems comparing data generated by different unique national measuring systems, where very different notions are involved and also where any countries might simply lack the infrastructure to generate such information (Fukada-Parr and McNeill, 2019). Here the affordances of the bullets and the table help to gloss over these issues.

While 1.1 and 1.2 target the eradication of all poverty and half of poverty respectively, 1.4 takes a very different form, which is glossed over in the bullet-list format. 1.4 offers details of some things involved in poverty: equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services ownership, control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance. It is not clear why this is presented at the same level as 1.1 and 1.2, since these appear to be things that may be addressed as part of eradicating or halving poverty, as performance indicators themselves. It is also a very complex target in itself, coordinating a list of elements in a single bullet point that are themselves quite different. For example, we find major political issues such as 'equal rights to economic resources' along with the

somewhat more modest sounding 'access to microfinance'. What is meant by each would require searching across other documents in the Agenda's information infrastructure. And it is such concepts as 'equal' and 'rights' that have been criticized in sustainability policy for being both vague and ethnocentric (Merry, 2011). The density of issues here points to the need to include multiple stakeholder interests.

The performance indicators for target 1.4, to eradicate world poverty, are placed in the column to the right. Given the affordances of tables, we would expect some kind of clear relationship, or sequentiality between the targets and how they are to be measured. However, the indicators now seem somewhat different and relate to measuring land tenure in 1.4.2 and households with access to services in 1.4.1. So the more ambitious and broader targets become tied to something more specific. The notion of legal land tenure/ownership, carried by these indicators, had become taken up by the UN as one key way to measure and address poverty, social instability and issues of justice. However, this had been highly contested as arbitrary and as a highly ethnocentric notion, rooted in very specific Western traditions of private property and ownership, which in local contexts around the world may be meaningless (Merlet, 2020). In practice, it has been argued, this is why many large-scale land tenure projects have failed, for example in cultures where land is always seen an un-ownable, or part of communities (Sjaastad and Cousins, 2009; Boone, 2019). As critics point out, the issue here is not whether private land ownership is important or not in specific contexts, rather that it is problematic to take a one-size-fits-all approach, especially one that is based on ethnocentric notions (Merlet, 2020; Murken and Gornott, 2022). This kind of collapsing of a broad, context-based issue such as poverty here into a single target is one clear case where performance management indictors can simplify, fragment and nevertheless then become reified. As in this case, they become *how* we deal with such complex issues.

Much more could be said about this table. But this short analysis allows us to indicate how the affordances of the bullets and the table play a role in the discursive script of the Agenda. They suggest a clear and technical, transparent process of laying things out and getting things done, supported by the go-getting directives. Closer inspection, however, begins to reveal issues of ethnocentrism, simplification, fragmentation and exclusion of the very forces that cause issues such as poverty, raised by critics of the Agenda.

Infographics, simplifications and symbolizing connections

The UN Agenda website provides summary cards for each SDG, a few clicks into the document chains. These can be printed out, displayed on information boards or at events, and included in other documents and websites by institutions and organizations. Figure 5 shows two examples, for poverty and sustainable industrialization.

Importantly, on these infographics the goals are all placed into the same template. In Figure 5, we see that each card follows a standard composition with use of a header and columns. Each card uses the same fonts and style of iconography. It is clearly communicated that these SDGs are classified as being of the same order, even though this is not so stated in writing. As with the building-block diagram and the tables used for the targets and indicators, we continue with the idea that all these different and complex elements can be unproblematically represented in identical ways.

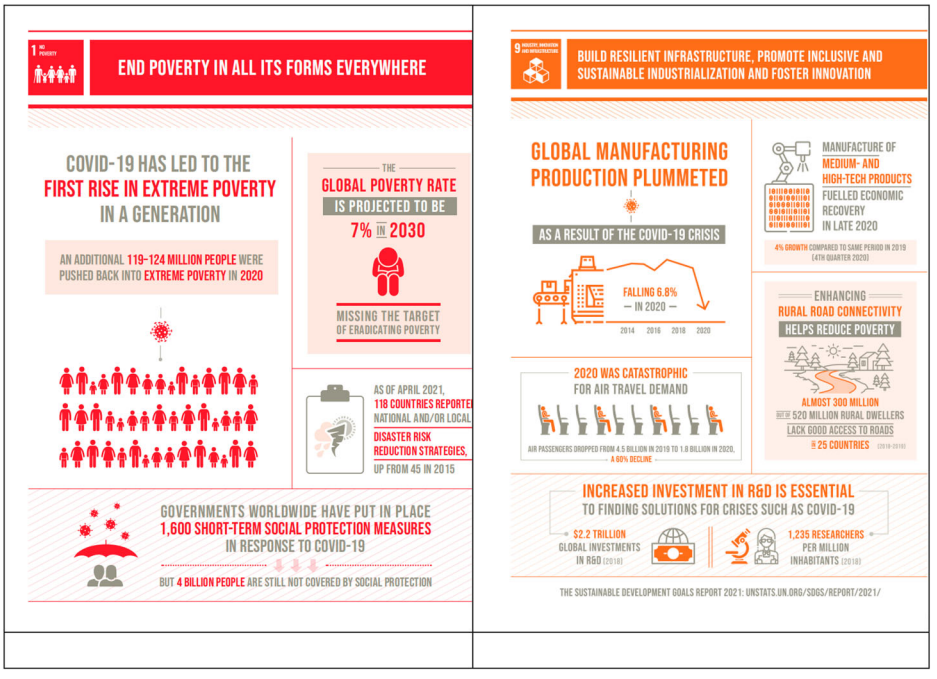

Figure 5. Infographics cards for each SDG.

Coherence is created across the sections in each infographic through the use of color, which codes the different sections as being of the order of that SDG. We see that for 'Poverty' all content is coded in red. And the icons used for each SDG on the building block design repeat, sometimes in a more developed form, on each infographic. However, looking more closely at the individual cards, there is much less coherence than is symbolized by the designs. On the 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' card, we find four information sections. In the left-hand vertical column, the most salient due to size, we are told that 'Covid-19 has led to the first rise in extreme poverty in a generation'. We are given numbers in a range: '119-124 million pushed back into extreme poverty'. We are not told how these numbers are generated. We might assume that the numbers are based on the performance indicators for poverty seen in the analysis above – all of which we saw involve problems and tensions in regard to what exactly is being used as a form of measurement. In Figure 5, it is not stated in language directly that Covid has a clear causal relationship to these numbers. Nor is it clear how Covid has been factored in as a cause. But relationships, or causalities, are rather symbolized in the drawing where we find an extended version of the icon for poverty carried in the SDG's box configuration. But here, rather than the 6 figures carried by the SDG box for poverty, there are 45 arbitrary figures. A classic icon for the Covid virus sits between them and the headline where connectivity between the two is provided by a short line.

Across these infographics, the icons used to represent numbers play a more symbolic than statistically accurate role. For example, on the infographic for 'Industry' in Figure 5, to the top left, an icon takes the form of half factory machine/ half line graph. The arrow

zig-zags and falls downwards dramatically to represent a decline in global manufacturing. The shape of the plotted line only symbolically represents the less dramatic number of 6% which is given. In the section below about air travel, we see another example that follows the same pattern. The row of ten aircraft seats, where more are empty than occupied, represents 'catastrophic' fall in demand.

This drive for visual simplification and codification in these infographics works to background the very complexities and interrelationships, critics argue, that the one-size-fits-all framework suppresses. Such infographics contribute, therefore, to both an affective sense of the framework being engaging, clear and simple, and also to the appearance of it being well-organized, technical and systematic.

Conclusion

The very concept of sustainability has been shown to be highly problematic, based on buzzwords and weakly defined concepts that gloss over tensions and contradictions. One reason for this is that so many different interests have colonized what it means. It is also a concept that, at its heart, includes economic development in a way that glosses over any sense that this may not so easily align with matters of climate change, justice and stability in different societies. The UN Agenda, in itself, has been argued to be an extension of such shortcomings, where, additionally, the one-size-fits-all target-based approach has led to a system based on fragmentation and simplification, and is laden with ethnocentric notions.

The aim of this paper, from a language and communication perspective, was to show that the formats used in the Agenda – its extensive use of infographics, diagrams, bullet-lists and tables - can be understood as one part of how the buzzwords and weakly-defined concepts become presented as being part of a technical, systematic and transparent process. It is part of how they become more easily reified. They become part of a discursive script that has very bold claims, with its imperatives to 'erase all poverty' and 'end hunger'. It is rich with positive buzzwords relating to things like 'justice', 'equality', 'opportunities' and 'democracy'. It takes a high moral stance, including photographs of the people of the world where transformation is taking place and where 'no one is left behind'. The iconic building-block diagram, with its iconography and bright color palette, is branding-friendly, where organizations can showcase how they too are caring for the earth and its peoples.

Buried in this overdetermination of codification and simplification lies a suppression of the fact that the main threats to the environment and to human well-being, in the form of geopolitics, competition for resources and the global spread of neoliberal economics, are excluded from the Agenda (Telleria and Gracia Arias, 2022). And while the Agenda speaks through a voice of 'we', of representing the interests of all people in the world, and leans on the concept of democracy, the very form of governance it comprises is neither democratic nor accountable. Arguably, the overdetermination, simplification, codification and signification of transparency is a clear indicator of this very anxiety.

Symbolic images and generic global south people

The discursive script of the Agenda is communicated also through the use of photographs of people who are integrated into these formats. In Figure 6, such photographs appear as

Figure 6. UN pdf summaries of goals with generic Global South people.

part of pdf documents summarizing why each goal 'matters', and in Figure 7 they are used as tiles to click on each SDG. In such cases, no clear information is given as to who these people are, nor if they have been aided by the Agenda specifically. Such images play an important role in the legitimation of the SDGs.

In Figure 6, to the left, for 'decent work and economic growth', we find three women, wearing matching clothing and head scarves and working at sewing machines. To the right for 'climate action' we find an agricultural setting in the Global South. Two people appear to be carrying out labor in the background, with gushing water/irrigation in the foreground. We are not given any information about these two scenes, the locations or the people we see in them. These photographs are not used to document particular people, an actual place or process, in a specific moment in time. It is not clear if they comprise positive outcomes from the Agenda. Yet such photographs place the SDGs into the world and lives of the 'global' population.

The persons we see in Figures 6 and 7 are typical of those used to represent people in the Global South in Western news media, by NGOs, charities or in ethical food branding, such as Fairtrade (Varul, 2008). Viewers in the Global North are familiar with representations of people from the Global South as somehow all 'suffering, simple and benevolent' (Varul, 2008: 661). Such people are homogenized as generic and distant 'others', where the massive differences between them and their actual circumstances, usually shaped by histories of colonialism, ongoing geopolitics and neoliberal global trading systems, are erased (Ramamurthy, 2012). As such, Varul (2008: 668) suggests, such people are romanticized and homogenized as 'pre-modern'.

In the photographs in Figure 6, we see a typical characteristic of the generic Global South people seen in such photographs. These people, Ramamurthy (2012) suggests, appear as neoliberal subjects, each seen in the context of their own success, self-determination and assertiveness. They smile or stare squarely out of photographs, comfortable

Figure 7. Generic empowered people from unspecified developing countries,

and communicating agency. In Figure 7, we see laughing children, enthusiastic students and baskets full of produce. Such photographs, with the smiling and active people, provide a positive evaluation of the goals and give weight to the idea that the Agenda is indeed delivering on its promise to 'transform the world'.

For critics (Telleria, 2021), the very problem underpinning the SDGs is, despite a language and rhetoric that suggests unity, that they view the world from the perspective of a small number of powerful countries who hold specific ideas about social and economic priorities and forms of social organization. The photographs seen in Figures 6 and 7 can be viewed as playing a role in a process of homogenization, where there is no sense that there may be ideas and values, or forms of life that may clash with the framework for transforming the world presented by the SDGs. Positive transformation in the SDGs is seamlessly connected to productivity and economic growth (Skene, 2021), here visually represented through utopic images of its outcomes in the forms of education, civic society and health care.

In Figure 6, the language in the summaries of 'why it matters' also helps to provide a sense of who is acting in this discursive script. The texts take the form of 'simulated conversations' (Fairclough, 1992). Why each 'matters' is dealt with by answering posed questions that are used as headings. These are: 'what is the goal here', 'why', 'what happens if we don't take action', 'can we solve this problem or is it too late to act', 'what can I do to achieve this goal'. Here language commodifies a kind of simulated discussion about the meaning of each SDG into a standardized format that serves the interests of the text maker. The question-and answer-format connotes something of 'equal footing', of openness, yet presupposing what the questions might actually be. Symbolized here is not a sense of formal or official information or instruction, but a conversation between a

global 'we', into which the viewer is implied/invited. This is evident, too, in the use of first-person pronouns in the questions:

what happens if ***we*** don't take action,

can ***we*** solve this problem or is it too late to act,

what can ***I*** do to achieve this goal.

Glossed over in this discursive script is who is defining the nature of 'this problem' and whether the ideas, values and culture of those we see in the images may disagree. We see the same construction of the relationship in Figure 7 where we are told to 'Empower women', where we see women exercising and 'Donate what you don't use', and we see the smiling children. The empowered and generic Global South people are integrated with 'our' actions – a world united by the goals. Clear in scholarship about the SDGs is that Third World Forums are deeply opposed to them (Ogujiuba and Jumare, 2012).

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