

## Urgency and Hope as Evaluative Orientations in United Nations SDG Report Forewords: A Diachronic Analysis (2021–2025)

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### Abstract

The foreword to each Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) report precedes the statistical sections and sets an evaluative frame. As recurring governance texts, SDG report forewords offer a revealing site for examining how crisis framing and ongoing commitment are negotiated across reporting cycles. This study examined diachronic variation in urgency and hope as higher-order evaluative orientations across five SDG report forewords published between 2021 and 2025, a period of pandemic recovery and global disruption as the 2030 target year for achieving the SDGs approached. The analysis combined Appraisal theory with corpus-assisted discourse analysis of a 3,132-word corpus. Functional categories for each orientation were developed inductively and coded at the clause level. Instances were normalised per 1,000 words. For each year, an urgency–hope ratio was calculated to capture the relative prominence of the two orientations as a proportional independently of text length. Inter-coder agreement, assessed on a double-coded sample of 100 instances, was high ( $\kappa = .94$ ). Across the five reporting cycles, urgency remained more prominent than hope in normalised frequency terms. Hope-related resources were absent from the 2022 foreword but returned in subsequent years. Both orientations reached their highest normalised frequencies in 2024, and the urgency–hope gap narrowed in 2025. The forewords did not maintain a stable evaluative profile across the five years. The study contributes to Appraisal-based research on institutional genres by showing how ratio-based comparison can reveal evaluative differences across comparable texts and track change over time.

**Keywords:** appraisal theory, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, hope, SDG report forewords, urgency

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## Introduction

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) reports are produced under a recurring communicative demand. Each reporting cycle must recognise limited progress and reaffirm the need for continued commitment. This communicative demand becomes especially visible in the foreword. Although brief, it carries considerable evaluative weight before the statistical evidence is presented. As the opening section of each report, the foreword signals priorities and establishes the tonal frame through which subsequent information is read. It articulates a stance before technical detail unfolds. This makes it a particularly revealing site for examining patterns of evaluation in this form of reporting.

Forewords operate under two related constraints. They remain anchored to the report's evidentiary base and translate that evidence into a public-facing position sustained across the reporting cycle. They serve a primarily promotional function within institutional reports (Bhatia, 2004). Space is limited and elaboration constrained, so evaluative choices assume particular importance despite the continuity of the reporting mandate.

Within recurring institutional genres, the management of tone shapes whether meaningful progress appears achievable and whether responsibility appears clearly distributed. In sustainability communication, urgency and hope often coexist but serve different communicative ends. Urgency is realised through resources such as crisis framing, obligation, and temporal pressure. Environmental communication research has raised concerns about crisis-centred messages that offer little indication that meaningful action remains possible (Moser, 2016; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Hope draws on progress, feasibility, and shared agency. Progress framing may help sustain engagement by signalling that action remains possible. The relative prominence of these orientations may therefore vary across SDG reporting cycles without implying a fixed evaluative stance.

Research in discourse analysis has shown how evaluative language constructs stance and alignment (Martin & White, 2005). However, how contrasting patterns of evaluation are configured across successive cycles remains less systematically examined. Many studies of evaluative language have examined individual texts or relatively small sets of texts (e.g., Fuoli, 2018). This tendency is also evident in research on institutional discourse. SDG reports recur annually under a shared mandate. Their credibility and broader institutional priorities extend across reporting cycles and are not confined to any single year's documented outcomes. Patterns of variation across successive years therefore clarify how evaluation operates within this genre and may reveal relationships that lexical counts alone cannot fully capture. Urgency and hope are treated as higher-order evaluative orientations constructed through patterned combinations of Appraisal resources.

The present study examines these orientations across five SDG report forewords published between 2021 and 2025. The rhetorical tone of each foreword is shaped by patterned evaluative and modal resources through which urgency and hope are realised. In this study, "resources" refer to recurring lexical, modal, and evaluative patterns associated with these orientations. The

analysis adopts a corpus-assisted discourse analytic approach to identify functional categories associated with each orientation and compare their distribution across five consecutive cycles. The period covers a phase of continuing global disruption and a narrowing timeframe for achieving the 2030 Agenda. This sequence provides a basis for examining how urgency and hope are configured as the 2030 target year approaches. Beyond SDG reporting, the study advances institutional discourse research by showing how evaluative orientations can be examined across recurring governance texts produced under stable communicative conditions. The analytical framework developed here may also be applied to other recurring institutional genres, such as annual reports and policy statements. By tracing evaluative change across five consecutive reporting cycles, the study further extends Appraisal-based research, which has less often examined how evaluative patterns evolve within the same institutional genre over time.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are urgency-related resources distributed and realised across the five SDG report forewords?
2. How are hope-related resources distributed and realised across the five SDG report forewords?
3. How does the relative prominence of urgency and hope vary across the five reporting cycles?

## Literature Review

### *1. Evaluative Stance and Diachronic Discourse Analysis*

Institutional texts position writers in relation to audiences and the conditions they report on. These positions are not incidental. They are realised through evaluative resources that align readers with particular attitudes and values. Appraisal theory maps this evaluative work through recurrent linguistic patterns (Martin & White, 2005). It organises these resources into three subsystems: Attitude, which covers affect, judgement, and appreciation; Engagement, which addresses dialogic positioning and modality; and Graduation, which scales evaluative force and sharpens or softens category boundaries. Evaluative meaning depends on how these subsystems interact within particular ideological contexts.

Of the three subsystems, Graduation is most directly relevant here. Martin and White (2005) distinguished two dimensions within this system: Force, which adjusts intensity or quantity, and Focus, which sharpens or softens category boundaries. In institutional discourse, Force often operates through temporal reference. Items such as *now* and mentions of swift or accelerating change amplify evaluative force without changing the core proposition. Although the coding framework used in this study was organised into functional categories and did not map directly onto Appraisal subsystems, these distinctions help explain how evaluative effects are linguistically realised.

Appraisal resources do not work in isolation. This study focuses on two higher-order orientations that arise through such combinations: urgency and hope. They are treated here as orientations shaped through combinations of resources across subsystems. In the clause “*we must act now before this crisis deepens*”, urgency is realised through the combination of

deontic modality in *must*, the negative appreciation carried by *crisis*, and the temporal pressure signalled by *now* (Martin & White, 2005). No single subsystem produces this effect alone. This example reflects the configurational logic of Appraisal, where evaluative effects emerge through the interaction of resources.

A single item may contribute to urgency or hope, but its function depends on the evaluative patterns in which it occurs. The same expression may serve different functions depending on surrounding discourse and institutional context. Urgency and hope must therefore be identified through attention to both individual items and broader patterns across the text.

Urgency and hope draw on different resources. *Massive* and *accelerating* give change greater evaluative force. *Crisis* and *fragile* depict conditions as unstable or under threat. With *must* and *require*, action becomes non-optional. Hope is realised differently. It appears in positive appreciation of progress and in the language of possibility, and it points forward to what collective action can still achieve.

Appraisal research has mainly examined how evaluation operates within individual texts and genres. Diachronic work shifts attention to sequences of texts produced under stable institutional mandates (Wodak, 2015). Comparisons are more informative where genre and authorship remain relatively stable across reporting cycles. Patterns of evaluative emphasis can therefore be examined in relation to changing institutional contexts. Such patterns are particularly relevant in texts produced to frame global priorities and maintain institutional legitimacy.

Longitudinal discourse studies illustrate how evaluative emphases shift across changing contexts. Carvalho (2005) showed that representations of the greenhouse effect in the British press shifted alongside changes in political context and scientific authority. During the 1980s, the issue moved from a primarily scientific matter to a contested political one. Institutional discourse can display similar forms of variation. Wodak (2015) described the Discourse-Historical Approach as attending to diachronic shifts in discursive emphasis. Within this framework, evaluative meaning reflects changing contexts. SDG forewords, produced annually under a shared mandate, provide an appropriate basis for diachronic analysis.

Within institutional reports, forewords occupy a distinct position. They precede statistical and technical sections and establish an evaluative frame before data appears. Bhatia (2004) noted that the foreword primarily serves a promotional function. Contemporary institutional texts typically combine informational and promotional purposes. The interplay between these functions often shapes how readers interpret the report. Forewords that foreground crisis create a different evaluative register from those that emphasise progress or possibility. They therefore provide an appropriate site for examining how urgency and hope are organised and how their relative prominence is configured over time. This view of evaluation as configurational informs the corpus-assisted approach adopted in the present study.

## *2. Urgency and Hope in Sustainability Communication*

Annual SDG report forewords face a recurring communicative challenge. Progress across the 17 goals has repeatedly fallen short of established targets. Each foreword must nonetheless sustain political commitment to a shared agenda extending to 2030. This tension influences how evaluation is configured in SDG forewords. Two orientations are particularly important in managing it: urgency and hope.

Crisis-oriented framing in sustainability communication does not reliably produce engagement on its own. Images of environmental crisis can instead leave audiences feeling helpless, particularly when they see no meaningful course of action (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Moser (2016) described a similar sense of despair among people who understand the science but see little action matching the scale of the problem. Institutional texts face the same challenge over time. Persistent urgency with no indication that change remains possible may lead audiences to withdraw.

Hope does not invariably sustain engagement. Ojala (2023) argued that its effects depend partly on whether people continue to perceive meaningful possibilities for action. When such possibilities recede from view, intensified urgency may contribute to disengagement. These studies do not establish how audiences respond to SDG forewords specifically. They help explain why the coexistence of urgency and hope has become an important concern in sustainability communication.

The role of hope in this context also extends beyond individual psychology. SDG forewords address member states, institutions, and international organisations. Such governance texts help organise shared understandings and uphold commitments. Braithwaite (2004) argued that collective hope depends on trust in available pathways and on a sense that collective action remains achievable. These conditions are central to SDG reporting. Trust and shared efficacy cannot be assumed. They need to be renewed across actors and reporting cycles if collective commitments are to retain their force.

As the 2030 target year approaches, each annual foreword is produced against a record of unmet targets and a narrowing window for action. At the same time, SDG forewords contribute to sustaining the cooperative commitments on which the agenda depends.

## *3. Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis*

Corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADA) combines the systematic coverage of corpus linguistics with the contextual interpretation of discourse analysis. Corpus methods can identify recurring regularities across texts, but they do not explain how those regularities function. Their significance depends on interpretation. Baker et al. (2008) described CADA as an approach that brings systematic pattern identification into dialogue with context-sensitive interpretation. This integration is particularly relevant for the analysis of evaluative language. Evaluative meanings are often realised through combinations of linguistic resources and rarely through isolated lexical items (Martin & White, 2005). Corpus evidence can reveal recurring evaluative tendencies, while discourse analysis supports their interpretation within local contexts. In the

present study, this approach is applied to urgency and hope as configurational effects across Appraisal subsystems.

CADA relies on tools that detect recurring features and situate them in context. Frequency counts can bring evaluative tendencies into view, while concordance lines support close reading of local contexts. Comparisons across reporting cycles may reveal forms of variation that are less apparent in individual texts. Corpus tools informed the initial stage of analysis, but decisions about evaluative function ultimately relied on the researchers' judgement.

Partington et al. (2013) argued that corpus findings require interpretive grounding to be meaningful. Frequency alone does not determine function. The same item can express obligation or possibility depending on its co-text. Interpretation forms part of the analytical process itself. This holds especially for evaluative language. Fuoli (2018) noted that evaluative meanings are highly context-dependent and cannot be read off surface forms alone.

CADA is well suited to diachronic analysis. Frequency distributions can be compared across texts produced at different points in time, and patterns of variation can be examined alongside changing institutional contexts. These considerations become particularly important when close interpretation of a small corpus is prioritised. SDG forewords constitute a compact and specialised genre. Each foreword frames the interpretation of the annual report and establishes its evaluative register before the technical and statistical sections that follow (Bhatia, 2004, p. 68). The limited space available in forewords means that evaluative choices carry considerable weight. The genre is institutionally structured: forewords follow a stable format and are attributed to the same institutional authorship across reporting cycles. This stability makes year-on-year comparison analytically meaningful and supports interpretation of evaluative patterns in relation to changing global conditions.

#### *4. Previous Studies on Evaluative Language in Sustainability and Institutional Discourse*

The evaluative priorities of institutional texts are not fixed. De Jong and Vijge (2021) traced how wider institutional and political change reshaped communicative priorities in the move from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the SDGs. Changes in context may therefore be accompanied by changes in evaluative emphasis. SDG report forewords provide a distinctive case within this broader picture. They are produced annually under the same mandate, by the same institutional author, and for the same global audience. The circumstances they address, however, change from year to year. This combination of institutional continuity and shifting contexts creates conditions for examining how evaluative orientations vary over time.

Fuoli (2018) stressed reliability and context-sensitive interpretation in Appraisal analysis, and Tupala (2019) showed the framework's value for institutional discourse. SDG report forewords extend this work to a recurring institutional genre. They are produced under stable conditions of authorship and purpose yet address changing global circumstances. This combination makes them well suited to examining how the relative prominence of urgency and hope varies across reporting cycles.

## Methodology

This study adopted a corpus-assisted discourse approach to examine how urgency and hope were realised across five SDG report forewords published between 2021 and 2025. Concordance analysis was used to identify instances associated with urgency and hope. These instances were interpreted according to evaluative function and compared across reporting cycles using normalised frequencies and ratio-based measures.

### *1. Corpus Design and Scope*

The corpus consisted of five complete SDG report forewords published annually between 2021 and 2025 (United Nations, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025), all attributed to António Guterres in his role as Secretary-General. All texts were retrieved from official UN SDG reports. The five texts totalled 3,132 words, with individual forewords ranging from 452 to 757 words. Word counts covered running text only and excluded titles, author names, and other paratextual elements. The corpus was intentionally bounded to support close diachronic comparison within a single institutional genre. Authorship and genre remained stable across the dataset.

### *2. Analytical Framework*

The analysis drew on Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005). The framework treats evaluation as a system of interpersonal meaning realised through patterned linguistic resources. Appraisal distinguishes three broad systems: Attitude, which covers expressions of emotion, judgement, and appreciation; Graduation, which adjusts the strength or scope of evaluation; and Engagement, which concerns how writers acknowledge or close down alternative viewpoints. In this study, Appraisal theory served as a conceptual foundation rather than a direct coding scheme. The functional categories described below were developed to capture how urgency and hope are constructed in the corpus.

Five functional categories for urgency and five for hope were identified (see Table 1). Categories emerged through iterative movement between Appraisal theory and patterns identified in concordance analysis. Items were assigned according to their dominant evaluative function within each clause.

**Table 1***Functional Categories Used in Coding Urgency and Hope*

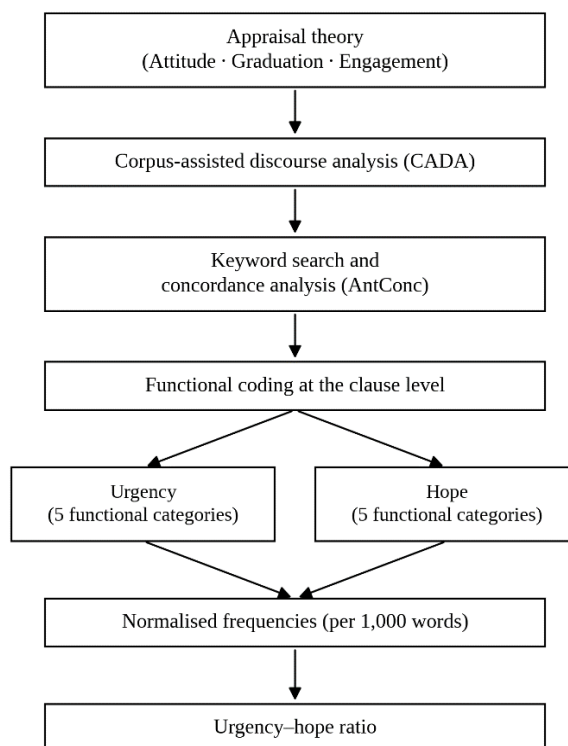
| <b>Orientation</b> | <b>Category</b>          | <b>Description</b>                                             | <b>Example</b>                           |
|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Urgency            | Crisis and Risk          | Lexical items presenting conditions as unstable or threatening | <i>crisis, fragile</i>                   |
| Urgency            | Obligation               | Deontic expressions presenting action as required              | <i>must, require, need to</i>            |
| Urgency            | Intensification          | Resources increasing magnitude or pace                         | <i>massive, accelerating</i>             |
| Urgency            | Temporal Pressure        | References foregrounding immediacy or narrowing response time  | <i>now, a critical moment</i>            |
| Urgency            | Action Framing           | Constructions presenting collective response as necessary      | <i>rescue, decisive action</i>           |
| Hope               | Progress Framing         | Positive references to movement or development                 | <i>progress, resilience</i>              |
| Hope               | Possibility and Capacity | Expressions indicating feasibility or potential                | <i>can, possible</i>                     |
| Hope               | Future Orientation       | Forward-looking references and projected future possibilities  | <i>hope, opportunity</i>                 |
| Hope               | Achievement              | Expressions indicating successful outcomes                     | <i>achieved, deliver</i>                 |
| Hope               | Collective Action        | References to shared agency                                    | <i>together, solidarity, partnership</i> |

*Note.* Categories were developed functionally and did not map directly onto individual Appraisal subsystems.

Coding was guided by evaluative function and interpreted in context. *Recovery* was coded as Progress Framing only when it signalled positive movement. When qualified as *fragile* or *uneven*, it was excluded. Modal *can* was coded under Possibility and Capacity only when it projected feasibility. When it denoted factual ability, it was excluded. Explicit references to *hope* were coded under Future Orientation when they projected hoped-for future possibilities. Where a resource potentially matched more than one category, coding followed the dominant communicative role at the clause level. The analytical workflow employed in the study is summarised in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Analytical Workflow Used to Identify and Compare Urgency- and Hope-Related Evaluative Orientations across the Corpus*



### 3. Corpus Procedures and Search Strategy

Corpus exploration was conducted in AntConc (version 4.3.1) through keyword searches and manual concordance inspection. Searches were case-insensitive, and wildcards were used to retrieve morphological variants (e.g., *achiev\** for *achieve*, *achieved*, and *achievement*). No automated lemmatisation or tagging was applied. All concordance lines were examined within full clause context.

An initial set of lexical candidates was informed by Appraisal-based expectations and exploratory reading of the corpus. For urgency, entry-point keywords included *must*, *crisis*, *urgent*, *risk*, *need*, and *require*. For hope, they included *progress*, *achieve*, *together*, *can*, *hope*, *future*, and *opportunity*. These served as search entry points rather than fixed coding categories. Subsequent concordance inspection identified additional evaluative expressions and prompted refinement of the initial keyword set.

Each retrieved instance was manually checked. Instances that did not carry an evaluative function in context were excluded. The following exclusion conditions were applied:

1. A concessive marker such as *despite* or *although* altered the intended positive meaning.
2. An obligation modal framed the clause, and the target verb carried no independent evaluative meaning.
3. The keyword appeared in a negative frame, such as *failure to achieve* or *risk of collapse*.
4. The keyword formed part of a proper noun or report title.

The lexical item *now* was coded under Temporal Pressure when it signalled time constraints. Multiword expressions such as *act now* were treated as single semantic units under Action Framing.

Where urgency and hope resources co-occurred within the same clause, each instance was coded separately according to its dominant communicative role. Coding decisions were guided by discourse function. Surface form alone did not determine category assignment.

#### 4. Coding Unit and Reliability

The coding unit was the evaluative instance at the clause level. In most cases, this corresponded to a lexical item such as *crisis* or *progress*, or a modal expression such as *must* or *can*, used evaluatively.

Multiple evaluative elements within the same clause were counted separately. When *crisis* and *must* occurred in the same clause, each contributed one instance. Multiword expressions such as *need to* and *within reach* were treated as single instances. Each expression functioned as a semantic unit.

All coding was conducted manually following concordance retrieval. A colleague in applied linguistics served as a second coder. A preliminary pilot of 15 instances was conducted to clarify category boundaries before full double coding.

Intercoder agreement was subsequently assessed on a double-coded sample of 100 instances, which included the 15 pilot cases. Cohen's kappa ( $\kappa$ ) was .94. Agreement was 100% for hope-related categories and 95.7% for urgency-related categories.

All three disagreements involved urgency-related categories and were resolved through discussion. Minor refinements to category boundaries were made as a result. Coding logs supported consistency throughout.

#### 5. Normalisation and Ratio Calculation

Raw frequencies were calculated for each functional category and each reporting year. Foreword length varied across years. Frequencies were therefore normalised per 1,000 words to support comparison across texts of unequal length.

An urgency–hope ratio was calculated for each year:

$$\text{Urgency–Hope Ratio} = (\text{normalised urgency frequency}) / (\text{normalised hope frequency})$$

A ratio above 1.0 indicates urgency prominence. A ratio below 1.0 indicates hope prominence. Where no hope-related resources were identified, as in 2022, the ratio is undefined. The absence of hope-related resources is analytically meaningful. This pattern cannot be captured numerically but can be examined through close reading.

The ratio was interpreted alongside raw and normalised counts. On its own, it does not capture differences in evaluative distribution across reporting cycles. It therefore functions as a comparative indicator within the dataset.

## 6. Analytical Orientation

Frequency counts informed close reading, which in turn refined the interpretation of evaluative meanings. These meanings were examined through the interaction of linguistic resources in context. Interpretation focused on how urgency and hope were realised at the clause level. The urgency–hope ratio functions as a descriptive tool within a bounded institutional sequence. It makes patterns in the relative prominence of urgency and hope visible across reporting cycles.

## Results

### 1. Distribution of Urgency and Hope Across Reporting Cycles

Overall, urgency ranged from 15.86 to 33.19 instances per 1,000 words, whereas hope ranged from 0.00 to 19.91. No hope-related resources were identified in 2022. Across the five cycles, urgency remained more prominent than hope in normalised frequency terms. This pattern held whenever hope-related resources were present.

**Table 2**

*Evaluative Stance Distribution across United Nations SDG Report Forewords (2021–2025)*

| Year  | Total Words | Urgency (raw) | Urgency (per 1,000 words) | Hope (raw) | Hope (per 1,000 words) | Urgency–Hope Ratio |
|-------|-------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 2021  | 757         | 12            | 15.86                     | 9          | 11.89                  | 1.33               |
| 2022  | 701         | 16            | 22.83                     | 0          | 0.00                   | N/A                |
| 2023  | 743         | 18            | 24.23                     | 6          | 8.08                   | 3.00               |
| 2024  | 452         | 15            | 33.19                     | 9          | 19.91                  | 1.67               |
| 2025  | 479         | 9             | 18.79                     | 6          | 12.53                  | 1.50               |
| Total | 3,132       | 70            | 22.35                     | 30         | 9.58                   | 2.33               |

*Note.* Normalised frequencies are reported per 1,000 words. N/A indicates that no hope-related instances were identified in 2022. The urgency–hope ratio is therefore undefined for that reporting cycle.

### 2. Functional Realisation of Urgency

Table 3 presents the distribution of urgency-related resources across the five functional categories.

**Table 3**

*Functional Categories of Urgency Framing (2021–2025)*

| Functional Category | Instances | Percentage | Representative Realisations                                      |
|---------------------|-----------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Crisis and Risk     | 22        | 31.4%      | <i>crisis, risk, fragile, failure, emergency</i>                 |
| Obligation          | 20        | 28.6%      | <i>must, need to, require</i>                                    |
| Intensification     | 20        | 28.6%      | <i>massive, accelerating, urgent, unprecedented, significant</i> |
| Temporal Pressure   | 4         | 5.7%       | <i>now, critical moment</i>                                      |
| Action Framing      | 4         | 5.7%       | <i>act now, decisive action</i>                                  |
| Total               | 70        | 100%       | —                                                                |

*Note.* Instances of *urgent* and *urgently* were coded under Intensification when they functioned as scalar intensifiers (e.g., “urgent need”) and were not coded as Temporal Pressure.

Crisis and Risk was the largest category, followed closely by Obligation and Intensification. Temporal Pressure and Action Framing were much less common.

### 3. Functional Realisation of Hope

Table 4 presents the distribution of hope-related resources across the five functional categories.

**Table 4**

*Functional Categories of Hope Framing (2021–2025)*

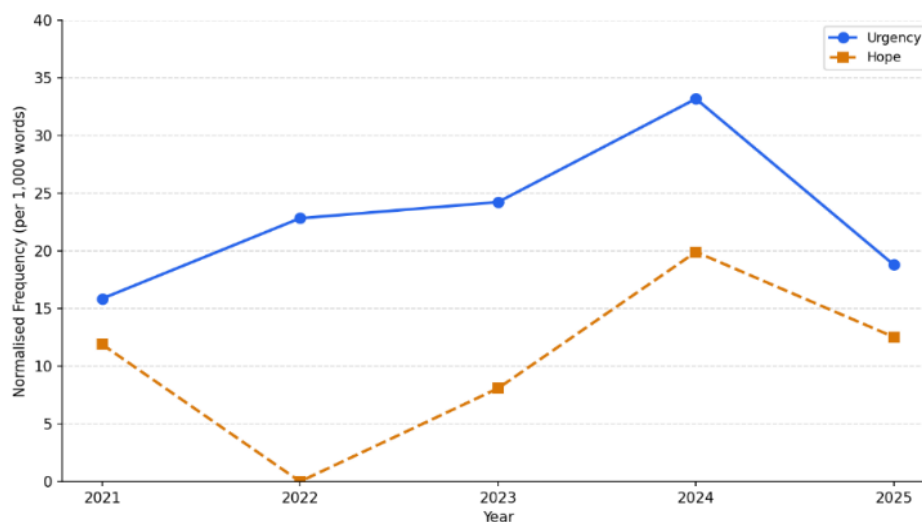
| Functional Category      | Instances | Percentage | Representative Realisations                  |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Progress Framing         | 8         | 26.7%      | <i>progress, gains, recovery, resilience</i> |
| Possibility and Capacity | 8         | 26.7%      | <i>can, possible, within reach</i>           |
| Future Orientation       | 5         | 16.7%      | <i>hope, opportunity</i>                     |
| Achievement              | 4         | 13.3%      | <i>achieved, deliver, attained</i>           |
| Collective Action        | 5         | 16.7%      | <i>together, solidarity, partnership</i>     |
| Total                    | 30        | 100%       | —                                            |

Progress Framing and Possibility and Capacity were the most frequent hope categories, while Achievement was the least frequent.

### 4. Diachronic Patterns of Urgency and Hope

**Figure 2**

*Normalised Frequencies of Urgency and Hope across SDG Report Forewords (2021–2025)*



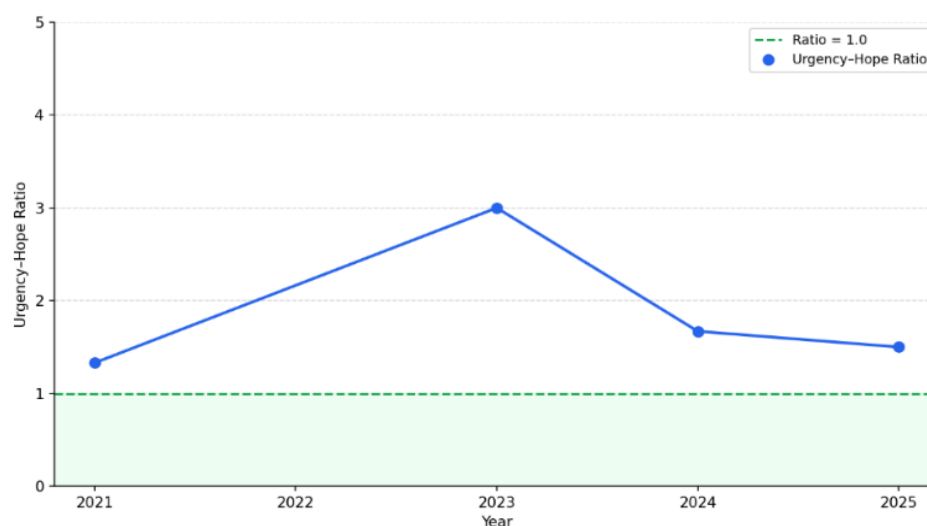
*Note.* Frequencies are normalised per 1,000 words.

Figure 2 shows that urgency generally exceeded hope across the five-year period. The gap was most pronounced in 2022, when no hope-related resources were identified. By contrast, both orientations peaked in 2024. Heightened expressions of hope co-occurred with intensified

urgency. Urgency remained the more prominent orientation throughout the period. However, both orientations declined in 2025, with hope returning close to its 2021 level.

**Figure 3**

*Urgency–Hope Ratio across SDG Report Forewords (2021–2025)*



*Note.* The ratio is undefined for 2022 due to the absence of hope-related resources.

Every defined ratio was above 1.00. For 2022, the ratio could not be calculated because no hope-related resources were identified. Urgency therefore exceeded hope whenever both orientations were present.

## Discussion

Urgency remained more prominent than hope across all five reporting cycles. Crisis and Risk, Obligation, and Intensification together accounted for nearly 90% of urgency instances, and urgency exceeded hope in every year where both orientations appeared. The prominence of these orientations varied across the five cycles and coincided with changing reporting conditions.

### *1. The Functional Basis of Urgency*

The discourse construed conditions as threatening or unstable and presented action as obligatory. It also amplified the scale and pace of the problem. Temporal Pressure and Action Framing each accounted for 5.7% of instances. These categories foregrounded immediacy and

named the kind of collective response the situation required. Bhatia (2004) treated the foreword as primarily promotional. Tupala (2019) likewise found that institutional texts tend to serve the aims of the organisation behind them. In this corpus, threat and obligation led the urgency profile. A genre oriented toward the 2030 target year has grounds to foreground both.

## 2. 2022: *Urgency Without Feasibility*

The 2022 foreword stood apart from all others. It contained no hope-related resources. Urgency reached 22.83 instances per 1,000 words, and Crisis and Risk, Obligation, and Intensification dominated its evaluative profile. Capacity modals, references to progress, and signals of collective agency were all absent.

By 2022, global instability had deepened and SDG progress had stalled. The foreword portrayed conditions as severely off track, with crisis framing accumulating across clauses. No signal of feasibility or direction appeared. The following excerpt illustrates this emphasis on threat and obligation:

“To recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and deliver global sustainability, we need an urgent rescue effort for the SDGs. We must deliver on our commitments to support the world’s most vulnerable people, communities and nations.” (2022 foreword)

The deontic verbs *need* and *must* press for immediate action amid cascading crises. The passage foregrounds threat and obligation while offering little indication of feasibility.

O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) found that crisis-centred messaging can leave audiences feeling helpless and unable to act. Moser (2016) linked a comparable despair to large problems set out without credible pathways for action. These findings concern audience response, which this study did not examine. Even so, the 2022 profile resembled the textual conditions they describe. Witte (1992) proposed that high threat combined with low efficacy can shift responses toward denial. Urgency prevailed across the foreword, and few linguistic resources pointed toward feasible action.

## 3. *Hope as a Relational Orientation*

Where hope appeared, it did not function as a freestanding positive stance. Progress Framing and Possibility and Capacity each accounted for 26.7% of hope-related instances. These resources drew attention to previous gains and sustained a sense of future possibility. Their evaluative role depended on the crisis-dominated contexts in which they appeared.

Martin and White (2005) treated evaluation as realised through combinations of linguistic resources. A reference to feasibility within a crisis-dominated context modified urgency without displacing it. Hope functioned as a resource for sustaining achievable action. It did not primarily serve as emotional reassurance. For Ojala (2023), not all hope functions the same way. Hope grounded in denial differs from hope that faces the problem directly. The pattern in the corpus fits the second type. Progress and possibility were embedded in crisis-dominated contexts.

“Against this backdrop, the steadfast unity of governments behind the 2030 Agenda, as demonstrated at the SDG Summit in September 2023, offers a glimmer of hope.” (2024 foreword)

“Their commitment to rescue the SDGs and to deliver an SDG Stimulus has generated fresh impetus behind the Goals.” (2024 foreword)

These examples projected collective agency through references to shared commitment and renewed momentum. The references followed extended descriptions of stalled progress, inequality, conflict, and climate disruption. Hope therefore emerged within a crisis-oriented context. It projected continued collective action.

Collective Action accounted for 16.7% of hope instances. These resources cast member states and institutions as the actors who would carry the agenda forward. Braithwaite (2004) argued that collective hope rests on a belief that such goals are reachable through coordinated action and that the means to pursue them can be trusted. Thirteen out of 30 hope instances fell under Possibility and Capacity or Collective Action, categories that project either achievable action or shared agency. This distribution reflected the form of efficacy the genre needed to sustain: not personal optimism, but collective and institutional commitment.

#### *4. Diachronic Variation and Contextual Conditions*

Across the five reporting cycles, urgency consistently exceeded hope, although the gap between the two orientations varied over time. The 2021 foreword opened the sequence with a ratio of 1.33. This was the smallest gap between urgency and hope observed in the dataset. It was produced during a period of continuing pandemic recovery and combined crisis framing with references to what had been achieved and what remained possible. The evaluative configuration was not optimistic, but it remained open to feasibility. Subsequent cycles configured urgency and hope differently.

Hope disappeared entirely in 2022, the only year in the dataset where this orientation was absent. In 2023, hope re-emerged and the urgency–hope ratio rose to 3.00, the highest value observed in the dataset. Despite the return of hope-related resources, crisis remained the dominant evaluative orientation. The 2023 profile was therefore more similar to 2022 than to the surrounding years.

By 2024, the ratio had fallen to 1.67. The gap was narrower than in 2023, although 2021 still marked the smallest gap in the dataset (1.33). The SDG Summit of September 2023 reaffirmed commitments to the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2023), and the 2024 foreword coincided with the institutional activity that followed. Both orientations reached their highest normalised frequencies. Although audience responses were not examined, this combination resembles the conditions under which Witte (1992) proposed that danger control processes are more likely to occur. Both orientations declined from their 2024 levels in 2025. Hope declined less sharply than urgency. The gap therefore remained narrower than the widest gap observed in 2023. As

the 2030 target year drew closer, the same intensity of urgency may have been harder to sustain rhetorically.

Raw frequency alone did not determine evaluative positioning. The relationship between orientations within the same cycle also mattered. The absence of an orientation marked a qualitatively different evaluative configuration. It was not simply a matter of lower frequency. The complete absence of hope in 2022 illustrates this clearly. Continuity across cycles did not require a stable evaluative profile. Each foreword registered the underlying tension between crisis and commitment differently. In 2022, this played out amid acute global disruption. The 2024 convergence took shape around a high-profile institutional event, and by 2025 the intensity had eased as the reporting sequence drew to a close. Wodak (2015) described comparable adjustments in diachronic institutional discourse. Evaluative configurations in SDG forewords were not fixed and varied across the cycles examined. Patterns of variation coincided with changing reporting conditions across the five cycles.

Similar patterns of evaluative change have been reported in other institutional and policy contexts. Tupala (2019) found that evaluative choices in EU migration documents consistently reflected the ideological positioning of the institutions that produced them, and de Jong and Vijge (2021) traced how the framing of development goals shifted as institutional priorities evolved from the Millennium Development Goals to the SDGs. The present findings extend this line of work by showing that such adjustment can also occur through the relative prominence of coexisting evaluative orientations, shifting across reporting cycles while the institutional mandate remains constant.

### *5. Implications*

The study treats urgency and hope as higher-order orientations. The approach extends current work on evaluative language in institutional discourse, which has often focused on individual markers. It also allows functional distribution and diachronic variation to be examined without reducing evaluative meaning to individual lexical items. The study demonstrates how corpus-assisted Appraisal analysis can be applied to recurring institutional texts across reporting cycles.

The findings suggest that the SDG forewords repeatedly negotiated pressure for immediate action alongside efforts to sustain a sense that progress remained possible. This points to a broader role for evaluative resources in holding institutional commitment together as conditions grow more difficult. In 2022, urgency ran high on its own. That profile resembles the communicative risks O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) and Moser (2016) identified elsewhere. The 2024 foreword carried both orientations at once, each at its highest normalised frequency. This combination may mark a different evaluative approach within the same setting. Where both orientations were present, urgency and hope functioned as complementary resources within the forewords of SDG reports.

The analytical approach developed here is not limited to sustainability reporting. Institutional genres operating under conditions of accountability face similar demands, particularly where

progress must be assessed against declared goals and communicated to multiple audiences. Climate policy statements, NGO annual reports, and government policy reports are cases in point, as each must repeatedly balance candour about setbacks with grounds for continued confidence and action. Appraisal-based analysis combined with ratio-based comparison provides a means of examining how urgency and hope are configured as conditions change. The framework may also support analyses of how evaluative balance is managed across successive reporting cycles.

## Conclusion

This study examined how urgency and hope were configured in United Nations SDG report forewords across five consecutive reporting cycles. No stable evaluative profile emerged across the period. Instead, the findings portray a genre under recurring pressure that nonetheless sustained the basis for ongoing commitment. The tension between crisis framing and continued commitment persisted throughout the reporting sequence, although it was realised differently across cycles, as reflected in the distributional patterns and ratio-based measures reported here. The findings point to three related observations. Urgency was the more consistent presence, concentrated in Crisis and Risk, Obligation, and Intensification. Hope was more variable. It functioned in relation to crisis-oriented passages and did not stand alone as a positive stance. Its absence in 2022 was the most structurally distinctive feature of the corpus, while its reappearance in subsequent cycles indicated evaluative variability that frequency counts alone did not fully capture. The ratio measure makes this variability visible, showing how evaluative weight was distributed between the two orientations across comparable texts.

The corpus comprised only five forewords totalling 3,132 words, and the findings are therefore descriptive of this bounded corpus rather than generalisable beyond it. At the same time, the focused dataset enabled close analysis of evaluative organisation within a stable genre. The same patterns may not extend to other institutional settings or communicative contexts. The forewords analysed here are highly mediated institutional statements shaped through multiple stages of drafting and editorial review. The patterns identified are therefore more plausibly interpreted as forms of institutional positioning than as expressions of individual authorial preference. Within this institutional setting, urgency and hope emerged as coexisting evaluative orientations whose prominence varied across reporting cycles.

## Recommendations

### *1. Recommendations for Practice*

The findings suggest that those who draft accountability-oriented texts may consider balancing urgency with resources that project feasibility, progress, and collective agency. The 2022 foreword shows the alternative: an evaluative profile narrowed to threat and obligation, with no signal that action remains possible. Keeping feasibility and collective agency in view alongside crisis framing may help such texts hold commitment together without narrowing to threat alone.

## 2. Recommendations for Future Research

Analyses of other recurring institutional genres, including policy statements, annual reports, and progress reviews, could clarify whether these evaluative patterns extend beyond SDG forewords. One question remains beyond the scope of the present study: the extent to which these evaluative adjustments are deliberate. A fuller answer would require access to drafting processes, an avenue for future process-based or paratextual research. Audience-oriented research could extend the present text-based analysis to readers and test whether the evaluative configurations identified here shape how such reports are received.

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