

Constructing ‘The Africa We Want’: A Linguistic Analysis of Identity, Agency and Participatory Communication in Agenda 2063

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, the African Union’s fifty-year strategic framework, linguistically constructs continental identity, distributes agency, and positions readers as participants in collective action. Although Agenda 2063 has attracted substantial scholarly attention as a development and policy framework, little research has examined the communicative mechanisms through which it performs persuasive and mobilizational work. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics as the primary analytical framework, supplemented by Appraisal Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the study analyses a purposively stratified corpus of five rhetorically distinct sections of the document: the Foreword, the Executive Summary and Vision Statement, the Situational Analysis, the Goals and Strategies Framework, and the Communication Strategy. Analysis of pronoun reference, transitivity, modality, and evaluative language identifies three interconnected discursive movements: constructing a collective “we” through inclusive reference and relational processes; depicting a desirable future through densely positive evaluative and future-referring language; and distributing responsibility across differentiated human and institutional actors through graduated modality. The paper’s central contribution is identifying a communicative pattern, simultaneous symbolic collectivisation and distributed responsibility, through which “Africa” is constructed as a unified symbolic subject while practical agency is allocated to Member States, institutions, communities, and citizens. The analysis further shows that the document’s participatory rhetoric operates chiefly at the level of symbolic inclusion rather than substantive civic engagement. The study contributes to communication scholarship on supranational policy discourse, participatory development communication, and the linguistic construction of collective identity in institutional contexts. The analysis is text-internal and does not claim to establish actual audience effects.

Keywords: Agenda 2063; Systemic Functional Linguistics; continental communication; participatory development; strategic communication.

INTRODUCTION

How does a continental policy document work, at the level of language, to move readers from recognising a shared identity toward committing to collective action? This question sits at the intersection of strategic communication, development communication, and discourse analysis, and is particularly salient for a document addressed to citizens across Africa with different histories, languages, and material circumstances.

Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want is the African Union’s fifty-year strategic framework for continental development, adopted by the AU Assembly in January 2015. It functions simultaneously as a policy framework and a future-oriented vision, and emphasises ‘awareness’ and ‘ownership’ as central objectives of its

communication strategy, while ‘participation’ and ‘action’ are core principles woven throughout its implementation framework (African Union, 2015, pp. 120, 129). As a continental communication artefact addressing over one billion people across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, Agenda 2063 offers a significant case for understanding how institutional communication seeks to construct shared identity and mobilise collective action at a supranational scale.

Existing scholarship on Agenda 2063 has examined its implications for development policy, regional integration and governance (Aniche, 2020; Oloruntoba, 2021), its relationship to Pan-Africanism and postcolonial theory (Murithi, 2017; Martin, 2020), and its framing of gender and youth (Chitonge, 2019; Akinola, 2021). This body of work has predominantly treated the document as a policy text to be interpreted thematically rather than as a communication artefact to be analysed systematically; the specific linguistic mechanisms through which it constructs identity, distributes agency, and invites participation remain comparatively unexamined. More broadly, discourse-analytic scholarship on policy communication has focused mainly on national or Western institutional texts (Fairclough, 1992; van Leeuwen, 2008; Escobar, 1995; Ziai, 2016), and while participatory-communication scholars have long emphasised the linguistic realisation of participation in development texts (Servaes, 2008; Waisbord, 2014; Tufte, 2017), this attention has rarely extended to African continental frameworks. African communication scholarship has correspondingly called for closer attention to how institutional power operates through language in African contexts (Lumala, Cruz & Connaughton, 2026; Wasserman, 2018; Moyo, 2020; Ndlela, 2021). This study responds to that call and to the IJRISS Special Issue on Communication’s interest in global communication dynamics, cross-cultural communication, and cultural narratives, by treating Agenda 2063 as a communication artefact rather than solely a policy text.

The article addresses three research questions:

1. How does Agenda 2063 linguistically construct a collective African identity through pronoun choices, collective nouns, and reference strategies?
2. How do transitivity patterns and modality choices distribute agency and obligation among continental, national, and civil-society actors, in particular differentiating “Africa”/ “the continent” as a grammatical Actor from “Africans”/citizens/Member States as human and institutional agents?
3. What evaluative and metaphorical resources does the text deploy to represent Africa’s future and position readers as invited participants rather than passive recipients?

Using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the primary framework (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), supplemented by Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), with a critical discourse orientation informed by Fairclough (1992) and van Leeuwen (2008), the study argues that Agenda 2063 works through three interconnected movements: establishing a collective “we,” constructing a desirable future, and distributing responsibility through graduated modality. Its central contribution is identifying a communicative pattern, termed simultaneous symbolic collectivisation and distributed responsibility, through which “Africa” is constructed as a unified symbolic subject while practical agency is allocated to Member States, institutions, communities, and citizens.

The analysis is text-internal and corpus-restricted: it demonstrates how these patterns operate within five purposively selected sections rather than establishing their frequency across the full 93,000-word document, and it makes no claim about actual audience effects, which remains a separate empirical question.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a hierarchical framework: Systemic Functional Linguistics provides the primary apparatus for grammatical analysis, supported by Appraisal Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, with Critical Discourse Analysis supplying a critical interpretive orientation. This combination is well established for analysing institutional discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Martin & White, 2005; van Leeuwen, 2008).

Systemic Functional Linguistics

SFL conceptualises language as a resource for making meaning, treating grammatical choices as socially motivated: language does not merely reflect social reality but actively constructs it (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Three SFL systems inform this study. First, reference and pronoun systems: first-person plural pronouns (“we,” “our,” “us”) and collective nominal groups (“Africans,” “the continent”) construct collective identity, marking who is included in the speaker’s position (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Fairclough, 1992). Second, transitivity: the system through which texts represent who does what to whom, distinguishing process types (material, relational, mental) and participant roles (Actor, Goal, Sensor, Carrier), with direct implications for how agency and responsibility are encoded (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; van Leeuwen, 2008). Third, mood and modality: modality expresses the speaker’s commitment to a proposition or the obligation attached to a proposal, realised through modal verbs, adjuncts and related resources (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014). Deontic modality (obligation/permission) is distinguished from epistemic modality (probability/certainty); for instance, *must* encodes strong obligation, *should* weaker recommendation, and *will* in policy genres typically encodes futurity rather than epistemic certainty.

Supplementary Analytical Resources

Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) extends SFL’s interpersonal metafunction to evaluative stance. Where modality concerns obligation and probability, Appraisal concerns attitude and value. Attitude covers emotional response (affect), judgments of character (judgement), and assessments of worth (appreciation); Engagement concerns how texts position themselves relative to other voices. Appraisal analysis has been widely used to examine how institutional texts construct legitimacy and align audiences (Martin & White, 2005).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) treats metaphor as a mechanism of thought rather than a figure of speech: conceptual metaphors map a concrete source domain onto an abstract target domain (e.g., DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY). Such mappings carry normative implications, structuring what kinds of change and agency appear imaginable, and this study uses CMT to examine how systematic metaphorical patterns naturalise particular visions of continental development.

Critical Discourse Orientation

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992; van Leeuwen, 2008) provides the interpretive orientation: discourse is socially constitutive, and linguistic choices can naturalise particular social arrangements or advantage some social actors over others. Van Leeuwen’s (2008) categories for social-actor representation inform how this study interprets inclusion, exclusion and differentiation in the text. These frameworks are complementary: SFL grounds the grammatical analysis, Appraisal extends it to evaluative meaning, CMT illuminates the figurative structuring of policy reasoning, and CDA situates the resulting patterns within their broader institutional and political context.

METHODOLOGY

Corpus

Rather than treating Agenda 2063 as an undifferentiated whole, this study constructs a purposive, functionally stratified corpus representing the document’s major communicative stages. Five sections were selected for their distinct rhetorical functions: the Foreword, the Executive Summary and Vision Statement (Chapter 2), the Situational Analysis (Chapter 3), the Goals and Strategies Framework (Chapter 4), and the Communication Strategy (Chapter 6.6). These sections represent recognisably different sub-genres within a single policy document, institutional positioning, vision articulation, problem representation, implementation specification, and explicit metadiscourse on communication and mobilisation, each likely to deploy different linguistic resources. The analysis does not claim that the patterns identified characterise the entire 93,000-word document, including its results matrices and annexes, which were not coded for this study.

Table 1. Corpus Composition

Section	Approx. length	Analytical purpose	Linguistic focus
Foreword	~600 words	Identity construction, institutional positioning	Inclusive pronouns; statements of collective achievement
Executive Summary and Ch. 2 (Vision and Aspirations)	~3,000 words	Collective identity and future construction	Evaluative language, metaphor, future-oriented constructions
Ch. 3 (Progress, Challenges, Implications)	~2,500 words	Representation of Africa's past and present	Passive constructions, nominalisation, causal framing
Ch. 4 (Goals, Priorities, Strategies)	~4,000 words	Specification of goals and agentive frameworks	Transitivity, modality, distribution of responsibility
Ch. 6.6 (Communication Strategy)	~800 words	Metadiscourse on mobilisation	Statements about audience and participation

Note. Section lengths are approximate and drawn from the paginated Agenda 2063 Framework Document (African Union, 2015).

Unit of Analysis and Coding Procedure

The clause is the primary unit of analysis for transitivity and modality coding; the sentence is the unit for pronoun and Appraisal coding, since evaluative meaning frequently spans clause boundaries.

Coding Framework:

Coding proceeded in four stages, guided by the following framework: We identified first-person plural pronouns (“we,” “our,” “us”) and collective nominal groups (“Africans,” “the continent,” “Member States”) as indicators of in-group construction. Ambiguous cases, such as whether “the AU” functions as a singular institutional actor or as a representation of African collectivity, required examination of surrounding context and the text’s own metadiscourse about who “the AU” represents.

Process types (material, relational, mental, verbal) were distinguished following Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), with the key challenge being to separate abstract from human/institutional Actors. “Africa” and “African economies” were coded as continental/abstract when functioning as grammatical Actors of transformation; “Member States,” “the AU,” “communities,” “citizens,” and named individual actors were coded as human/institutional. Single clauses presenting both levels were coded for the superordinate Actor.

Modality analysis separated deontic modality (expressing obligation or permission: “must,” “should,” “requires,” “may”) from epistemic modality (expressing probability or certainty: “will,” “can,” “likely”). The verb “will” in policy contexts proved particularly difficult. In “Africa will by 2063 be prosperous,” it marks futurity rather than epistemic commitment; in “Member States will develop policies,” it is ambiguous between futurity and soft obligation. Resolving this required examining the full modality system of each clause. Where “will” appeared as the sole modal item in a context of stated future goals, we coded it as futurity/prediction; where it appeared alongside deontic modals like “must” or “shall,” we coded it as soft obligation.

Attitude (emotional response, judgment of character, assessment of worth) and engagement (how the text positions itself relative to other voices) were identified following Martin & White (2005) for Appraisal analysis. The distinction between appreciation and judgment sometimes required interpretive judgment, particularly when the text attributed positive qualities simultaneously to outcomes and human agency.

Single-Coder Procedure and Verification:

The analysis was conducted by a single coder using the coding framework and decision rules specified above. Given the study's interpretive and text-internal orientation, the analysis prioritised systematic application of theoretically informed coding rules, contextual interpretation, and transparency of analytical decisions rather than statistical estimation of inter-coder agreement. To strengthen coding consistency, the coder applied the same decision rules systematically across all eligible instances, recorded contextual excerpts for each analytical category, and cross-checked interpretations across reference, transitivity, modality, Appraisal, and metaphorical patterning.

Particular attention was given to potentially ambiguous cases. For example, instances of *will* were distinguished between futurity/prediction and obligation by considering the grammatical and rhetorical context of the clause rather than treating all occurrences as modal markers. Similarly, abstract Actors such as "Africa" and "African economies" were distinguished from human and institutional actors such as "Member States," "the AU," "communities," and "citizens" according to their grammatical roles in individual clauses. These decision rules were applied consistently throughout the selected corpus.

Because the analysis was conducted by a single coder, the study does not claim formal inter-coder reliability or statistical agreement. Instead, methodological transparency was pursued through explicit coding criteria, systematic treatment of ambiguous cases, contextual recording of coded excerpts, cross-checking across analytical dimensions, and provision of representative coded evidence in the Appendix. The Appendix also provides complete summary counts of all coded instances across each analytical dimension (Tables A1a–A5), enabling readers to assess the scope and distribution of the coded dataset. The findings should therefore be understood as theoretically informed, text-internal interpretations of the selected corpus rather than as frequency-based generalisations to the full Agenda 2063 document.

Limitations

The absence of a second coder is a methodological limitation. Although the explicit coding rules and systematic application of the analytical framework strengthen consistency and auditability, the study cannot establish inter-coder agreement for the corpus as a whole. Future research could address this limitation by employing independent coding of a larger corpus and comparing coding decisions across analysts. The analysis also does not establish the frequency of these patterns across the full 93,000-word document or their presence in the excluded results matrices and annexes; these limitations are considered further in the Discussion.

FINDINGS

The findings are organised around the three research questions. The first subsection examines how Agenda 2063 constructs collective identity through pronoun choices and reference strategies (RQ1); the second examines how the text constructs a desirable future through evaluative language and metaphor (RQ3); the third examines how agency and responsibility are distributed through transitivity and modality (RQ2); and the fourth presents the paper's central finding, the simultaneous operation of symbolic collectivisation and distributed responsibility.

Constructing Collective Identity: "We"

The Foreword opens by explicitly widening its address beyond formal political institutions:

"I am pleased to present to Member States of the African Union, all Africans, including those in the Diaspora and the international community, the Agenda 2063 Framework Document." (African Union, 2015, p. 5)

This performs an inclusion move: the addressee is not only “Member States” but “all Africans,” including the Diaspora. The Foreword continues by naming collective actors, “Africa” as agent, “the continent’s citizens” as collective beneficiaries, “Africa’s political leadership” as historical agents, that together construct “Africa” as a collective entity with shared history and aspirations rather than a purely geographical designation, a strategic choice for constructing a single addressable audience despite extreme heterogeneity.

A central passage manages a tension the text itself names:

“As a Union of 54 countries, Africa has the biggest landmass and is the second largest in terms of population. As can be expected, the continent is strikingly diverse... However, the continent... is also shaped by a sense of shared destiny, with similar languages, cultural values and heritage, as well as a shared history of struggle against colonialism and liberation from external dominance...” (African Union, 2015, p. 6)

The passage first names diversity explicitly (“strikingly diverse”) and then, through “However” and the additive markers “also” and “as well as,” subordinates that diversity to a claim of shared destiny. The relational process “is also shaped by a sense of shared destiny” presents shared destiny as a current state of affairs rather than an aspiration, naturalising the unity the rest of the document mobilises rather than presenting it as something to be built. This strategy, acknowledging diversity while subordinating it to a larger unity, is comparable to the European Union’s “unity in diversity” discourse (Wodak, 2009).

Chapter 2 extends this identity work through the AU Vision and the seven Aspirations. The Vision is attributed to a collective process:

“Africans of diverse social formations and in the Diaspora affirmed the AU Vision of ‘an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens...’ as the overarching guide for the future of the African continent.” (African Union, 2015, p. 29)

The participial construction “Africans...affirmed” positions Africans as collective agents of a mental/verbal process, implying that the Vision is recognised by a prior collective rather than authored top-down. The seven Aspirations are listed in parallel anaphoric form (“An Africa...”, “A prosperous Africa...”, “A peaceful and secure Africa...”), reinforcing “Africa” as a singular entity capable of properties ordinarily predicated of nations or persons. Aspiration 6 marks a partial shift, moving from Africa as Carrier to “African people” as the relied-upon resource for development, while the clause’s superordinate subject remains singular and continental.

Constructing the Desired Future: “We Want”

Aspiration 1 is introduced with future-referring, evaluatively dense language:

“Africa will by 2063 be a continent of shared prosperity...African people will have a high standard of living and quality of life and well-being...where no child misses school due to poverty...” (African Union, 2015, p. 32)

The “will...be” construction is a future-referring prediction rather than a marker of epistemic certainty; the absence of hedging (e.g., “hopefully,” “possibly”) is itself a meaningful stylistic choice. The dense positive evaluation accumulating around the prediction, “shared,” “high standard,” “quality of life,” “no child,” belongs to Appraisal (Attitude) rather than modality: Appraisal makes the future desirable, while futurity marking presents it as a stated destination.

Chapter 3’s account of present challenges deploys distinct grammatical resources for backgrounding agency, which should not be collapsed into a single “passive voice” category. “Africa remains marginalised in global governance” backgrounds an implicit external Actor. “[Africa] lacks full control over her resources and destiny” is an active relational process, not passive, in which Africa is grammatical Subject but the process construes absence rather than action, representing Africa as Carrier of a negative Attribute. “The inability of the continent to finance its own development” is a nominalisation that converts a possible clause into a noun phrase, removing tense and modality and backgrounding any external contributing cause. Each of these resources,

passive/participial construction, relational process with negative Attribute, and nominalisation, achieves agency-backgrounding by a different grammatical route. By contrast, the aspirational sections of Chapter 2 consistently place “Africa” or “African economies” as grammatical Actor of material processes (“African economies...will be structurally transformed”), though even here the Actor remains an abstraction rather than a named human or institutional agent.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory illuminates further dimensions of how the document constructs the future. Four systematic metaphorical patterns structure the document’s vision of continental development: DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY (“the journey towards 2063,” “Africa’s relentless march towards attaining the Agenda 2063 Vision,” “set a new trajectory of growth, prosperity and peace”) (African Union, 2015, pp. 8, 43, 99); AFRICA IS A BUILDING (“building the institutions,” “strengthening the foundations”) (pp. 5, 7); AFRICA IS A PERSON (“Africa...lacks full control,” “will by 2063 be a continent of shared prosperity”) (pp. 7, 32); and DEVELOPMENT IS WAR (“confront the challenges,” “muster the needed resolve”) (p. 8).

Journey metaphors imply predetermined destinations and cast obstacles as challenges for persevering travellers. Building metaphors position citizens as architects of institutional foundations. Personification attributes intentionality to the continent itself and reinforces symbolic collectivisation by making “Africa” the grammatical agent of transformation. War metaphors frame development as struggle requiring unified response and solidarity. Together, these mappings naturalise a vision of development that is linear, planned, unified, and dependent on collective mobilisation.

Distributing Agency and Responsibility: “We Must Act”

Chapter 4 shifts from future-referring declaratives to modal constructions distributing obligation across differentiated actors (Table 2). The clearest evidence of graduated obligation is the contrast between “should develop” (recommendation, contextual latitude) and “must...act” / “requires” (deontic obligation directed at named actors). The Communication Strategy section makes the address to citizens most explicit:

“Agenda 2063 is a call to action. Policy makers at all levels, business, religious, community, women and youth leaders, ordinary citizens must therefore act with determination and muster the needed resolve, exercise greater unity of purpose to confront the challenges facing Africa...” (African Union, 2015, p. 8)

The deontic “must...act” is directed at a long, explicitly enumerated list of actor categories, distributing obligation widely rather than concentrating it on the state; notably, what citizens are obligated to do is stated abstractly, “exercise greater unity of purpose,” at the level of disposition rather than concrete, prescribed action.

Table 2. Modality Coding (Representative Examples from the Corpus)

Example	Modal item	Category	Function
“Agenda 2063...must therefore act with determination”	must	High obligation (deontic)	Direct call to collective/citizen action
“Agenda 2063 requires Member States to place greater emphasis on domestic resources”	requires	High obligation (deontic)	Mandated core commitment
“Member States should develop policies and strategies adapted to its circumstances”	should	Intermediate obligation/recommendation	Allows contextual adaptation
“This will require improvements in legal, institutional, regulatory systems”	will require	Futurity + implied necessity	Predicts a future need rather than mandating an actor

“Each country...will develop policies and strategies adapted to its circumstances”	will develop	Futurity/prediction	Softer than “must/shall develop”; allows flexibility
“African countries will be amongst the best performers”	will be	Futurity/prediction	States an outcome, not an obligation

Table 3 codes representative clauses for process type, separating continental/abstract Actors from human and institutional Actors. The pattern that emerges is systematic: when the text names what will change (economies, standards of living, the continent’s global position), the grammatical Actor is frequently the continental abstraction “Africa” or a sectoral abstraction (“African economies”), backgrounding which specific human or institutional actor performs the transformation. When the text specifies who is responsible for producing that change, it shifts to naming differentiated human and institutional actors, Member States, the AU, communities, “policy makers...business, religious, community, women and youth leaders, ordinary citizens.” The text thus performs two distinct kinds of agency-construction simultaneously.

Table 3. Transitivity Coding (Representative Examples from the Corpus)

Process type	Actor/Senser/Carrier	Process	Goal/Phenomenon/Attribute	Actor category	Function
Material	The AU	has put in place	many important organs	Institutional	Institutional agency
Material	Member States	have agreed	on the AU vision	Institutional/national	Political agency
Material	Communities	will need to be responsible	for their development	Human/collective	Local agency
Material	African economies	will be structurally transformed	(implicit Actor not named)	Continental/abstract	Backgrounds human agent of transformation
Mental	Africans	desire	for themselves and the continent	Human/collective	Collective aspiration
Mental	Africans (of diverse social formations)	affirmed	the AU Vision	Human/collective	Collective recognition, not invention
Relational	Africa	has	the biggest landmass	Continental/abstract	Identity construction
Relational	The continent	is	strikingly diverse	Continental/abstract	Acknowledges heterogeneity

The Central Finding: Symbolic Collectivisation and Distributed Responsibility

The analysis prioritises interpretive depth and pattern-tracing over frequency counts. The focus is on how linguistic choices accumulate and shift across sections rather than on calculating percentages of modality types or transitivity patterns. Frequency counts are not treated as a substitute for interpretive evidence, particularly in

a single-coder qualitative analysis. Instead, the analysis relies on transparent coding procedures, contextualised textual evidence, and careful interpretation of recurring linguistic patterns.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above reveal a systematic pattern in how Agenda 2063 constructs identity, agency, and participation. This section interprets those findings, considers their implications for communication scholarship, and reflects on what the analysis reveals about the communicative strategies of continental policy discourse.

Symbolic Collectivisation and Distributed Responsibility

The central finding is the coexistence of two communicative strategies in Agenda 2063: the document constructs “Africa” as a unified symbolic and grammatical subject, while simultaneously distributing the practical work of realising that vision across differentiated institutional and human actors. These are not separate operations; they enable each other. The symbolic unity of “Africa” makes the distribution of responsibility feel coherent, with everyone contributing to one continental project; the distributed responsibility gives the symbolic unity practical, implementable content. Without the symbolic unity, distributed responsibility would lack a unifying framework; without distributed responsibility, symbolic unity would remain abstract and unrealised.

This dual movement has implications for how continental policy discourse positions its audiences. The document does not simply address Africans as a homogeneous collective; it differentiates among them, assigning different kinds and degrees of responsibility to different actor categories. Member States and AU institutions are associated with concrete implementation activities, while citizens are positioned through broader ideological obligations such as unity, resolve, participation, and solidarity. This distinction is significant for communication scholarship: institutional actors are assigned specific tasks, while citizens are assigned dispositional stances. It raises important questions about how participatory citizenship is rhetorically constructed.

Positioning Within Supranational Policy Discourse

While this study does not conduct a systematic comparative analysis of other supranational frameworks, the findings indicate that “symbolic collectivisation and distributed responsibility” is a salient feature of the communicative pattern identified within the analysed Agenda 2063 corpus. Whether this pattern is distinctive to Agenda 2063, characteristic of African supranational discourse, or more widely shared across supranational policy communication requires comparative analysis beyond the scope of the present study.

Research on supranational policy frameworks indicates that collective identity is generally constructed through abstraction rather than direct collective pronouns (Martin & White, 2005; van Leeuwen, 2008). Scholarship on policy discourse suggests that documents like the UN 2030 Agenda distance collective reference through institutional framing (“countries,” “stakeholders”) rather than intimate “we” address, and EU policy discourse privileges institutional actor specification (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2011). Agenda 2063 participates in this broader feature of supranational communication.

However, Agenda 2063 combines symbolic collectivisation, graduated modality, aspirational future-construction, and a strongly mobilisational tone within the analysed corpus. The co-occurrence of these resources is analytically significant because they operate together to construct continental identity while distributing responsibility across differentiated actors. Whether this combination is unusual when compared with other supranational policy frameworks cannot be determined from the present study.

A brief illustrative comparison, rather than a systematic one, is possible within the scope of the present study. The Constitutive Act of the African Union (African Union, 2000), the Union’s own founding treaty, offers the closest available point of contrast, since it is produced by the same institution. Its preamble is likewise organised around a collective “we”, but that “we” is explicitly restricted at the outset to its signatories, “We, Heads of State and Government of the Member States” (African Union, 2000, Preamble), addressing “our peoples” from an

external, representative position rather than incorporating citizens as co-enunciators, as Agenda 2063 does in addressing “all Africans, including those in the Diaspora” (African Union, 2015, p. 5).

A parallel contrast appears in modality: deontic “shall” in the Constitutive Act is reserved throughout for institutional organs, as in “The Assembly shall be the supreme organ” (African Union, 2000, Art. 6), while “participation of the African peoples” appears only once, as a nominalised principle with no citizen-Actor performing it (African Union, 2000, Art. 4(c)). Agenda 2063’s extension of directive modality to citizens themselves is, by this single-document comparison, a more citizen-facing construction of participation than its own institution’s founding text, though this observation is suggestive rather than conclusive, drawn from one comparator document read illustratively rather than coded with the same framework, and a fuller answer would require the systematic comparative analysis outlined below.

Whether the “symbolic collectivisation and distributed responsibility” pattern is characteristic of African supranational discourse more broadly remains an open question requiring comparative analysis of other continental and supranational frameworks. Future research could extend this comparison systematically, applying the full coding framework used here to the Constitutive Act and to other comparable documents such as ASEAN Vision 2020, to determine whether the pattern identified here is distinctive to Agenda 2063 or reflects broader features of supranational institutional communication.

Unity Constructed Through the Accommodation of Diversity

As the Findings show, the Foreword’s “strikingly diverse...However...” construction does not deny diversity; it subordinates diversity within a claimed larger framework of shared destiny. This is a communicatively significant strategy. A document that denied the continent’s evident heterogeneity would likely undermine its own credibility with informed readers; the discursive move is instead to accommodate diversity within, rather than resolve it by, a larger claim of shared destiny.

This distinction between accommodation and erasure of difference is a more defensible and communicatively realistic characterisation of how large-scale identity claims typically operate in continental or supranational policy discourse. Similar dynamics have been observed in European Union discourse on “unity in diversity,” where heterogeneity is acknowledged as a feature rather than a problem, and unity is constructed through the management of difference rather than its elimination (Wodak, 2009; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2011). Agenda 2063 appears to deploy a comparable strategy, though the specific linguistic resources it uses; relational processes that present shared destiny as a naturalised state, cumulative additive markers that subordinate diversity to unity, are distinctive to its African institutional context. The comparison suggests that accommodating diversity while constructing unity may be a generic feature of supranational communication, even as the specific linguistic realisations vary across contexts.

What the “We” May Background

A totalising “we” is, definitionally, a selection. The Findings section has examined what the text includes; it has not systematically examined what it may exclude or background. Two observations are offered here, with appropriate caution given the corpus-internal method used.

First, this linguistic analysis identifies what the text linguistically constructs as collective voice, but the text’s collective “we” may operate differently at the level of actual reception. The text constructs collectivity through elite and institutional voice: AU leadership, Member States, consultation processes. This analysis cannot determine whether this constructed collectivity resonates with or alienates citizens who experience governance differently. The consultative process the document references (described in the Foreword as spanning twenty-four months) is beyond the scope of this text-internal analysis.

Second, the document’s own genre creates a structural tension with its participatory rhetoric. As an instrument “adopted” by the AU Assembly rather than ratified by popular vote, it invokes “all Africans” and mandates that “ordinary citizens must...act”. The text does not linguistically resolve this tension. This paper is not in a position

to assess whether that tension is a communicative weakness in practice; it can only note that it exists at the level of the text's own self-description.

Linguistic Evidence and Interpretive Inference

This analysis rests on observable linguistic patterns: pronoun choices, process types, modality items, and evaluative language. However, interpretations of what these patterns do move from linguistic evidence into inferential territory. These include questions about how they position readers, what effects they produce, and whether they function as intentional strategy. The claims are therefore distinguished carefully.

Linguistic finding: The text places abstract Actors (Africa, African economies) in positions where desirable transformations occur, and places differentiated human/institutional actors (Member States, citizens, communities) in positions where responsibility for change is distributed. This pattern is consistent across the five coded sections.

Interpretive claim: This pattern functions as a communicative strategy, enabling the document to construct symbolic unity while allocating practical responsibility. This interpretation rests on three observations. First, the pattern is consistent across multiple sections. Second, the document's own metadiscourse (Chapter 6.6) states that awareness, ownership, participation and action are intentional communication objectives. Third, the pattern has pragmatic coherence: it would be an effective way to address heterogeneous audiences. However, the analysis cannot establish that readers perceive or respond to this strategy as intended, nor can it rule out alternative interpretations of the pattern's communicative function.

Hedged interpretive claim: The document's approach to participation operates "more at the level of symbolic inclusion than practical agency." This characterisation rests on the observation that citizens are invited to adopt dispositions (unity, resolve, solidarity) rather than specified actions, a finding grounded in the modality and process-type coding. Whether citizens experience this as symbolic inclusion or as meaningful participation is a question about reception, not about what the text linguistically does. This study does not claim to answer that question; it identifies a textual feature that invites further investigation.

Critical Interrogation of "Participation"

The distribution pattern identified in the Findings raises questions about what kind of "participation" the document actually constructs. While the text invites citizens to "act," the actions specified for citizens (such as "exercise greater unity of purpose" and "muster the needed resolve") are framed at the level of disposition and solidarity rather than concrete political or civic engagement. This suggests that the document's participatory rhetoric may operate more at the level of symbolic inclusion than practical agency.

This observation aligns with critiques within development communication scholarship that distinguish between "symbolic" and "substantive" participation (Servaes, 2008; Tufte, 2017). Symbolic participation constructs audiences as beneficiaries who are "invited" to support pre-determined agendas, while substantive participation involves audiences in agenda-setting and decision-making. Agenda 2063 appears to lean toward symbolic participation: citizens are invited to feel ownership and act with resolve. The linguistic forms directed at citizens tend to construct participation primarily through mobilisation, identification, unity and disposition, even though the wider Communication Strategy contains institutional mechanisms for consultation, dialogue and feedback.

Whether this constitutes a limitation of the document's communication strategy, or a pragmatic accommodation of the diversity of contexts it addresses, is an empirical question about implementation that falls outside this study's scope. However, the linguistic analysis reveals that the document's communication strategy operates primarily through identification and mobilisation rather than through deliberative or dialogic communication. This is a significant finding for communication scholarship on development and policy discourse.

Contribution to Communication Studies

The Communication Strategy section (Chapter 6.6) explicitly frames “awareness, ownership, participation and action” as the intended outcomes of the document’s communication strategy. The Findings provide the linguistic mechanism connecting this stated communicative goal to specific textual choices: pronoun and collective-noun choices construct the awareness of a collective subject; evaluative and future-referring language constructs the desirability that motivates ownership; and the differentiated modality and transitivity patterns analysed above construct the distributed participation and action the document calls for. This linguistic chain, identity construction leading to audience positioning leading to differentiated invitation to participate, is the paper’s argument for why this is properly a communication-studies contribution rather than a linguistic description of a policy text for its own sake. The Communication Strategy section provides explicit evidence that these effects are intentional, even if the analysis cannot establish whether they are achieved.

Against this backdrop, the study offers three contributions to communication scholarship.

First, it demonstrates how SFL analysis can be extended to the analysis of continental policy communication. By connecting SFL’s grammatical categories (reference, transitivity, modality) to questions of audience positioning and participatory discourse, the study provides a replicable analytical model for examining how policy texts construct identities, distribute agency, and invite participation. This bridge between linguistic analysis and communication theory has been relatively underexplored in African communication scholarship (Lumala, Cruz & Connaughton, 2026; Wasserman, 2018).

Second, the study provides a systematic linguistic analysis of Agenda 2063 as a continental communication artefact. While existing scholarship has examined the document’s policy implications, thematic content, and relationship to Pan-Africanism, no study has offered a detailed analysis of how the document performs its communicative work. The analysis demonstrates that Agenda 2063 is not merely a policy text but a carefully constructed communicative project, deploying specific linguistic resources to construct identity, build consensus, and invite action.

Third, the study identifies “symbolic collectivisation and distributed responsibility” as a communicative mechanism through which Agenda 2063 positions Africa as a collective subject while allocating practical responsibility across multiple actor categories. This concept captures the dual movement (abstract Actor, differentiated agents) that characterises the document’s approach. Whether this mechanism is distinctive to Agenda 2063, characteristic of African supranational discourse, or common to supranational policy frameworks more broadly requires comparative analysis beyond this study’s scope. However, the concept offers a framework for future analysis of how institutional actors in diverse contexts manage the tension between unity and diversity in addressing heterogeneous audiences.

In addition, the metaphor analysis reveals how systematic metaphorical patterns (DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY, AFRICA IS A BUILDING, AFRICA IS A PERSON, and DEVELOPMENT IS WAR) structure the terms in which continental development is imagined and communicated. Collectively, these metaphors position development as linear, planned, unified, and requiring collective mobilisation, demonstrating the ideological work that figurative language performs in policy communication.

Implications for Policy Communication

The findings have practical implications for how continental and national policy communication might be designed to invite ownership and participation. Effective mobilisation discourse appears to require attention to both the symbolic and the practical dimensions of agency. A purely abstract collective identity (“Africa”) may inspire aspiration but lacks implementable content; a purely practical distribution of tasks (“Member States will...”) may specify action but lacks motivational force. The communicative challenge is to hold these two dimensions together.

The analysis also suggests that differentiation among actor categories is a resource for policy communication, not a liability. By assigning different kinds and degrees of responsibility to different actors, institutions assigned concrete tasks, citizens assigned dispositional stances; the document creates multiple points of entry for participation, which may be a more effective strategy than addressing all actors as undifferentiated “stakeholders” with identical responsibilities. However, the analysis also suggests a caution: “participation” that remains at the level of disposition rather than action may be perceived as tokenistic by audiences who expect substantive engagement. Policy communicators should be attentive to the gap between symbolic inclusion and practical agency, ensuring that participatory rhetoric is matched by concrete mechanisms for citizen engagement.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want linguistically constructs continental identity, distributes agency, and positions readers as potential participants in collective action. The analysis identifies three interconnected discursive movements: constructing a collective “we” through inclusive reference and relational processes that present shared destiny as a naturalised state; depicting a desirable future through densely positive evaluative and future-referring language; and distributing responsibility across differentiated human and institutional actors through graduated modality. Its central contribution is identifying “symbolic collectivisation and distributed responsibility” as a communicative mechanism evident in the analysed corpus, through which the document positions “Africa” as a unified symbolic subject while allocating practical agency to Member States, institutions, communities, and citizens.

For communication scholarship, the findings contribute to understanding how supranational policy discourse manages the tension between unity and diversity, aspiration and implementation, and symbolic inclusion and practical agency. The study demonstrates that Agenda 2063 is not merely a policy text but a carefully constructed communicative project, deploying identifiable linguistic resources to construct identity, build consensus, and invite differentiated participation. The analytical approach offers a replicable model for examining how institutional communication constructs audiences and invites engagement, with potential applicability to other continental frameworks and supranational policy discourse more broadly.

The study is text-internal and does not claim to establish actual audience reception. Future research might examine how African citizens, policymakers, and other stakeholders interpret and respond to the document’s communicative strategies. Comparative analysis with other continental frameworks would assess whether the collectivisation-and-distribution pattern identified here is distinctive to Agenda 2063 or characteristic of supranational policy discourse more broadly.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that Agenda 2063 does more than describe a desired future: it uses language to construct a collective subject, depict a desirable future, and invite differentiated participation in its realisation. For communication scholars, the document offers a rich case study in how continental institutions engage heterogeneous publics through textual choices. The linguistic patterns we identify may contribute to scholarship on global communication dynamics, cultural narratives, and the linguistic construction of participatory development, though their broader applicability remains to be tested through comparative analysis with other policy frameworks.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest in relation to this research.

Data Availability: The data supporting this study are derived from Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (African Union, 2015), a publicly available document accessible through the African Union Commission.

Ethics Statement: This study involved analysis of a publicly available policy document and did not involve human participants or animals. No ethical approval was required.

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Appendix A: Coding Framework Application and Complete Coding Summary

This appendix documents the application of the coding framework to the five analysed sections of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (African Union, 2015). Due to the length of the full coding record, comprising approximately 870 coded clauses across the five analysed sections, complete clause-by-clause tabulation is not

feasible for print publication. The full coding dataset is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

The appendix is organised in two parts:

- **Part 1 (Tables A1–A4):** Representative examples illustrating coding decisions for each analytical category, including ambiguous cases and the decision rules applied. These examples demonstrate how the coding framework was operationalised in practice.
- **Part 2 (Tables A1a–A5):** Complete summary counts documenting all coded instances across each analytical dimension by section. These summary tables establish the scope and distribution of the coded dataset, enabling readers to assess the evidentiary basis for the patterns discussed in the Findings.

Together, these provide sufficient transparency for verification of the analytical procedure while remaining practical for print publication.

Part 1: Representative Examples

Table A1. Reference and Pronoun Coding

Excerpt	Code	Reasoning
“I am pleased to present to...all Africans, including those in the Diaspora...”	Inclusive collective pronoun	Deliberate audience expansion beyond formal institutions
“The continent is strikingly diverse...However, the continent is also shaped by a sense of shared destiny”	Diversity acknowledged; subordinated to unity	“However” + additive markers subordinate heterogeneity to larger unity claim

Table A2. Process Type and Transitivity Coding

Excerpt	Process Type	Actor	Coding Decision
“Africa will by 2063 be a continent of shared prosperity”	Relational (prediction)	Africa (abstract)	Abstract actor as Carrier; human agents backgrounded
“Member States must develop policies...adapted to its circumstances”	Material	Member States	Institutional actor with concrete obligation and flexibility
“Africa remains marginalised in global governance”	Relational (negative Attribute)	Africa (abstract)	Passivity framed through Attribute; external cause backgrounded

Table A3. Modality Coding

Excerpt	Modal Item	Category	Target	Coding Decision
“Policy makers...citizens must...act with determination”	must	High obligation	Enumerated actors	Action specified abstractly (unity, resolve) not concretely
“Member States should develop policies...adapted to circumstances”	should	Intermediate obligation	Member States	Weaker than “must”; flexibility explicitly permitted
“African economies will be structurally transformed”	will be	Futurity prediction	Abstract	Future state predicted; agent of transformation backgrounded
“Each country will develop policies adapted to circumstances”	will develop	Futurity/soft obligation	Countries	Futurity allowing flexibility (weaker than “must”)

Table A4. Appraisal and Metaphor Patterns

Pattern	Examples	Function
Positive Attitude accumulation	“shared prosperity,” “high standard of living,” “quality of life and well-being”	Dense evaluation combines with futurity marking to make predictions desirable
DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY	“journey towards 2063,” “relentless march,” “set a new trajectory”	Implies linear progress; predetermined destination
AFRICA IS A PERSON	“Africa...lacks full control,” “will...be driven by its own citizens”	Attributes intentionality to continent; constructs collective agency as singular
DEVELOPMENT IS WAR	“confront the challenges,” “muster the needed resolve”	Frames development as struggle requiring collective solidarity

Part 2: Complete Summary Counts

Table A1a. Complete Count Summary: Reference and Pronoun Coding (All Eligible Instances)

Category	Foreword	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 6.6	Total
First-person plural pronouns (“we,” “our,” “us”)	4	18	0	7	3	32
“Africa” / “the continent” (as collective subject)	6	24	12	9	3	54
“Member States” (as institutional actor)	2	6	8	19	2	37
“Africans” / “citizens” (as human collective)	3	11	4	6	5	29
“Communities” / civil society actors	0	2	1	8	4	15
Named institutional actors (AU, AUC, RECs)	3	5	4	12	1	25
Total reference items coded	18	66	29	61	18	192

Table A2a. Complete Count Summary: Process Type and Transitivity Coding (All Eligible Clauses)

Note: Clauses with multiple processes were coded for the dominant/main process.

Process Type and Actor Category	Foreword	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 6.6	Total
Material						
= with human/institutional Actor	6	28	18	62	8	122
= with continental/abstract Actor	3	22	7	14	2	48
- Actor not specified/backgrounded	1	4	8	3	1	17
Relational						
- identity construction	5	14	6	4	1	30
= negative Attribute (challenge framing)	0	2	15	1	0	18
= positive Attribute (aspiration)	2	19	2	5	2	30
Mental						
= collective aspiration	0	8	0	1	1	10
= institutional recognition/affirmation	1	4	0	2	0	7
Verbal (declarative/policy statements)	1	3	4	6	2	16
Existential	0	2	1	0	0	3
Total clauses coded	19	106	61	98	17	301

Table A3a. Complete Count Summary: Modality Coding (All Eligible Instances)

Modality Category	Modal Item(s)	Foreword	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 6.6	Total
High obligation (deontic)	must, shall, requires	1	3	2	18	4	28
Intermediate obligation	should, ought to	0	4	1	12	1	18

Soft obligation / recommendation	may, could (prescriptive)	0	1	0	4	2	7
Futurity / prediction	will (future-referring)	2	34	6	26	3	71
Futurity + implied necessity	will require, will need	0	3	2	9	1	15
Epistemic (probability/certainty)	can, could, may, likely	1	6	3	5	2	17
Permission / possibility	may, can (enabling)	0	2	1	3	1	7
Total modal items coded		4	53	15	77	14	163

Table A4a. Complete Count Summary: Appraisal - Attitude (All Eligible Instances)

Attitude Type	Foreword	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 6.6	Total
Positive						
= Appreciation (worth/quality of outcomes)	4	42	3	21	6	76
= Judgement (capacity/tenacity of actors)	2	10	1	14	4	31
= Affect (emotional response evoked)	1	8	0	3	2	14
Negative						
= Appreciation (challenges/obstacles)	0	1	18	4	0	23
= Judgement (deficit/lack)	0	1	6	1	0	8
= Affect	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total Attitude items coded	7	62	29	43	12	153

Table A5. Complete Count Summary: Conceptual Metaphor Patterns (All Identified Instances)

Metaphor Pattern	Foreword	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 6.6	Total
DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY	3	8	2	5	2	20
AFRICA IS A BUILDING	2	3	1	2	0	8
AFRICA IS A PERSON	2	6	4	3	1	16
DEVELOPMENT IS WAR	1	2	1	3	2	9
Other systematic metaphors	0	3	1	2	0	6
Total metaphorical expressions coded	8	22	9	15	5	59

Counting Methodology

Counts in Tables A1a–A5 represent all eligible instances identified through systematic application of the coding framework to the five analysed sections.

- **Reference/Pronoun coding:** Each distinct referential item was counted once per occurrence. Pronouns (“we,” “our,” “us”) were counted as individual occurrences; collective nominal groups were counted when they functioned as grammatical subjects or objects referring to collective entities.
- **Transitivity:** Each main clause was coded for its dominant process type and Actor category. Clauses with multiple embedded processes were coded according to the main clause process. Where Actor category was ambiguous, the decision rules documented in the Methodology were applied.
- **Modality:** Each modal item was coded individually. Clauses containing multiple modal items (e.g., “will require”) were coded for each modal item separately.

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- **Appraisal:** Each distinct evaluative item was coded separately. Where a single clause contained multiple attitudinal items (e.g., both appreciation and judgement), each was recorded individually.
 - **Metaphor:** Each identified metaphorical expression was counted once. Where multiple metaphors appeared within a single clause (e.g., a journey metaphor embedded within a war metaphor frame), each was coded separately.

Ambiguous cases were resolved using the decision rules documented in the Methodology. Inter-coder reliability was not established; however, coding transparency is provided through the representative examples in Tables A1-A4 and the complete summary counts in Tables A1a-A5. The full coding dataset is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.