

Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Education and Youth (Meeting on 06/05/26) by IDEA – Irish Development Education Association

Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. We welcome the opportunity to share perspectives from IDEA - Irish Development Education Association, a network of over 100 organisations and individuals working across this island to advance education that helps people understand our interconnected world, to think critically, and feel empowered to play an active role in shaping a fair and sustainable future.

Our members are active across Ireland - north, south, east and west, working with all ages in classrooms, on campuses, in youth work, community education and public engagement - supporting transformative learning on ecology, climate, human rights, war and conflict, poverty, equality, peace, democracy and global justice.

We come here today with a message of hope and a clear call to collective action. At this time of profound global turbulence, education has an increasingly essential role to play in shaping our world for the better.

As legislators and public representatives, you are well aware of the complexity and scale of the challenges. Across Europe and the world, we are seeing authoritarianism on the march, democratic norms under attack, rampant inequality, and the impact of war, conflict and genocide, alongside fossil-fuel-propelled climate and ecological breakdown, unregulated AI, and growing social polarisation, fuelled by algorithms that profit from misinformation, disinformation and racism, and drive division across our homes, workplaces and communities. Together, we are navigating a moment of profound existential uncertainty and anxiety - felt acutely by young people - as we confront unprecedented complexity in an increasingly fragile and interconnected world.

In that context, it is worth briefly stepping back to ask ourselves: what is education for and what is its purpose?

If education is merely confined to the transfer of facts and information, it will fail to rise to the challenge of this historic moment. Instead, what is required is a wiser, broader, more holistic approach - one that fosters critical thinking, helps people to examine the root causes and interconnected nature of global challenges, and serves to inspire and enable active, informed, and empowered participation in society, at all levels - locally, nationally and globally.

This is at the heart of the interrelated fields of development education, Global Citizenship Education, or GCE, and Education for Sustainable Development, or ESD. While terminology can vary, the core aim is consistent: to support learners of all ages to understand an interconnected and unequal world, to think critically, to recognise our interdependence with each other and the natural world, to connect the local to the global, and to develop the skills, confidence and agency to take action.

Ireland has proud traditions and strong foundations to draw upon. From monasteries and hedge schools, missionaries and aid workers, to climate justice and human rights activists, advocates and UN peacekeepers, a compassionate, humanitarian, outward-looking and rights-based perspective has long been part of our national identity.

This is reflected in our national and international commitments, including the Government's ESD to 2030 strategy, Irish Aid's soon-to-be-renewed Global Citizenship Education strategy, Ireland's Climate Action Plan, Ireland's SDG National Implementation Plan, the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050, often referred to as the Dublin Declaration, and the commitment under Target 4.7 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, which calls for all learners to be supported in acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to promote development that is fair, just and sustainable.

However, while policy ambition is clear and progress has been made, we must be honest: delivery is not matching the urgency of the moment - particularly given the scale and speed at which relentless waves of misinformation and disinformation now operate.

Across the system, despite significant advances in recent years, we see fragmentation and the need for greater cohesion across interdepartmental working and cross-sectoral coordination. Overstretched educators and under-resourced organisations are feeling the strain, often navigating multiple frameworks that cut across different departments, policies and funding streams. While Ireland - including through the strong and consistent leadership of Irish Aid within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, alongside the Department of Education and Youth, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, and the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment - has held firm in its overall commitment at a time when others are turning towards more militarised or inward-looking responses, a significant step forward is needed if we are to meet the scale of the enormous challenge - and the tremendous opportunity before us.

In these times of polycrisis and heightened tensions, it can be hard to have hope, and easy to lose faith, but every day we encounter stories and powerful examples of how education delivers when it comes to empowerment, impact, change and inspiration. Across the country, IDEA members are bringing this work to life, reaching 100,000s of learners of all ages each year. Organisations like Trócaire and Concern Worldwide are supporting schools and young people to engage with global justice - through classroom resources, campaigns, and initiatives like the Concern Debates.

In schools, WorldWide Global Schools is supporting post-primary teachers and school leaders to take a whole-school approach. At the primary level, Global Village is helping younger students begin to explore these issues in ways that make sense to them.

But it doesn't stop at the classroom. Organisations like ECO-UNESCO are working with young people on climate and sustainability in very practical ways.

Programmes like Youth 2030 and STAND are creating space for young people and students to engage with these issues in their own lives. At the community level, groups such as Development Perspectives and ChangeMakers Donegal are working with people of all ages, including in rural and border areas. And in the North, organisations like the Centre for Global Education and Children in Crossfire continue to support this work through education and dialogue.

An Taisce's Green Schools Programme, Global Action Plan Ireland (GAP) climate action programmes, the Irish Schools Sustainability Network (ISSN) are other examples of inspiring initiatives. Meanwhile, DICE and the Ubuntu Network ensure that GCE and ESD are embedded in initial teacher education for all primary and secondary student teachers.

There are many more inspiring examples out there, and we invite you to connect with them and hear from them in due course. And while approaches may differ, the intention is shared - to help people understand the world around them, and to recognise that they have a role within it.

The foundations are strong. The question now is how we build on them. In that context, IDEA would highlight four practical areas for action.

First, stronger cross-departmental coordination, to bring greater alignment between government departments and policy objectives across education, foreign policy, environment, youth, community, justice and related areas. In particular, we urge closer more strategic alignment between Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development. This is about moving beyond parallel efforts towards a more coherent, whole-of-government approach.

Second, sustained and increased investment to upscale reach and deepen engagement with learners of all ages and backgrounds across all counties, particularly in the context of a rapidly changing information environment. This would involve greater support to youth work, adult and community education, further and higher education, informal learning, and digital learning spaces.

Increased investment is also needed in research and impact measurement, as well as educator support and system capacity. This goes beyond continuous professional development to include time, resources, networks, and long-term support for educators and organisations, ensuring they are confident, connected and able to sustain and deepen this work across all parts of the island. It also requires more predictable, timely and coordinated funding across government to match the scale of ambition set out in policy and the urgency of the moment.

Third, further integration of GCE and ESD into curricula, assessment, and lifelong learning across all levels. Beyond policy, this requires attention to the practical side of integration: clearer, joined-up guidance and resourcing for schools and education providers, so that these themes are embedded in a way that is consistent, accessible and meaningful across different settings, rather than experienced as an added layer.

Fourth, we urgently need to strengthen partnerships across and within government, civil society, and education stakeholders through a coordinated all-island approach, including through the Shared Island initiative at the Department of the Taoiseach. We also need to strengthen partnerships with the Global South.

Taken together, these actions point towards the need for a more ambitious and unified programme of investment, coordination and coherence across government. This is not about creating new policy frameworks, but about strengthening and connecting what already exists, so that it can operate at the scale and level of coherence now required. At a time when public discourse is increasingly fraught, polarised, and even dangerous, education of this kind has an urgent and unifying role to play. It builds connection, deepens understanding, fosters dialogue and trust, and strengthens the foundations of human understanding and democratic participation. In doing so, it offers us the much-needed promise of a world that cherishes peace, democracy, human rights, and the fragile, beautiful planet we call home.

Ireland has a strong tradition of valuing education as a force for social progress, shaped by our history of hardship, hunger, conflict, and emigration, informed by a deep and enduring commitment to global solidarity.

The question now is how we stay true to our values and demonstrate the courage and vision to build on that tradition in a way that meets the demands of this moment - marked by great urgency and threat, but also by real possibility and the need for visionary leadership at all levels - at home, at the EU level, and at the global level. This we owe to all people, but especially to the next generations who will inherit the most complex of global challenges.

This is not a time for backsliding - it is a time for leadership and renewed ambition; a time to invest in humanity, not war - a time to invest in education that counters division and plants the seeds of hope that are so badly needed.

With your support, and a shared commitment across both Houses, matched by meaningful investment and stronger cross-departmental coordination, there is a real opportunity to build on what is already in place and to act on the belief, as Nelson Mandela reminded us, that education remains the most powerful force we have to change the world.

Thank you for your attention, and we look forward to your comments and questions.