

IDEA submission to the public consultation on development of Ireland's Third Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan



Background

[IDEA](#) (the Irish Development Education Association) is the national network for Development Education, also known as Global Citizenship Education (GCE), in Ireland. We are a leading voice for the sector, representing 114 [members](#) involved in GCE in formal, non-formal and informal settings across the island of Ireland. Our members include civil society organisations (CSOs), local development partnerships, networks, coalitions, consortia, university departments, trade unions and individuals involved in GCE in Ireland. Several of our members also work on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and use the SDG framework in their educational work. IDEA considers ESD as a pillar of GCE and recognises that both Ireland's national ESD strategy and Irish Aid's Global Citizenship Education strategy feature in Ireland's 2023 Voluntary National Review (VNR) as the main policy vehicles through which Ireland seeks to meet SDG Target 4.7. IDEA was created in 2004 but several of our members have been educating children and adults in schools, colleges, universities, youth clubs and other learning spaces since the 1970s.

This submission was co-created by IDEA staff and IDEA members. In answering the consultation questions, this submission focuses on the relevance of Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development (SDG Target 4.7) to the SDG National Implementation Plan. However, IDEA is also a member of Coalition 2030 and thus endorses and is also represented within the Coalition 2030 submission to this consultation.

A note on terminology: We use Development Education and Global Citizenship Education interchangeably. For the purposes of this submission, we use Global Citizenship Education or the initialism GCE. We use the initialism SDG NIP to refer to the SDG National Implementation Plan throughout the submission.

Consultation Questions

1. What are the key areas of progress in achieving the objectives and actions of the current NIP and how can these be built upon?

Key areas of progress

- Increased visibility of the SDGs across government, education, and civil society.
- Recognition of education and public engagement as part of SDG implementation.
- Strong progress has been made in Education for Sustainable Development; this has certainly increased SDG awareness among young people.

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- Appearance on examination papers of SDG related themes and Global Justice issues gives value to the SDGs.
- The introduction of and reporting on a Wellbeing Framework for Ireland “as an important complement to work on progressing Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development” - “is intended to help inform policy-makers so that we can take a rounded view, based on evidence, of what determines quality of life in Ireland, beyond just economic growth” (2nd SDG NIP, p.23). This emphasis on quality of life beyond economic growth suggests progress in how sustainable development is conceptualised.

How to build on progress

- Explicitly recognise Global Citizenship Education as much broader than education on the SDGs. There also needs to be greater understanding of ESD as a pillar of GCE. Global Citizenship Education covers crucial elements needed to enable successful SDG implementation that ESD does not generally cover, such as GCE's role in developing understanding of the interconnectedness of global and local issues, critical thinking and systems thinking, fostering democratic participation, solidarity, and accountability.
- Ensure the inclusion of reporting on the Wellbeing Framework translates as a wellbeing approach to sustainable development across implementation of the SDG NIP.
- Ensure that SDG implementation does not narrow education to “delivery mechanisms” or technical competencies.
- Promote stronger coherence and coordination across and within Government departments (e.g. Department of Education and Youth, NCCA and the Inspectorate, Department of Children, Equality and Disability, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment). Integrating the SDGs within these government departments enables the conditions for education.

2. What are some of the key challenges in achieving the objectives and actions of the existing NIP and how can these be addressed?

Key challenges

- The fragmented and unconnected approach to ESD and GCE, which can lead to inconsistency in school teaching and additional pressure on teachers.
- We also observe at times conflation of GCE with SDG promotion, leading to a loss of critical voice, and limited space within the NIP to address contested issues such as power, inequality, conflict, and historical responsibility. In this regard, GCE risks

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becoming *subsumed within SDG awareness-raising agendas*, as political and social narratives prioritise climate concerns while marginalising the underlying social and structural root causes. The transformative and justice-oriented dimensions of GCE seem increasingly diluted in SDG discourse.

- Insufficient attention to increasing societal polarisation and rising far right and exclusionary narratives, racism, and democratic backsliding within Ireland and globally. These phenomena make it more challenging for teachers and educators to engage learners with themes of global justice and human rights in formal and non-formal settings. Addressing these challenges requires stronger alignment between ESD and GCE, alongside clear policy backing, guidance, and professional development that enable teachers and educators to feel supported and confident to engage bravely in these complex spaces.
- Mechanisms for accountability regarding meeting targets could be strengthened both domestically and in Ireland's international engagements.
- Inconsistent messaging regarding national priorities e.g. [long haul tourism promotion](#) despite the contributions of the aviation industry to the climate catastrophe. This does not demonstrate policy coherence.

How these can be addressed

- Reframe GCE as a space for critical democratic education, not neutral consensus-building.
- Explicitly acknowledge and respond to the rise of racism, disinformation, and far-right movements as SDG-relevant challenges.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms linking Ireland's domestic policies with international human rights commitments.
- Ensure education is positioned as a space for debate, dissent, and ethical reflection.

3. Do you agree with the NIP's current key objectives? In your view, are there further or alternative objectives that should be included?

- The current objectives provide a strong and appropriate framework, particularly in relation to policy coherence, partnerships, localisation of the SDGs, and the principle of Leave No One Behind. These objectives support important progress in education, including Education for Sustainable Development, youth participation, and whole-of-society engagement. However, we recommend some further objectives or tweaking of objectives as follows:

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- A clear objective recognising GCE as a critical response to democratic erosion and inequality.
- Stronger commitment to anti-racism, social cohesion, and democratic participation across SDG implementation. Clearer recognition of these areas would better support teachers and educators and those in charge of formal and non-formal learning settings in addressing inequality, countering polarisation, and empowering people as active, informed, and inclusive global citizens.
- Explicit recognition of Ireland's responsibility not only to *report* on the SDGs but to be accountable to international human rights frameworks.
- An objective addressing the political and structural drivers of injustice, not only outcomes.
- Query re the positioning of 'Leave No One Behind' as the second last chapter (Chapter 8) in the NIP. As one of the three universal values of Agenda 2030, should this (along with the other two universal values – a Human-Rights Based Approach and Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment) not be front and centre, and woven throughout all aspects of the NIP? The universal values link directly to most of the points made above with regard to responding to inequality, injustice, racism, erosion of democracy, addressing drivers of injustice, etc.

4. Are you satisfied that the Governance structures in place are sufficient to ensure increased policy coherence for sustainable development across all levels of government?

Concerns

- More transparency is needed regarding the work and the effectiveness of the governance structures. There seem to be no public records on who sits on the SDG Senior Officials group, when and how often it meets and what is discussed. It is also unclear how its role differs compared to the SDG Interdepartmental Working Group. On the official gov.ie website, it seems that these two groups have the same function:

"The SDG Senior Officials Group (SOG) and the [Sustainable Development Goals Interdepartmental Working Group \(IDWG\)](#) support implementation and a whole-of-government approach. Both groups play a key role in identifying priorities, overseeing and monitoring progress, and ensuring officials from across government departments work together to incorporate the SDGs into their work and stakeholder engagements."

In addition, the IDWG seems to have been inactive in the last 21 months. The gov.ie website states it last met in April 2024. No minutes are provided, despite minutes provided for all previous meetings of the group since 2019.

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- Coalition 2030, of which IDEA is a member, has consistently advocated for implementation of the SDGs to be coordinated from the Department of the Taoiseach and not the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment. We support this recommendation.
- Governance structures prioritise coordination but lack mechanisms for challenge and accountability.
- Civil society engagement risks becoming procedural rather than influential.
- Insufficient scrutiny of how Ireland's policies impact people beyond its borders.

Suggestions

- More transparency on the governance structures and clearer and more frequent communication with non-governmental stakeholders related to the coherence and coordination between relevant departments with regards implementation of this plan.
- Strengthen the role of civil society and education actors as critical partners, not just consultees.
- Embed accountability to international human rights bodies within SDG governance.
- Ensure governance structures allow space for critique, disagreement, and evidence from lived experience.

5. Stakeholder Engagement - what is working well and what needs to be further developed e.g. better reaching the furthest behind first?

- The SDG Data Hub is a very good resource for stakeholders to learn about Ireland's progress on the SDGs.
- The National Stakeholder Forum works well in providing some opportunities for engagement, with a range of topics explored and opportunities for contribution through breakout groups and Slido/Mentimeter. However, those who attend tend to already be engaged with the SDGs - the forum could be further developed through more promotion and by extending targeted invitations to people/representatives of groups who don't usually participate in the forum. Similar events (or a series of smaller versions) could be hosted around the country - most tend to take place in Dublin - to more actively seek engagement with those 'furthest behind'. A range of creative, participatory approaches (GCE methodologies would support this) could be used as well as traditional approaches (i.e. panel discussions, Q&As, break out groups).

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- The SDG Champions Programme works well in providing another opportunity for engagement, for organisations/companies to first self-assess their own interest in further engaging with the SDGs and then (if successful with their application) to be supported in this work. However, it seems contradictory to the values of Agenda 2030 to run the SDG Champions Programme as a competition with limited places available. Could it instead be organised so that all applicants who are interested in improving their practice and championing the SDGs be supported with guidance and opportunities for interaction with other champions in a community of practice? If financial support is involved, could this be directed towards shared resources that all could benefit from?

What needs further development

- Engagement must move beyond consensus language and allow space for uncomfortable conversations.
- Greater effort needed to engage communities affected by racism, exclusion, and inequality.
- Feedback loops should show how critical perspectives inform decision-making.

6. How can youth voices and the voices of groups identified as being in danger of being left behind best be included?

- We would broaden this question to encompass not just youth voices and voices of those in danger of being left behind. However, obviously youth-led GCE initiatives addressing democracy, rights, and justice should be supported.
- They can be best included by resourcing participatory, creative, and dialogical approaches that counter polarisation and disinformation and recognising lived experience as expertise within SDG processes.
- Ensure that young people are invited to participate beyond just presenting at the end of the day at events. This was the case at some Stakeholder Forum events in the past, though not more recently.

7. Are there specific actions that should be considered for inclusion? If so, please specify.

- Explicit recognition of GCE as distinct from SDG awareness-raising.
- Urgent need for strong funding for and guidance on addressing racism, inequality, and democratic participation as part of SDG implementation.

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- Support for partnerships between education actors, civil society actors, and marginalised communities.
- We recommend including actions to develop the capacity of stakeholders charged with delivery of the NIP.
- Increased support for international partnerships.
- Prioritise education, clear messaging and modelling of coordinated, coherent government action grounded in the universal values of Agenda 2030, i.e. Human Rights-Based Approach; Leave No One Behind; Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. In the face of ongoing geopolitical crises, it is urgent and essential to show the relevance and importance of international cooperation that is grounded in, and that promotes the upholding of, human rights.

8. Are there new topics or areas which need to be considered for inclusion (e.g. AI and Digitalisation, Pact for the Future, etc.)?

- Urgent: Rise of the far right, racism, and polarisation as direct threats to sustainable development.
- Urgent: Democratic erosion, shrinking civic space, and attacks on human rights defenders.
- Ethical accountability of states to international institutions and agreements. Strengthening of international institutions in general.
- Disinformation, AI, and digital power in shaping public understanding of global issues.
- Recognition of and response to exclusionary narratives, ideologies and assumptions, particularly the dominance of neoliberalism and associated narratives around the primacy of traditional economic growth (in contrast to e.g. the pursuit of a circular economy) over social and environmental needs.

9. How can the monitoring and reporting framework be improved, particularly in preparation for Ireland's next Voluntary National Review?

- Looking at quality and impact (beyond numbers), which necessitates robust additional resources for monitoring and reporting.

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- Situating monitoring and reporting within a critical analysis of international and national structures and systems, e.g. by including questions such as “who holds power and who is disadvantaged by these structures and systems?” “How does this power dynamic interact with Agenda 2030 (universal values, SDGs and implementation)?”
- Grounding evaluation in the universal values and how progress made on the SDGs reflects these values.
- Making information clearer and more accessible to schools, educators, and young people, and by better linking data to real experiences and actions.
- In preparation for the next VNR, it would be important to actively share and explain results through education and youth-focused channels, so findings can be understood more clearly.

10. What role can partnerships play in furthering the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland?

- Partnerships among and between different stakeholders play a critical role in furthering the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland. However, there is a need for sustainable partnership models. Partnerships must be based on solidarity, equity, and mutual accountability, and not extractive models. Too much is often expected of organisations and individuals, and it is unclear whether government stakeholders understand the real cost for non-governmental stakeholders of working on such partnerships. Similarly, international partnerships should include space for critique of power imbalances and historical legacies.
- Partnerships with GCE practitioners can help connect local experiences with global systems and responsibilities.

11. Do you have any other comments or feedback on the content of the draft Plan?

- The SDGs provide an important framework, but education on the SDGs cannot become a replacement for critical Global Citizenship Education.
- The NIP should clearly articulate the role of education in strengthening democracy, confronting racism, and holding power to account – all critical aspects of ensuring sustainable development.
- Without strong Global Citizenship Education, SDG implementation risks becoming technocratic and disconnected from democratic realities. We recommend co-designed and cross-disciplinary approaches to ESD and GCE, and further financial and political support to Target 4.7.

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- We recommend reviewing Coalition 2030's report "Leaving No-One Behind?", which was produced as a shadow report to Ireland's last VNR in 2023 and taking on board the recommendations within it when drafting the 3rd SDG NIP.
- We recommend updating the SDG Policy Map to include Irish Aid's GCE Strategy under Target 4.7. Although Irish Aid's GCE Strategy is referenced in Ireland's 2nd SDG NIP, it is missing from the 2022 SDG Policy Map and the 2022 SDG Policy Update.
- The human rights grounding of the SDGs should be highlighted so that equality and justice are centred throughout the NIP.