

Theory of Impact for Global Citizenship Education

Overview



Introduction

The Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) is the national network for Development Education, also known as Global Citizenship Education (GCE), on the island of Ireland, and a leading voice for the sector. We represent over 100 members involved in GCE in formal, non-formal and informal settings. Together we work to strengthen GCE in Ireland and to raise awareness of the crucial role it plays in fostering global citizenship and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We work in strategic partnership with Irish Aid to help deliver its Global Citizenship Education Strategy.

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is an educational approach that helps people understand the world around them and take action to create positive change. It equips people with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to understand global injustices and work towards solutions. GCE encourages critical thinking about the complexity of the world and highlights how local and global issues are deeply connected. It is delivered by Development NGOs, community and voluntary organisations, educational institutions and networks, youth organisations, trade unions, and educators.

Development Education, Global Citizenship Education, Education for Sustainable Development are all terms used by our members depending on the nature of their work or their areas of specialism. For the purpose of this document, we use the term Global Citizenship Education (GCE) to encompass all relevant terms and approaches within the area of education for global citizenship and sustainable development.

Rationale

For many years, IDEA members have been grappling with the concept of impact in Global Citizenship Education (GCE).

As GCE practitioners, tracking impact helps us to identify how, where and with whom our work is creating positive change, as well as areas in which our impact could be stronger. In IDEA we believe we can also benefit from examining the collective impact of GCE carried out by the wide-ranging work of our members, and from exploring how these impacts contribute to the major social changes to which the GCE community aspires. Similarly, donors are also keen to know the impact of the work they fund.

Driven by the need to understand how projects and programmes are collectively “making a difference”, we looked at models that could help us visualise and capture GCE “impact networks”. We formulated our vision of impact and then a theory of how we expect this desired impact to be achieved to allow us to map our activities and collect data from our members to corroborate that theory. In short, our theory is based on the idea that that if GCE activities look at complex systemic and structural issues, then we assume achieving impact will require a diverse range of individuals (learners and educators) and organisations, coordinating and working together. This Theory of Impact model is how we plan to illustrate this complex GCE impact network.

In an area as vast and wide-reaching as GCE, we believe this impact can be better assessed on a sectoral level, rather than at the level of individual learners or projects which is where traditional impact measurement sometimes focuses. Monitoring & Evaluation may confirm the results of the activities of specific projects and programmes within a given time frame, but the impact of GCE is something which often occurs beyond the typical project implementation period. IDEA will use this

Theory of Impact to articulate the collective impact of Global Citizenship Education on Irish society.

Background to the development process

This process builds on work done by IDEA over many years, including building sectoral capacity in using [Results Frameworks for GCE](#), the work of our Quality & Impact Working Group, engagement with Irish Aid on their Performance Measurement Framework (PMF), and the successful roll-out of a [Code of Good Practice for DE/GCE](#). This next step, to ‘develop a consistent approach to measuring impact within the sector’, is central to IDEA’s Strategic Plan (2024-2029).

We set out below the activities undertaken by IDEA to develop a consistent approach to impact measurement in Global Citizenship Education:

i. 2022-2023: Understanding impact measurement in GCE

In 2022, IDEA carried out a preliminary [review of approaches to impact measurement](#).¹ This review conducted by McCreanor Murray Rose confirmed inherent difficulties in measuring the impact of GCE. A major finding of the desk review was that impact measurement requires a combination of quantitative data and qualitative methods to provide a complete picture. Looking at existing research on impact measurement it also warned against “approaches which ignore both the individualised nature of learning and the assumptions made as to how learners may employ knowledge and skills” (Mallon 2018).

A [network-wide workshop](#) for IDEA members followed the publication of the desk review in October 2023. At the event, members raised the relevance of the “circle of influence”

framework² to impact measurement. We believe that our sector’s common vision for social change is beyond our “circle of control” and our “circle of influence” and it lies in our “circle of concern”. This became fundamental to our Theory of Impact, which aims to include impact measurement on outcomes at all three levels. By articulating impact within our circle of control and our circle of influence, we will be able to illustrate how impact at these levels enables us to contribute to impact at the higher level of our vision, “within our circle of concern”.

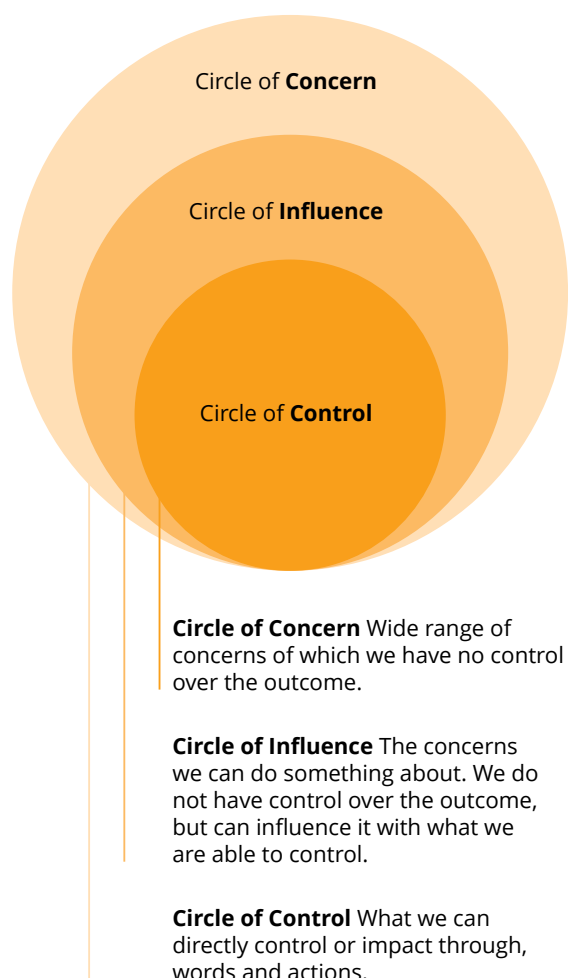


Image: Harvest Document. Workshop: Exploring Impact Measurement (p.5), IDEA

Our [discussions](#)³ during this workshop and [review of approaches to impact measurement](#)

1 IDEA, *Desk Review Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Global Citizenship Education in Ireland*, November 2023

2 The “Circle of Influence framework”, introduced in the 1940s by psychologist Kurt Lewin was popularised by Stephen’s Covey’s book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

3 IDEA, *Harvest Document Workshop: Exploring Impact Measurement in Global Citizenship Education*, October 2023

highlighted the need to shift to systems thinking and collaborative approaches when attempting to map the impact of GCE, exploring the idea of “impact networks”. GCE actors have tended to focus on the impact of single projects run by individual organisations, funded by one donor. This creates a ‘scattergun’ effect that does not do justice to lifelong learning nor to the impact of participating in a range of GCE and ‘GCE-adjacent’ interventions.

ii. 2024/2025: Development of a collective ‘Theory of Impact for GCE’

Based on learning from developing the [Code of Good Practice for Development Education](#) (IDEA, 2019) in collaboration with IDEA members, the Theory of Impact model presented here was developed through iteration by an IDEA Task Group,⁴ set up in September 2024. The Task Group was recruited after an information session by [ODS](#) (consultants leading this phase) about Theory of Change models [hosted by IDEA](#). ODS then hosted workshops with the Task Group over a period of four months to jointly develop a Theory of Change.

An initial Theory of Change model was finalised with the Task Group in January 2025. Following a period of feedback and a review by critical friends this evolved into a Theory of Impact pyramid model and accompanying data collection form in May 2025. This Theory of Impact model was tested by a group of nine IDEA members.⁵ Their feedback shaped edits and refinements to the model and data collection form, which was approved by the Task Group in September 2025. Following this, the Theory of Impact model was presented to the full IDEA membership and other interested stakeholders in November 2025. In 2026, a pilot phase of data collection will commence.

iii. 2025/2026: Piloting the Theory of Impact model and data collection

It is crucial for IDEA that the Theory of Impact model reflects the work of ‘on-the-ground’ Global Citizenship Education practitioners and provides an accurate sector-wide overview of the activities taking place across Ireland, enabling us to map both individual and collective impact. Piloting this offers us the chance to refine the model, as theory is applied to practice, and to receive feedback from a wider pool of users to ensure the model is as representative as possible.

We believe that the model and the visualisation tool developed to accompany it will ultimately provide a coherent picture of the complex work of IDEA members towards a collective vision of desired social change.

⁴ The initial Task Group was made up of: Financial Justice Ireland, DICE, WorldWise Global Schools, CBM, Changemakers Donegal, STAND, NYCI, LYCS, Individual Member

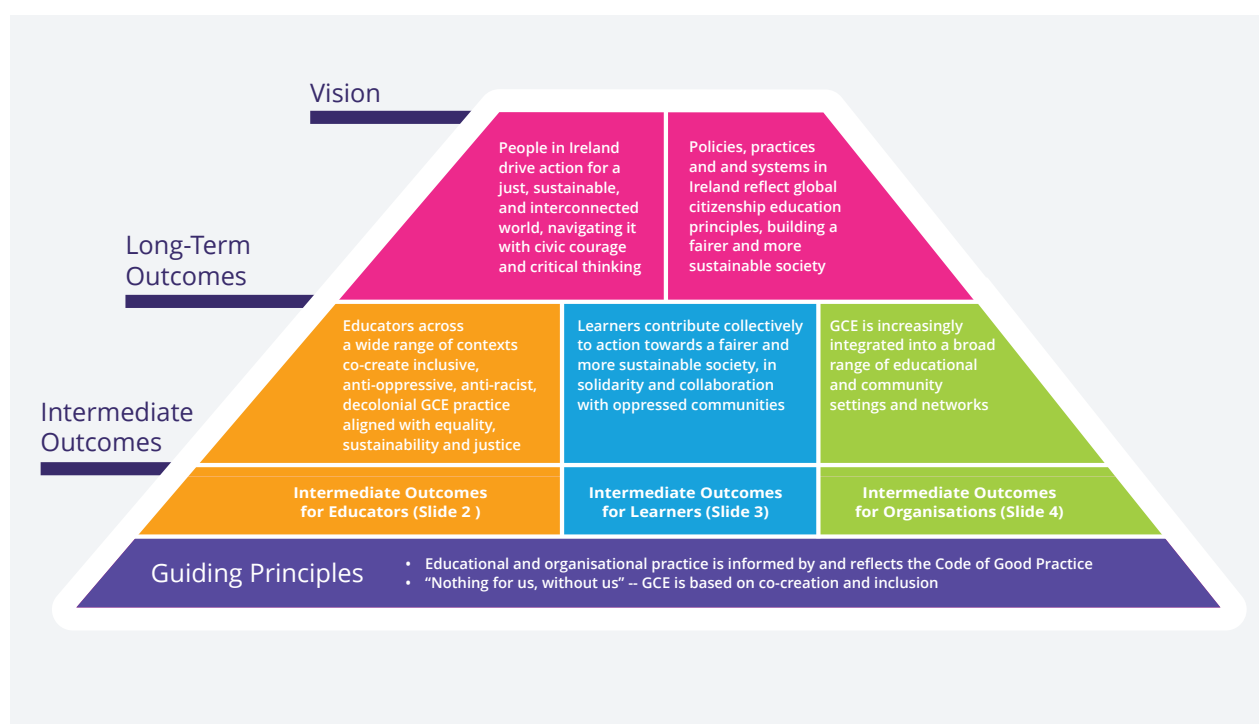
⁵ Members who provided feedback on the model during the testing stage included: Global Village, Individual Member, DICE, UBUNTU, Comhlámh, Concern, WorldWise Global Schools, Tearfund Ireland, GOAL

Theory of Impact

Overview of the Theory of Impact model

Our Theory of Impact model presented below sets out a progression from Intermediate Outcomes to Long-Term Outcomes, leading ultimately to a high-level Vision of social change. As we move 'up' the pyramid, we move from being able to *attribute* specific

outcomes to our work to being able to say that our work *contributes* to systemic social change. Another way of stating this is that we move from our 'circle of control' to our 'circle of influence' and ultimately to our 'circle of concern'. We believe that this reflects the reality of Global Citizenship Education work and that it will enable us to illustrate complex GCE pathways to impact, whilst acknowledging that GCE does not take place in a vacuum.



Working from the bottom of the pyramid upwards:

Guiding Principles

There are two principles guiding all levels of the Theory of Impact for GCE:

1. Educational and organisational practice is informed by and reflects the [Code of Good Practice for Development Education](#). Developed collaboratively by IDEA members from all areas of the GCE sector, the Code illustrates the values and practices that are essential to achieving the outcomes and impacts set out in the pyramid.
2. *‘Nothing for us, without us’*. The IDEA Task Group identified values of co-creation and inclusion as central to GCE. To achieve the impact envisioned in the model, marginalised individuals and groups must be actively involved in the development of GCE materials and interventions, and in the integration of GCE into the systems within Irish society.

Intermediate Outcomes

The model sets out 14 Intermediate Outcomes, grouped under the three categories of Educators, Learners and Organisations.

Educators

Global Citizenship Educators plays a central role in driving change via all forms of education—formal, informal, and non-formal—throughout communities across Ireland. These outcomes focus on educators and the tools and resources they need to guide learners effectively.

The Intermediate Outcomes are:

1. Educators critically reflect on their own positionality and practice, building their understanding of equality, diversity, sustainability, human rights, and power structures
2. Educators use accurate, balanced, evidence-based and up-to-date materials that actively challenge stereotypes and biases
3. Educators have the knowledge and skills to effectively guide GCE learners at different stages of their learning
4. Educators use tools to identify and challenge systems that support inequality
5. Educators and organisations use monitoring and feedback to refine and improve educational practices.

Learners

IDEA members engage with hundreds of thousands of learners of all ages across the island of Ireland, in classrooms, lecture halls, youth clubs, community halls, and other learning spaces. Beyond those in formal education, our members engage with young people and adult learners,

including those in Local Authorities, the business community and marginalised groups, such as migrants and the Traveller and Roma communities. The outcomes of this category focus on how GCE equips people of all ages with the skills, values, and knowledge needed to navigate today's complex world.

The Intermediate Outcomes are:

6. Skills

- Learners critically examine development models and question power relations
- Learners develop skills and confidence to take informed, collective action on local and global justice issues
- Learners collaborate with minoritised people to identify root causes of injustices
- Learners co-design alternatives and solutions to existing unequal systems.

7. Values/Attitudes

- Learners envision a fairer, more equitable and sustainable world
- Learners connect local and global issues to their own experiences, fostering empathy and solidarity
- Learners develop emotional literacy to help navigate what they have learned.

8. Knowledge

- Learners understand connections between local and global issues
- Learners understand the systemic nature of local and global justice issues
- Learners understand structural oppression

- Learners address biases in their understanding of global issues and the materials they use.

Organisations

Organisations engaged in Global Citizenship Education continuously build support for GCE across Ireland and globally. The focus of these outcomes is to forge strategic alliances with a wide range of sectors, such as trade unions, sports clubs, migrant-led organisations, and youth groups. The aim is to create communities of practice by sharing research, resources, and best practice.

The Intermediate Outcomes are:

9. Strategic partnerships are built with similar values-based movements such as trade unions, sports clubs, minoritised-people organisations and youth groups
10. Strategic partnerships are built with institutions with a role in integrating GCE into education systems, policies and settings, such as donors, policymakers, educational institutions, local authorities and government bodies
11. Communities of practice grow stronger through collaboration and ongoing learning
12. GCE programming and advocacy is based on co-creation and inclusive decision-making with impacted communities
13. Narratives around GCE show its value, challenges, misunderstandings, and highlights its positive impacts
14. GCE in Ireland and Europe receives stronger and more secure funding, policy support and institutional backing

The 14 outcomes listed above lie within our 'circle of control' in that they can be related to specific GCE interventions undertaken by IDEA members. The Intermediate Outcomes 'aim high' in that they seek outcomes that are significantly beyond the successful delivery of GCE activities and projects. The 14 Intermediate Outcomes describe **who is doing what differently as a result of our GCE interventions**. Although the Intermediate Outcomes are ambitious, IDEA members are already documenting many of these outcomes, in the form of quantitative and qualitative results in their Results Frameworks, in their Annual Reports (which may include valuable case studies) and also in the evidence articulated in their annual submissions to the Code of Good Practice.

Long-Term Outcomes

At the middle level of the pyramid, there are three statements of Long-Term Outcomes. These build on the Intermediate Outcomes for Educators, Learners and Organisations.

Educators

Educators, across a wide range of contexts, co-create inclusive, anti-oppressive, anti-racist, decolonial GCE practice aligned with equality, sustainability and justice

Learners

Learners contribute collectively to action towards a fairer and more sustainable society, in solidarity and collaboration with oppressed communities

Organisations

GCE is increasingly integrated into a broad range of educational and community settings and networks

The three Long-Term Outcomes aim to capture collective impact across the GCE sector. They will be drawn from the collation and analysis of data at the Intermediate Outcome level. The Long-Term Outcomes will be multi-layered and have a complexity that reflects the diverse nature of the sector, the

wide range of target audiences, and the many ways in which impact is created.

The Long-Term Outcomes lie within our 'circle of influence' in that we can expect to make discernible progress towards them, while also acknowledging the influence of both positive and negative external factors. This level of the Theory of Impact is crucial as it will create a concrete picture of the broader changes that can be created when strong GCE practice is implemented across the network of IDEA members, connecting data from 'on-the-ground' GCE practitioners to the Vision at the top of the pyramid.

Vision

At the top of the pyramid are two vision statements:

- a. People in Ireland drive action for a just, sustainable and interconnected world, navigating it with civic courage and critical thinking
- b. Policies, practices and systems in Ireland reflect global citizenship education principles, building a fairer and more sustainable society

These statements at the top of the pyramid sit within our circle of concern, reflecting the high-level change to which the GCE sector aspires. We acknowledge, and indeed celebrate, the fact that GCE is not the only pathway to the Vision. The realisation of the Vision relies on the coming together of a multitude of initiatives from all areas of society. At the Vision level, we will use the data gathered to articulate how we expect GCE to help create the systemic social change to which we aspire. We also plan to draw on a wide variety of relevant evidence as it becomes available, for example, research carried out by IDEA members, and data from educational institutions and funders.

Assumptions

Like all models, our Theory of Impact is built on certain assumptions. We have attempted to identify and address our assumptions, including:

- **We will be able to gather the necessary data.** We have addressed this assumption by designing a data collection form that is short and user-friendly. We are not asking members to source new data. They can use the data already collected in their own reporting e.g. their Results Frameworks, Annual Reports and Code of Good Practice submissions. In the initial testing phase of the model, strong evidence came in for many of the Intermediate Outcomes. Refinements were made to the data collection form after the initial testing phase, and we expect to make further refinements after the pilot phase. The aim is to have a user-friendly Form that will encourage all IDEA members to contribute data to the Theory of Impact for GCE model.
- **GCE organisations and practitioners will feel that the outcomes named in the model accurately represent their practices and values.** We have addressed this assumption through the collaborative process of developing the model and articulating the outcomes through a task group of IDEA members,⁶ and we have reinforced this through repeated testing/ sense-checking with the Task Group. Further points will likely emerge during the pilot phase, and edits will be made accordingly to ensure that the model works for the whole sector. Our approach to developing the model mirrored the process used by IDEA in developing the [Code of Good Practice for Development Education](#). This was truly a collaborative, if lengthy and labour-intensive process. From experience, we know the collaborative process will result in an extremely high

⁶ See full list of Task Group members on our dedicated webpage ideaonline.ie/theory-of-impact-for-gce and footnote 3, p.3

level of ownership, buy-in and engagement of members.

- **We will be able to collate and analyse the data received, so that it ‘makes sense’ and demonstrates collective impact.** We have addressed this assumption through realistic expectations about what collective data will look like. One of the strengths of the GCE sector is its diversity, in terms of types of interventions, settings and target audiences. Given the sector’s diversity, we do not expect to be able to synthesise Intermediate Outcome data into ‘one-size-fits-all’ statements of Long-Term Outcomes. However, by rigorous collation and analysis of impact data under the 14 Intermediate Outcomes, we believe that we will be able to make the ‘step-up’ to a clear yet nuanced articulation of impact for the three areas (educators, learners and organisations) at this level.
- **Change at the Intermediate Outcome level will lead to change at Long-Term Outcome level, and ultimately to change at Vision level.** We believe measuring the impact of any educational endeavour is inherently challenging, especially in GCE, which has a strong element of long-term, complex attitudinal change. For this reason, our model does not function on an ‘If-then-then’ chain of logic, nor does it attempt to predetermine how GCE participants will apply their learning. Instead, it sets out to demonstrate how the wide-ranging, but concrete intermediate outcomes combine with other intermediate outcomes to create longer-term impact and ultimately contribute to the vision. It is therefore a **theory** of how we expect our desired **impact** to be achieved.

How the model will be used

The Theory of Impact model presented in this document will allow us to map the organisational impact of work carried out by IDEA members. When we have collated data coming in at Intermediate Outcome level, we will analyse the data and present it in a way that best illustrates progress towards Long-Term Outcomes and Vision via an online data visualisation tool. This will allow us to create a much broader picture of the collective impact of the sector.

Theory of Impact Visualisation Tool

IDEA has created a form and an online visualisation tool that will enable us to use the data collected from our members to illustrate the sector’s collective impact.

The online form will allow IDEA members to share quantitative and qualitative data for any of the 14 intermediate outcomes. This data will then be mapped against the Theory of Impact model using the interactive data visualisation tool, to capture progress towards the Long-Term Outcomes. The tool will also help us articulate how IDEA members’ work contributes to the collective Vision of desired social change.

Benefits of the Theory of Impact model

This model will give IDEA members a better understanding of how their work contributes to the wider sector. It will also allow IDEA to offer a comprehensive and convincing picture of our work to strategic stakeholders, strengthen our legitimacy as a sector, and reach out to new partners.

The Theory of Impact model will function as a strong companion piece to the Code of Good Practice for Development Education.

The Code provides concrete illustrations of ‘what good GCE looks like’ and the Theory of Impact will demonstrate how good GCE ‘makes a difference’.

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