

February 2023

**SUBMISSION TO DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE AND COMMUNICATIONS ON
IRELAND'S VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

1. What are you/your organisation/your sector doing to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The Irish Development Education Association, IDEA, is the national network for Development Education, also known as Global Citizenship Education (GCE), in Ireland representing over 100 member organisations and individuals involved in the practice, promotion and advancement of GCE in formal, non-formal and informal settings. Our members are drawn from across civil society including the development, human rights, environment and education sectors.

We work with our members to strengthen GCE in Ireland and to raise awareness of the crucial role it plays in both fostering global citizenship and as a key enabler of all of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Much of our work focuses on SDG 4.7

“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through Education for Sustainable Development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development”

We are a member of both Coalition 2030 and Dóchas. Much of our policy and advocacy work focuses on lobbying for the prioritisation and implementation of the SDGs at local, national and EU level. We also work to build the capacity of our members to engage on these issues.

We share the concern of many of our members that nationally and globally, we are failing to achieve the targets of the SDGs and there is a need for renewed focus on implementation.

2. Key challenges facing Ireland in its achievement of the SDGs?

In our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, Ireland is significantly impacted by the global challenges of conflict, inequality, human rights violations, and poverty.

- The climate emergency is intensifying and requires a climate justice focussed response.
- Racist and anti-migrant narratives, the rise of far-right politics and the spread of conspiracy theories and false information threaten democracy and our values of human rights, equality, and sustainability.
- Economic inequality is at a record high and intensifying. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and created new sites of inequality.
- Civil society space is under threat and shrinking.
- War and conflict remain prevalent across the world in the 21st century.

Mid-way through the SDG process, we are concerned that Ireland has not made the progress anticipated and it now seems unlikely that the primary targets of the SDGs will be achieved by 2030. Indeed, many

of the recommendations from the 2018 Voluntary National Review are still relevant for the 2023 Voluntary National Review. We understand that the challenges and constraints caused by Covid-19 over the past three years contributed to the lack of progress. Nevertheless, Ireland remains significantly behind where it needs to be.

If the term “Leave no-one behind” is not to become just a meaningless platitude, we need a renewed effort with a new focus on creating a ‘Just Recovery’ from the effects of Covid-19 and ensuring those hit hardest and those with marginalised voices are recognised and supported. We fully support the call from Coalition 2030 that putting “the furthest behind first” must be a priority for Ireland’s SDG Implementation.

3. What are your/your organisation's key observations related to Ireland's SDG implementation?

Ireland led the UN in establishing the Goals. As a state, we must lead, and be seen to be leading, in implementing ambitious actions to achieve the Goals.

We welcome the “whole-of -society” approach to the SDGs and also the commitment to a “whole of government approach” outlined in the National Implementation Plan. However, this will involve a proactive, “action-led” approach by each Government Department, which has been sorely lacking to date.

We acknowledge that there have been some good policies developed, particularly in the education area, but action on implementation falls far short of what is needed. This is in part due to a lack of leadership at official and political level on the SDGs.

Civil Society is leading in the areas of education for the SDGs. However, civil society is often under-resourced and lacks the policy and curricular infrastructure needed. Supporting civil society through policy infrastructure, curriculum development (at all levels) and investment is essential to achieve the potential of education in the SDGs.

The findings reported in the National Implementation Strategy¹ at the lack of awareness/ knowledge of the SDGs in Government Departments, State Agencies and Local Authorities and that high-ranking officials seem oblivious to their responsibility in the delivery/implementation of the SDGs were most alarming. Indeed, with such levels of ignorance, it is difficult to see how implementation could be a priority. The lack of awareness of the SDGs among the general public also reported in the Strategy² is hardly surprising when there is such a gaping hole at official state level.

This needs to be addressed first before the policy challenges can be effectively addressed. Individual action will follow if the leadership and policies create the conditions for this to happen.

One example is the failure of many local authorities to use the SDGs as a framework to base the future development of their Counties/Cities in the new round of Development Plans that were adopted over 2021 and 2022. Cork City Council was one of the few Councils to reference each chapter within the framework of the SDGs in their Development Plan³.

We are concerned that the SDG unit within DECC is completely under-resourced which seems to be reflective of the overall approach to SDG implementation.

¹ SDG Second National Implementation Plan, Chapter 2 pps. 35 & 36

² Ibid, pps 33,34

³ <https://www.corkcity.ie/en/cork-city-development-plan/volume-1-written-statement/>

4. What would you/your organisation suggest Ireland do to further increase SDG implementation?

We would repeat some of the calls we made in our submission to the SDG National Implementation Plan.

- Prioritisation of the role of education, and in particular Global Citizenship Education, for a deeper public engagement and participation with the SDGs. This would require a comprehensive public education strategy to develop awareness and understanding of the SDGs to be delivered through formal, non-formal and informal education. We would particularly like to see a stronger focus on non-formal education. We reiterate our call in previous submissions on the need for a strong public education programme.
- There is a need for a clear plan on resourcing the implementation and co-ordination of the National Implementation. Hence, we believe that there should be a specific commitment to providing additional budget for SDG implementation. We note that the SDG unit within DECC is under-resourced and commend the work done by the staff in difficult circumstances. We support the call by Coalition 2030 and other Civil Society Organisations for the SDG Implementation Unit to be housed within the Department of the Taoiseach with sufficient resources to carry out its task effectively.
- There should be an enhanced role for the Oireachtas in terms of SDG implementation such as a specific Oireachtas Oversight Committee. Furthermore, we believe all policy/legislative proposals to be SDG-proofed before being advanced/enacted. We would support the call from C2030 for a Minister for Policy Coherence in Ireland.
- IDEA believes that Local Authorities play a pivotal role in the implementation of the Goals and the creation of communities of learning for sustainable development. Local government is the way forward for up to 60% of the implementation of the SDGs⁴, but local government is not being driven to do the necessary work to progress the SDGs. In particular, resources should be made available to local authorities to carry out Local Voluntary Reviews. We point to the example of Bristol⁵ as an example of good practice of Local Voluntary Reviews and note that this review was done in partnership with Bristol University.

5. What is Ireland doing well?

We welcome the “whole-of -society” approach to the SDGs and also the commitment to a “whole of government approach” outlined in the National Implementation Plan. However, this will involve a proactive, “action-led” approach by each Government Department, which has been lacking to date.

In terms of GCE, there has been a number of important policy developments in recent years to support SDG implementation, including:

- The Irish Aid Global Citizenship Education Strategy (2021-25)⁶,
- The second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development⁷
- The Dublin Declaration⁸ on Global Education to 2050 which was ratified in Dublin Castle in November
- The proposal for a new Leaving Certificate subject on Climate Action and Sustainable Development is being progressed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

⁴ Coalition 2030 Submission to Second SDG National Implementation Plan

⁵ <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/BRISTOL%20AND%20THE%20SDGS.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.irishaid.ie/media/irishaid/publications/Global-Citizenship-Education-Strategy.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/02952d-national-strategy-on-education-for-sustainable-development-in-irelan/>

⁸ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6decace4ff425352eddb4a/t/636d0eb7a86f6419e3421770/1668091577585/GE2050-declaration.pdf>

There have also been positive policy developments at EU and international level which are worth noting:

- EU Council Recommendation on Learning for the Green Deal and Sustainable Development⁹ (2022),
- EU Council Conclusions on transformative role of education for sustainable development and global citizenship as an instrumental tool for the achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs)¹⁰
- The UN Transforming Education Summit (TES)¹¹ represented a significant development in the prioritisation of education and the recognition of education as an enabler of all of the SDGs.
- The current revision of the UNESCO 1974 Recommendation concerning education for international understanding, co-operation and peace¹²

In tandem with these policy developments, IDEA members and civil society organisations are continuing to build on their excellent work, reaching all parts of Irish society. This work has been strengthened with Irish Aid's introduction of strategic partnerships for Youth, Adult and Community, Primary Education organisations. There is a greater recognition of the importance of GCE/ESD among the wider public.

However, there is a need for much greater investment and scaling-up of activity within the sector if the ambition of SDG Target 4.7, that all learners would have the “knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development”

6. What could Ireland improve on?

While acknowledging that there is a policy infrastructure in place for SDG implementation, the impediments often lie in the middle – between policy and grass roots – in the execution of these policies within institutions / state bodies. Implementation is side-lined or becomes a mere box ticking exercise.

Hence, the need to ensure that those in leadership and management positions within Government Departments and state bodies are prioritising the SDGs and taking them seriously. Problems emerge when there is a lack of institutional follow up to ensure implementation of policies that have already been put in place.

As the business sector is becoming increasingly aware of the SDGs and their responsibility to deliver on key targets, the State needs to protect against “cherry-picking” and ensure that the whole indivisible SDG agenda is being acted on by business.

There is a strong impetus for the SDGs coming from learners, teachers, civil society and local communities that demonstrates the importance of a multi-governance approach and strong stakeholder collaboration. There is a risk that the good will of these groups will be lost if this is not acted on and progress on achieving SDG targets continues to lag behind.

In relation to the Second National Implementation Plan, there is an overly strong focus on the formal education sector within the education chapter. Disappointingly, sufficient attention has not been given to the Adult and Community Education Sector. If we are to ensure that “No one is left behind”, then the inclusion of non-formal and informal education provision should be a priority.

Key challenges specifically for the implementation of SDG 4.7 in Ireland include both insufficient strategic prioritisation of GCE / ESD within overall departmental strategies and insufficient funding to scale up and activate the potential of GCE/ ESD in Ireland.

⁹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9242-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

¹⁰ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10345-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit>

¹² <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383055>

7. Have you any ideas you would like to share on how Ireland can Build Back Better while Leaving No One Behind?

There is now a need for a renewed focus on creating a 'Just Recovery' from the effects of Covid-19 and ensuring those hit hardest and those with marginalised voices are recognised and in line with the key message of "Leave no-one behind".

In terms of Ireland's international approach to the SDGs (section 1.6) we would have liked to see the commitment to reaching 0.7% of GDP in Overseas Development Aid specifically referenced in the Plan. Given the role of the DFA in the co-ordination and implementation of the plan we believe such a commitment to be a sine qua non of Ireland's implementation plan.

As outlined above there is a need for a strong public global citizenship education programme to develop awareness and understanding of the SDGs. Awareness alone will not ensure public participation in the SDGs. It requires public education and a comprehensive public education strategy with a focus on SDG action. We believe that Ireland needs to move towards the European benchmark of 3% of ODA for GCE. The priorities for the GCE sector are clearly outlined in our Strategy statement Vision 2025.

Localisation of the SDGs is pivotal to their implementation. However, the NIP came too late for many County and City Development Plans which had already been adopted. The new cycle of Development Plans run from 2022 to 2028 (with just two years to 2030). Disappointingly, few of the Development Plans adopted in 2022 make commitments to work towards the implementation of the SDGs or contain more than a passing reference to the SDGs. There is a need for a mechanism to hold Local Authorities accountable for incorporating the SDGs in terms of using the SDGs as a tool for policy-making in Corporate and County Development Plans.

In summary, the following issues should be prioritised at national level:

1. Policy coherence: A whole of Government Approach with cross-government and institutional strategic prioritisation for the SDGs
2. A commitment to reaching 0.7% of GDP in Official Development Assistance (ODA) and corresponding annual budgetary increases.
3. Multi-stakeholder collaboration - facilitating alliances between a wide range of actors (such as businesses, civil society, scientific committees, communities and informal groups)
4. Localisation of the SDGs should be seen as critical to their delivery and will help ensure that those who are at risk of being left behind are reached. Financial assistance and support should be provided to local authorities for the production of Voluntary Local Reviews (similar to one carried out in Bristol)
5. Investment in Global Citizenship Education -GCE/SDG 4.7 should be viewed not just as SDG target but as enabler of all SDGs. Education and communication programmes to better communicate the SDGs to the public which will involve increased investment for GCE. This would involve the following:
 - a. Investment and Funding: Moving to the European benchmark of 3% of ODA for GCE.
 - b. Scaling-up Global Citizenship Education across the formal, non-formal and informal education sectors
 - c. Commissioning longitudinal research on the impact of GCE programmes.
6. Specific SDG Training for Government officials, local authorities, public representatives
7. Ensure a focus is kept on those most at risk and actions to support "furthest behind first" in all aspects of SDG implementation.

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