

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005 –
2014

An Irish Stakeholder Vision

Our vision for the future is of a world that embraces common values of solidarity, equality and mutual respect between people, countries and generations. It is a world characterized by sustainable development, including economic vitality, justice, social cohesion, environmental protection and the sustainable management of natural resources, so as to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

Education, in addition to being a human right, is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and an essential tool for good governance, informed decision-making and the promotion of democracy. Therefore, education for sustainable development can help translate our vision into reality. Education for sustainable development develops and strengthens the capacity of individuals, groups, communities, organizations and countries to make judgements and choices in favour of sustainable development. It can promote a shift in people's mindsets and in so doing enable them to make our world safer, healthier and more prosperous, thereby improving the quality of life. Education for sustainable development can provide critical reflection and greater awareness and empowerment so that new visions and concepts can be explored and new methods and tools developed."

(These paragraphs are adapted from the Vision Statement of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development which was adopted by European Ministers 17th and 18th March 2005).

1. Introduction

‘Sustainable Development’ is development that meets the needs of people throughout the world today in a way that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

There has sometimes been a distinction made between those who focussed on ‘saving the planet’ and those that focussed on ‘saving people across the planet’. While some groups today continue to focus on ‘environmental’ issues or ‘development’ issues as separate fields, the sustainable development concept argues that this distinction no longer makes sense. Sustainable development implies that saving the planet means saving the people all across the planet and vice versa.

Human Deprivation is a product of Climate Change

Development is sometimes seen as synonymous with economic growth. However, it is now evident that economic growth often gives rise to increases in greenhouse gas emissions which in turn contributes to man-made climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has stated that climate change will lead to a rise in seawater levels of between 9 cm and 88 cm by the year 2100, with higher rises in some places due to local geography. A one-metre rise in sea levels would see 12 per cent of Egypt – home to 7,000,000 people – disappear under the water. Other countries with large river delta regions such as Bangladesh, Thailand, and Nigeria, would have significant areas made uninhabitable.

Other impacts of climate change that the IPCC predict include: increased risk to human health and life due to the spread of vector-borne and water-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue and cholera; increased risk to human life and health due to increased volatility of floods and storms; significant disruptions of ecosystems, leading to threat to biodiversity; significant threat to food production due to disruption of rainfall, change in temperature and increases in pest infestations; reduced availability of clean fresh water and exacerbation of water shortages.

The United Nations Development Programme has noted: “Climate change is the defining human development challenge of the 21st Century. Failure to respond to that challenge will stall and then reverse international efforts to reduce poverty. The poorest countries and most vulnerable citizens will suffer the earliest and most damaging setbacks, even though they have contributed least to the problem”.

Making development sustainable means a change in the lifestyles and choices made by people in Ireland everyday. There is, however, a worldwide recognition that people cannot and should not be simply coerced, legislated or taxed into making their lifestyles more conducive to sustainable development. People must be enabled to develop the knowledge about how their actions will impact upon the world and its people, the creative- and critical-thinking skills to make informed choices about how they will act

and the self-confidence and ethical judgement to follow through on those choices. For this reason, education is seen as an essential prerequisite for sustainable development.

In December 2002 the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed that the decade 2005 to 2014 would be the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. In the European area, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was adopted by Ministers in 2005. Each country is regularly asked to report to both the UNECE and UNESCO on the activities undertaken and policies implemented during the period of the decade.

2. What we mean by Education for Sustainable Development

Education for sustainable development (ESD) has been described by UNESCO as “a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities... This vision of education emphasises a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to developing the knowledge and skills needed for a sustainable future as well as changes in values, behaviour, and lifestyles. This requires us to reorient education systems, policies and practices in order to empower everyone, young and old, to make decisions and act in culturally appropriate and locally relevant ways to redress the problems that threaten our common future”.

ESD encompasses both formal and non-formal education and alternate delivery systems. ESD should equip people with knowledge of and skills in sustainable development, making them more competent and confident and increasing their opportunities for acting for a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature and with concern for social values, gender equity and cultural diversity. It is not simply about raising awareness and providing information and knowledge, but rather creating the values, understanding and convictions which will result in participative democratic actions and changes in behaviour to promote a more sustainable society.

Education at all levels and in all its forms should enable people of all ages better understand the world in which they live and the complexity and inter-relationships of problems such as poverty, wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, population growth, gender inequality, health, conflict, and the violation of human rights that threaten our future.

ESD is fundamentally about values, with respect at the centre; respect for others, including those of present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment, for the planet's resources. Education enables us to understand ourselves and others and our links with the wider natural and social environment, and this understanding serves as a durable basis for building respect. Along with a sense of justice, responsibility, exploration and dialogue, ESD aims to move us to adopting behaviours and practices, which enable all to live a full life in a way that is fulfilling and sustainable.

3. Ireland and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

In Ireland, the Department for Education and Science has responsibility for developing a national strategy for ESD. A consultation process was undertaken on behalf of the Department by ECO UNESCO and, in 2007 a draft National Strategy for ESD was published. A consultation process was held around this draft in late 2007. As of October 2009, the National Strategy has not yet been published.

One dimension of the UN Decade is the establishment around the globe of a network of Regional Centres of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development (RCEs). RCE's are regional networks designed to strengthen collaboration on ESD in their area. The Irish Regional Centre of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development RCE – Ireland was approved by the United Nations University in 2007. RCE – Ireland has linked with a number of development and environmental NGOs to develop this draft 'vision' for the rest of the decade.

The stakeholders who have developed this vision have recognised that the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is now past its mid-way point, and we feel that there is insufficient awareness of, or action on, the aims of the Decade in Ireland. For that reason this vision for the rest of the Decade has been developed. This 'vision' has been developed for and by civil society groups, but contains recommendations for both civil society groups and for state bodies. It identifies, with reference to internationally agreed strategies and frameworks, the education for sustainable development challenges of the rest of the decade to 2014. It highlights our shared view as to what the priorities should be if Ireland is to effectively deliver on the promise of the United Nations Decade of ESD.

This is a voluntary vision. The actions which it recommends are not binding on the groups and organisations which endorse the vision – each group remains free to choose its own actions in line with its own aims. What this vision does seek to do is to provide an overview of the actions that would be necessary for our sectors as a whole to address the goals of the Decade in the Irish context. In this way, it will enable stakeholders to rethink their priorities for action.

This vision recognises the considerable work which went into the development of Ireland's Draft National Strategy for ESD. It also recognises that many groups in both the state and civil society sectors have made significant contributions to ESD in Ireland. It adopts and re-focuses the headings used in the Draft National Strategy of 2007 and seeks to build upon that work and these initiatives by highlighting additional areas for attention.

4. Realising the Vision for ESD in Ireland

Realising this vision for ESD will require existing strategies, actions and funding measures are re-oriented to ensure that ESD becomes a core value in education and

public awareness strategies, and that there is optimum synergy and coherence in the context of a co-ordinated national approach by a range of actors – both state and non-governmental – supported by local community actions.

Four key ESD objectives for the remainder of the Decade to 2014

- Embed Education for Sustainable Development at every level of the education system
- Promote public awareness of Education for Sustainable Development designed to provide the knowledge skills and values to encourage individuals, businesses and organisations to take action in support of a sustainable and just society, care for the environment, and responsible global citizenship.
- Promote Capacity Building in support of ESD
- Promote a virtuous cycle of high standards of environmental management in public institutions, and the use of these institutions as demonstration and public education sites in ESD

Objective 1: Embed Education for Sustainable Development at every level of the education system

Key actions for the state sector by 2014:

- Develop and implement the proposed Senior cycle subject in Politics and Society, with a strong focus on sustainable development issues
- The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to commission a curriculum audit of the opportunities for addressing sustainable development issues across the primary and post-primary curricula.
- The Teaching Council to research and report on the extent to which sustainable development teacher education is addressed across teacher education programmes
- The Higher Education Authority to establish a Working Group to embed appropriate ESD content, values and approaches into higher education programmes, particularly in regard to training of teachers, and training for the business, science, construction, engineering, technology, energy and environmental sectors, as well as the legal, social science and humanities fields
- Department of Education and Science to provide guidelines to textbook manufacturers on the appropriate integration of sustainable development case studies across all syllabus areas and years.

Key actions for the civil society sector by 2014:

- NGOs to work with professional bodies (College of General Practitioners, Engineers Ireland, Institute of Chartered Accountants, Teaching Council and so on) to ensure that sustainable development competencies are included in their accreditation requirements for professional education programmes in Medicine, Engineering, Accountancy and Education.
- NGOs to ensure that educational materials developed reflect the interrelationship between environmental and global development issues
- NGOs to ensure that educational materials developed which are intended for school use are targeted at specific learning outcomes within the school syllabuses

Objective 2: Promote public awareness of Education for Sustainable Development designed to provide the knowledge skills and values to encourage individuals, businesses and organisations to take action in support of a sustainable and just society, care for the environment, and responsible global citizenship.

Key actions for the state sector by 2014:

- State bodies across all departments involved in public awareness to audit how they can include a sustainable development focus in their public awareness work
- The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government to ensure a change in the criteria for the Tidy Towns competition to reflect both sustainability and global development (e.g. fair trade) criteria
- The Departments of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Irish Aid to collaborate on the development of a Sustainable Global Development Business Award on the Tidy Towns model.
- Irish Aid and Comhar to expand their work on promoting a media interest in sustainable global development issues.

Key actions for the civil society sector by 2014:

- NGOs to work with the Press Council and media groups on the representation of sustainability and global development issues in factual programming and reporting, with a particular emphasis on the media's responsibility to distinguish between authoritative and non-authoritative sources.
- NGOs to work with media groups on the representation of sustainability and global development issues in fictional programming.
- NGOs to reflect the relationship between environmental sustainability and global development issues in their public information work.

Objective 3: Promote Capacity Building in support of ESD

Key actions for the state sector by 2014:

- Irish Aid to continue to support the integration of sustainability and development issues into primary and post-primary teacher education

- FETAC to research and report on how sustainability and global development issues and skills can be integrated into apprenticeship and skills training programmes.
- The prioritisation of research into the educational processes that support the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and actions which are conducive to sustainable development in research funding programmes (such as PRTL, IRCHSS, IRCSET) or through the development of a new research funding line on the model of the HEA/ Irish Aid Programme of Strategic Co-operation Fund.

Key actions for the civil society sector by 2014:

- NGOs to promote in-career development for their staff in the areas of sustainability and global development.
- NGOs to work with both initial and in-career teacher education bodies (e.g. SLSS) to ensure that sustainable development issues are represented in teacher education across the professional education continuum
- NGOs to build networks which bring together groups, bodies and individuals who work in the ‘development’ and ‘environment’ sectors.

Objective 4: Promote a virtuous cycle of high standards of environmental management in public institutions, and the use of these institutions as demonstration and public education sites in ESD

Key actions for the state sector by 2014:

- The Department of Education and Science Building Unit to ensure that new educational buildings and refurbishments have a low carbon footprint, and use pro-sustainable global development building materials through its Generic Repeat Design programme
- The Department of Education and Science move to a life-cycle accounting approach to building and managing educational institutions
- The Office of Public Works ensure that new public buildings and refurbishments have a low carbon footprint, and use pro-sustainable global development building materials
- Local Authorities to adopt enhanced guidelines on low carbon footprint building and on the use of pro-sustainable global development building materials in their development plans and building regulations.
- Public bodies involved in capital building use opportunities to provide public information and education on low carbon footprint building and on the use of pro-sustainable global development building materials.

Key actions for the civil society sector by 2014:

- NGOs to expand the current work on environmental management with schools to also include a focus on pro-global development management system (e.g. ‘a ‘Rainbow Flag’ Scheme to complement the Green Flag scheme).

