

Background context for the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland

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What is Sustainable Development?

‘Sustainable development’ can be defined as ‘development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’¹ Sustainable development is characterised as a continuous, guided process of economic, environmental and social change aimed at promoting wellbeing of citizens now and into the future. To realise development of this nature requires creating a sustainable and resource-efficient economy founded on a fair and just society, which respects the ecological limits and carrying capacity of the natural environment.²

There are 3 core pillars of sustainable development: the environment, the economic, and the social.

- *Environment*: this involves an awareness of the resources and fragility of the physical environment and the effects on it of human activity and decisions, with a commitment to factoring environmental concerns into social and economic policy development.
- *Economic*: a sensitivity to the potential of economic growth and its impact on society and on the environment, including an awareness of the effect of consumption levels on the environment and on social justice.
- *Social*: an understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, as well as the democratic and participatory systems which give opportunity for the expression of opinion, the selection of governments, the forging of consensus and the resolution of differences.³

Sustainable Development is wider than a focus on ‘environmental concerns’. It involves harnessing the efforts of those working in a number of diverse policy areas that range from natural resource management and climate change to issues such as social inclusion, the protection of human rights, the promotion of inter-culturalism, the development of sustainable transport, as well as efforts to ensure social justice and equality.

¹ Defined by the Our Common Future (The Brundtland Report) – Report of the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development; Quoted in [Our Sustainable Future - A Framework for Sustainable Development in Ireland](#), p.10

² *Our Sustainable Future*, p.10

³ DES discussion document (2007)

International Context

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 adopted a declaration calling for a comprehensive programme of action throughout the world towards achieving a more sustainable pattern of development for the 21st century and beyond. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 a further declaration and plan of implementation were agreed which together set the international context for sustainable development.⁴

In 2003, UNECE (the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) compiled overall strategy for education for sustainable development. In 2005, this strategy was adopted and the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development was launched, to run from 2005 to 2014. The goal of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. As part of the UNECE strategy, Member States are required to develop and implement a national strategy for education for sustainable development, and to collaborate internationally to achieve its goals.⁵

A UN Conference on Sustainable Development was held in June 2012 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit (Rio+20). The two agreed themes for the Conference were (i) the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and (ii) the institutional framework for sustainable development. *Our Sustainable Future*, which was published by the DECLG in 2012, represented the Irish Government's contribution to the Rio+20 conference.

The 193 Member States of the UN that were represented at Rio+20 agreed an outcome document entitled "The Future We Want". This document calls for a wide range of actions, encompassing the development of the green economy, promoting corporate social responsibility, and adopting a framework for tackling sustainable consumption and production.

Sustainable development has also been accorded priority status at European level. It became a fundamental objective of the EU in 1997 when it was included in the Treaty of Amsterdam as an overarching objective of EU policies. At the Gothenburg Summit in June 2001, EU leaders launched the first EU sustainable development strategy based on a proposal from the European Commission. A renewed sustainable development strategy, for an enlarged EU, was adopted by the European Council in June 2006.

The overall aim of the renewed EU sustainable development strategy is to identify and develop actions to enable the EU to achieve continuous improvement of quality of life both for current and for future generations, through the creation of sustainable communities able to manage and use resources efficiently and to tap the ecological and social innovation potential of the economy, ensuring prosperity, environmental protection and social cohesion.

The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) states that one of the EU's objectives is to work for the sustainable development of Europe based, in particular, on a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment. Although the idea of sustainable development was included in the existing treaties, the Treaty of Lisbon reinforces and better defines this objective.

⁴ *Our Sustainable Future*, p.16

⁵ www.unesco.org/education (Oct 2007)

Sustainable development is also affirmed as one of the fundamental objectives of the Union in its relations with the wider world.⁶ There is also a focus on sustainable development in the EU 2020 Strategy. This is the EU's strategy to ensure that the European economy is smart, sustainable and inclusive. It also contains seven new 'flagship initiatives' one of which centres on creating a resource-efficient Europe. This will be one of the key drivers for advancing the sustainable development and green economy agendas in Europe for the years ahead.⁷

The EU adopted its first Sustainable Development Strategy in 2001 with revisions in 2006 and 2009. The strategy provides the overarching policy framework for all EU policies and strategies.⁸

National policy context

[*Our Sustainable Future - A Framework for Sustainable Development in Ireland*](#) (hereafter referred to as *Our Sustainable Future*) was published by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in June 2012. Its objective is to provide for the integration of sustainable development into key areas of policy, to put in place effective implementation mechanisms and to deliver concrete measures to progress sustainable development.⁹

Our Sustainable Future is built upon a number of 'themes' that include the economy, the efficient use of resources, equity (whether on a generational, gender, societal or geographical basis) respect (for cultural heritage/ diversity, and for ecological integrity and biodiversity), and good decision making. These themes are further refined into key 'principles' of sustainable development.

While *Our Sustainable Future* acknowledges that considerable progress has been made in integrating sustainability principles into public policy making in Ireland in recent years, it also recognises that significant gaps remain across a range of economic, social and environmental policy areas.

Accordingly, the document outlines seventy measures that are intended to improve the quality of life of current and future generations, ranging from the sustainability of public finances, to climate change and clean energy, sustainable transport, social inclusion and sustainable communities, to education, research and innovation, and skills and training.¹⁰ The key measure for the education sector is the development of a National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development.

It is the responsibility of each sector of society, led by the relevant Government Department, to implement the elements of *Our Sustainable Future* in their respective areas. This will involve cooperation with relevant stakeholders, at regional and local level. A High Level Inter-Departmental Group on Sustainable Development, chaired by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, is coordinating overall implementation of *Our Sustainable Future* and will report on progress to the Cabinet Committee on Climate Change and the Green Economy, which is chaired by the Taoiseach. The Department of

⁶ [*Our Sustainable Future*](#), p.17

⁷ *ibid*, p.13

⁸ *ibid*, p.18

⁹ *ibid*, p.21

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp.21-22

Education and Skills is represented on the Cabinet Committee by the Minister of State for Research and Innovation, Seán Sherlock T.D.

National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development

Education has an important role to play in relation to promoting sustainable development. This is evident at both national and international level. At national level, [Our Sustainable Future](#) highlights the importance of education for sustainable development in strengthening the capacity of individuals, communities, businesses and governments to make decisions that take appropriate account of environmental protection.¹¹ Education for sustainable development has also been accorded priority status at EU and UN level (as outlined in the previous section).

The *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development* will detail the contribution that the education sector and other stakeholders are making towards the promotion of education for sustainable development in Ireland in the context of the Our Sustainable Future strategy. It will also identify a number of measures intended to ensure that current activity levels are sustained and, where possible, enhanced in order to strengthen provision in this area.

The education sector encompasses both formal education (schools, further and higher education institutions) and non-formal education (community and adult education) provision. In the context of sustainable development, ‘education’ is also viewed from a wider perspective. From this vantage point, education is seen to encompass the efforts made by other agencies and sectors to raise awareness of, and influence policies related to, sustainable development. This includes the work of other Government Departments, NGOs, the youth sector, the media, as well as private enterprise.

A discussion paper on the development of a *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development* in Ireland was produced by the then Department of Education and Science in November 2007. The discussion paper was developed by a steering committee¹² comprising representatives from relevant agencies and was supported by ECO UNESCO. Consultation with relevant stakeholders was also undertaken as part of this process.

The timeframe for the implementation of this Strategy is the period up to 2020. This mirrors the timeframe in *Our Sustainable Future* and is used mainly because the year 2020 is sufficiently close to be directly affected by decisions made today but distant enough so that policy has a real chance to affect outcomes.¹³

The *National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development* will be informed by the 2007 discussion paper tacking into account the many significant changes that have occurred in the intervening period. It also will consider the contributions of a public consultation.

In particular, this Strategy endorses the following core objectives that were identified in 2007:

¹¹ [Our Sustainable Future](#), 77

¹² The Committee included representatives of the Department of Education and Science; the Department of Environment Heritage and Local Government; Irish Aid, Department of Foreign Affairs; the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; Curriculum Development Unit of City of Dublin VEC; Comhar – the Sustainable Development Council; the Higher Education Authority; and Dr Roland Tormey, University of Limerick and NCCA.

¹³ [Our Sustainable Future](#), 21

Objective One: Embed education for sustainable development at every level of the Education System.

Objective Two: Promote public awareness of education for sustainable development.

Objective Three: Promote capacity building in support of education for sustainable development.

Objective Four: Promote high standards of environmental management in education institutions.

It is important to acknowledge that the Department of Education and Skills is a key stakeholder in the support of these objectives but its work in this regard must be complemented by the activities of other important stakeholders, particularly in light of the broad definition of 'education' that is envisioned in this strategy. As explicitly stated in *Our Sustainable Future*, the achievement of sustainable development depends on people acting together. Key stakeholders including business, community-based organisations and other civil-society groups must all play their part.¹⁴ In relation to this strategy for ESD, the role played by other Government Departments, public sector bodies, NGOs, the media and private enterprise will be crucial, especially in relation to objectives two and four of this strategy.

The implementation of a strategy of *education* for sustainable development encompasses a diverse set of policy areas. This includes environmental education, natural resource management, the conducting and disseminating of relevant research, addressing the skills requirements of the sustainable economy, as well as addressing a number of broader issues that can contribute to a more equitable society such as poverty reduction, social inclusion, active citizenship, human rights, gender equity, and cultural diversity.

¹⁴ [Our Sustainable Future](#), 16, 77