

How Ireland is Adopting the Sustainable Development Goals

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The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, with their accompanying 169 targets, are a blueprint for the future development of mankind and of the planet. Never before has the world come together on an agenda of this kind. Breathtaking in its scope and ambition, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most comprehensive attempt yet made to respond to the interlocking challenges of eradicating poverty, preserving the planet, and stimulating balanced economic growth.

Ireland had the honour and privilege to play a key role as one of the two co-facilitators, or co-chairs, of the negotiations among the 193 member States of the United Nations which, in August, 2015, finalised the agreement on this Agenda. Our partner in this process was Kenya. The Ambassador of Kenya and I had the task of leading the negotiations and steering member States towards eventual consensus on this unprecedented work programme for the world. It fell on us to present successive drafts of the document which, in due course, came to be known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

A smaller number of member States, in an earlier phase of negotiations, had reached a preliminary agreement on a set of goals and targets. It was our responsibility to secure the agreement of all 193 member States to a finalised set as well as to provisions concerning the means needed for implementation of these goals and targets, to the arrangements for follow-up and review of the new agenda, and to an accompanying political declaration. We ensured careful coordination between these negotiations and a separate process on financing for sustainable development which, in July, 2015, led to the agreement on the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. Our endeavours involved a major input from non-governmental organizations, from the academic and scientific community, and from the private sector. Backed by an intensive worldwide public consultation, the three-year process culminated in the proclamation at a special summit in September, 2015, of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agreement reached on the SDGs was truly historic and is regarded as the UN's most important achievement in a generation.

The Agenda's new goals and targets are intended to be implemented at the national, regional and global levels. We are all agreed, however, that the bulk of the effort needed to implement them must come at the national level. National Governments, parliaments, local authorities, civil society, the private sector and the academic community all have roles to play in ensuring that the necessary progress is made – and made at the pace and on the scale envisaged in the new Agenda.

The summit in September, 2015, launched the 2030 Agenda with great fanfare and was met with displays of enthusiasm and commitment across the world. Each of the UN's member States, from the largest to the smallest, must do everything within its power to get to work on the new goals and targets. We must all maintain the momentum, adjust our Governments and societies to the demands of the Agenda and ensure that no time is wasted. The clock is ticking. We are already well into the second year of the 15-year time frame which has been agreed.

The first year (2016) was used by many member States to translate the Goals and targets into national legislation and to create the domestic structures needed for implementation. My own country, Ireland, has been confronting the many challenges involved. We are actively considering the most appropriate institutional arrangements for implementation, monitoring, and review of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. Effective implementation of the Agenda at the national level will require a broad and integrated domestic policy response across the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainable development. Our national implementation framework will, therefore, have to provide for the coordinated involvement of many different parts of government and reach out to a broad group of stakeholders.

During the period of negotiations which led up to adoption of the Agenda, Ireland set up a mechanism to ensure effective preparation and coordination of its position across all relevant Ministries. This involved thorough consideration of national policies within the context of the emerging Sustainable Development Goals. The existence of this mechanism over the past few years, conceived to support our input to the successive negotiation processes at the UN, provides us with a good basis for the framework which is now required to ensure full implementation of the Goals and targets.

In many respects, existing policies and strategies in Ireland already integrate many of the objectives envisaged in the SDGs. For example, we already have a national sustainable development plan which anticipates many of the themes and priorities set by the SDGs. The framework for sustainable development in Ireland is entitled

“Our Sustainable Future”. Our international development policy, set out a couple of years ago in a document entitled “One World One Future,” is also very much in keeping with the philosophy and approach which underlie the SDGs. Where Irish policy is not fully aligned with the new Agenda, we envisage that our national implementation framework will facilitate the necessary integrated approach to implementation, as well as further progress on alignment of the Goals and targets with relevant national policies.

Like many other member States, we have also been working to create new institutional arrangements for the coordination of our efforts across all relevant Government Ministries and agencies, bearing in mind the cross-cutting nature of much of the Agenda. The model for such coordination and centralisation will vary from one country to another. In many instances the President’s Office or the Prime Minister’s Office will be seen as the natural clearing-house for decisions and actions which cover almost the full extent of Governmental responsibilities.

In the case of Ireland, we are considering a centrally driven model involving a possible Cabinet sub-committee which would provide political oversight of our national performance on implementation of the SDGs. This might be supported by a group of senior officials coordinated by the Prime Minister’s Office. The detail of the arrangements we might make is being closely examined and has not yet been finalised. How exactly the supervisory/monitoring work would be organised (example, the balance to be struck between generalised discussion of implementation and detailed consideration of individual Goals and activities or initiatives under each) is one of many issues which will require further attention.

A key challenge for us, as for all other member States, is how to ensure that the cross-sectoral and integrated approach which underpins the Agenda is fully grasped, and acted on, across our administration. Ministries and agencies which operate on the basis of traditional “silos” of responsibility need to be attuned to the realities of the SDGs and the new cross-cutting perspectives which these call for. However, this takes time and effort. The changes of mindset needed will not materialise overnight. Furthermore, an instinctive reflex to the effect that the new Agenda is fundamentally about developing countries and does not impinge on countries like our own needs to be countered. This is a universal agenda, applicable to every country in the world and agreed to by all on this basis. It is a set of commitments which spans virtually all the traditional portfolios and which rightly belongs at the centre of government.

As part of the national implementation framework, we are considering how best

to ensure that implementation of the SDGs in Ireland will be responsive to the needs of our youth. Given that today's generation is the one which will experience most directly the success or failure of the SDGs, it is strongly invested in significant progress being made under all headings over the coming years.

Ireland's Central Statistics Office (CSO) will have a key role to play as part of our national implementation framework. Senior officials of the CSO have already been actively involved at UN level in work done by the UN Statistical Commission to create a set of global indicators which would support implementation of the new Goals and targets. The CSO will support at the national level the development of national objectives and indicators, closely aligned with the Agenda, which will assist with implementation and monitoring.

Ireland's implementation of the SDGs will, of course, not be confined to the national level. We also have responsibilities at the regional and global levels. At the global level, we will be actively supporting delivery of the SDGs in developing countries, particularly in the policies and programmes which we administer in key partner countries for Irish Aid (Ireland's development cooperation programme).

In the Irish Parliament, consideration is being given to ways in which parliamentary scrutiny of the new Agenda and its implementation might be strengthened. In addition, employers' bodies and trade unions are reflecting on its implications for their own work.

The Irish Government attaches particular importance to the role to be played in implementation by civil society and other stakeholders. Our national implementation framework will facilitate outreach to these key partners. Civil societies are gearing up for implementation. Recently over 100 such groups who are based in Ireland formed themselves into a network called "Coalition 2030," which is seeking early progress on implementation both in Ireland and around the globe. The Coalition's expertise ranges from children's rights to environmental sustainability, and from humanitarian relief to education. It wants to hold political leaders in Ireland accountable for implementation of the Agenda. It notes that the challenges which Ireland faces – including, homelessness, conflict, forced displacement, climate change, loss of biodiversity and income inequality – are by no means confined to our country. Such challenges can only be tackled at a global level and on a basis of universal participation.

An example of effective cooperation in the SDGs context between our Government and civil society is a working group on climate finance which has been established to

create a plan for the scaling-up of future climate finance flows as required under the Paris Agreement. This brings together the Ministries of Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Foreign Affairs, and Trade and the Environment.

Another example was the presentation by our Ministry for Education of its strategy regarding “Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland” to a range of stakeholders across both Government and civil society. The key principles of this strategy included a number of commitments relevant to the SDGs, not least of which are (i) the promotion of active democratic citizenship and inclusion as a means of empowering individuals and the community; and (ii) the recognition that sustainability calls for interdependence and interconnectedness across all sectors. Ireland’s Global Coalition for Education has committed to developing a strategy and creating an alliance around SDG 4 which would focus on advocacy for education in development aid policy, education for sustainable development, global citizenship, lifelong learning, and inclusive education.

We are giving thought to public information initiatives to create greater public awareness of the SDGs. Schools will be a particular focus. We hope that teachers in every classroom in the country will play their part in educating Irish children about the importance of this Agenda for their generation, in Ireland as in the rest of the world. Already there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that young people in Ireland are becoming familiar with the SDGs. While there were initial concerns that the slightly cumbersome title “Sustainable Development Goals” might stand in the way of this, the snappier version “SDGs” seems to be catching on, albeit slowly. There is still a long way to go, however; and, while social media will help to transmit knowledge of the new Goals and to give today’s youth ownership of these Goals, there will continue to be a significant need to foster awareness of them.

More widely, Ireland has a keen understanding of the challenges which many smaller developing countries will face in implementing the SDGs. From our own history of post-colonial development, and the challenges we faced in building up an effective public administration of our own through decades of economic difficulty, we know only too well the scale of effort and resources which are required. In addition to co-facilitating the negotiations which produced agreement on the 2030 Agenda, we played an active part in the parallel negotiations at the UN which led to the adoption of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the latter’s comprehensive set of understandings on the financial and other means needed for implementation of the SDGs.

It is widely recognised that improving data collection capacity in many countries is of critical importance. It is clearly vital that all countries are in a position to monitor their performance and measure the progress they are making towards full achievement of the Goals and targets by 2030. The challenge is particularly acute given the need to generate data which are capable of tracking intersecting and interconnected goals, and of providing comprehensive information which is disaggregated by a range of different criteria.

The Agenda provides for, and indeed actively encourages, the creation of partnerships to generate progress under specific Goals and targets or under one of the Agenda's cross-cutting themes. Involving multiple combinations of Governments, international organisations, foundations, the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders, partnerships will enable an efficient concentration of planning, expertise, and resources on specific initiatives in key sectors of the Agenda. Such partnerships will be critical to achieving the momentum and impact we all wish for from the SDGs.

At the global level, the UN is developing its arrangements for monitoring and review of implementation, notably through the High-Level Political Forum. In the first year of implementation of the SDGs, it was inevitable that the focus would be on process; on the powers, functions, scope and work programme which the High Level Political Forum would have over the coming years; on alignment of the new Goals and targets with national development plans; and on creation of the structures which will be required to stimulate, oversee and report on the progress being made in each member State to fulfil the commitments made in the 2030 Agenda. Some 22 member States reported voluntarily to the meeting of the HLPF in July 2015 on the progress they were each making under these and other headings. Now that we are into the second year of implementation, and with more data becoming available on achievements to date, there is likely to be greater emphasis in the HLPF on the substance of the Goals and targets and emerging global trends. Well over 40 member States are expected to provide voluntary reporting on their own situations at the HLPF meeting in July 2017. In July 2018, Ireland will present itself for voluntary review. A vital feature of the HLPF's work is, of course, the learning of lessons and exchanges of best practice among member States as they come to terms with the challenges, and also the opportunities, presented by this unprecedented global Agenda.

There is much which we can learn from Bhutan, for example, in its development of the concept of Gross National Happiness for the measurement of progress. In Bhutan, the principles of Gross National Happiness – such as equitable social development,

cultural preservation, conservation of the environment and the promotion of good governance – are considered a valuable guide in determining the extent to which sustainable development is being achieved.

While the concept poses some methodological challenges, it is fair to say nevertheless that happiness as a policy prerogative is gaining momentum worldwide. On March 20 this year, the United Nations celebrated, for the first time, the International Day of Happiness. Several member States convened a valuable panel discussion at the UN on “public policies for happiness”. The World Happiness Report was launched. And the formation of a new “Global Happiness Council” was also announced.

Bhutan, which has placed the concept of happiness at the heart of its political agenda, has made some remarkable progress in its own sustainable development. In the past 70 years it has doubled life expectancy; it has enrolled almost 100 percent of its children in primary school; and it has significantly modernised its infrastructure. Supported by a guiding philosophy of happiness, it is charting its own course towards a sustainable and equitable society. As we set out together on the road towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda, we can be inspired by what Bhutan has already achieved and what it will achieve over the next 15 years.