



Irish Network for
Education Worldwide



Ireland's Third Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan

Submission to the Public Consultation
16 January 2026

Irish Network for Education Worldwide

Overarching Objective

The Irish Network for Education Worldwide (INEW) is a network of civil society actors and education stakeholders in Ireland advocating for inclusive, equitable, and safe quality education for all worldwide, with a commitment to reaching the furthest behind. As a membership organisation with 29 members, we connect and represent a diverse range of Irish development and humanitarian aid NGOs, school and university teacher unions, global citizenship education organisations, and more.

Ireland's Second National Implementation Plan (NIP) for the Sustainable Development Goals (2022–2024) rightly addresses Ireland's international approach to the SDGs. The commitment to the 2030 Agenda goes beyond national implementation: progress at home only has lasting impact when situated within a wider global context, where persistent gaps demand focused attention and meaningful engagement. Ireland's use of its global influence to advance the SDGs is therefore not only a moral responsibility in the face of ongoing global need, but also a matter of shared interest. The 2030 Agenda seeks global prosperity, well-being for all, peace, and justice—outcomes on which Ireland, like all countries, depends.

A cornerstone of Ireland's global engagement on the SDGs is education. Yet, SDG 4, the commitment to education, is absent from the chapter on the international approach in Ireland's Second NIP. We urge that education not be overlooked again. It is integral to Ireland's development cooperation policy priorities on gender equality, climate action, reducing humanitarian need, strengthening governance, and reaching those furthest behind first.

Education is, in fact, a catalyst across all these areas and for the achievement of all SDGs. It underpins sustainable development, shared prosperity, and peace. It enables self-reliance, improves health and well-being, provides climate mitigation and adaptation skills, strengthens community resilience, and advances gender equality. It also serves as a key driver for promoting Irish values globally, fostering partnerships and stability for a more equitable and prosperous world. And it educates global citizens who can think critically, act with empathy, and uphold the democratic and humanistic values that are under growing threat.

Ireland has long been a champion of education with a €250 million

pledge for global education from 2019 to 2024, €60 million contribution to the Global Partnership for Education (2021–2024), and €31 million support for Education Cannot Wait since 2019. This support enabled children's learning from sub-Saharan Africa to the Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and more. These investments reflect the values and priorities of the Irish public (Dóchas Worldview Survey, p. 63): education ranks second only to health among areas the Irish Government is expected to support overseas.

As these commitments are due to be renewed for 2026 and beyond, Ireland's commitments to achieving SDG 4 through its global engagement must be recognised and built upon in the Third NIP for the SDGs.

Today, 272 million children are out of school, and a projected decline in international aid to education of USD 3.2 billion by 2026 is expected to leave an additional six million children out of school, the

equivalent to emptying every primary school in Germany and Italy combined. **In this context, strengthening Ireland's global commitment to SDG 4 must take centre stage in the new NIP.**

The Programme for Government 2025 and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Statement of Strategy 2025–2028 already pledged to "significantly increasing" the proportion of Ireland's Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocated to education. **These commitments should decisively shape the objectives and ambitions of Ireland's NIP for 2026 and beyond.**

Responses to selected Consultation Questions

1

What are the key areas of progress in achieving the objectives and actions of the current NIP and how can these be built upon?

A key area of progress under the first two NIPs has been the clear recognition of Ireland's responsibility to advance the SDGs beyond national implementation, situating domestic action within a global context of shared risks and interdependence. **This acknowledgement of the importance of international engagement provides a strong foundation for the next NIP and should now be built upon through explicit objectives and ambitions, alongside stronger integration of Ireland's full range of global policy tools**—particularly in areas where Ireland has established expertise, demonstrated impact, and articulated ambitions to grow.

One such area is education. Ireland's long-standing commitments and global leadership in this field offer significant potential to further advance progress under the 2030 Agenda. **Following its absence from the previous NIP, SDG 4 should now be included as an integral component of Ireland's global engagement on the SDGs, explicitly recognised as a catalyst for their achievement.**

In particular, when setting out Ireland's ambitions to **advance the SDGs at country level, the next NIP should recognise education as a cross-cutting**

driver for reducing poverty and hunger and for delivering all objectives under A Better World, Ireland's International Development Cooperation Strategy.

Additionally, Ireland has explicitly acknowledged that access to education cannot wait until the cessation of hostilities ([Irish Aid Annual Report, 2024](#)). **Accordingly, ambitions relating to humanitarian assistance and reaching the most vulnerable individuals and communities should explicitly include education in emergencies.** Education is a critical element of life-saving protection and assistance, while also promoting resilience and providing tools for long-term recovery and peace.

Within Ireland's global climate action ambitions, the nexus between climate and education should also be clearly recognised. Education is a key driver of climate awareness, mitigation, and adaptation, and education systems themselves require protection from climate-related shocks. Because this nexus cuts across education, climate, development, and humanitarian policy, **the NIP should emphasise shared responsibilities across departments and a coherent, whole-of-government approach as a prerequisite for Ireland to effectively shape the global policy agenda,** climate negotiations, and

interdependences with other SDGs, including SDG 4.

The Second NIP also highlights Ireland's role in influencing international financial institutions (IFIs) to advance the SDGs. This is an area that requires sharper focus and more concrete objectives for 2026 and beyond. The world urgently needs a fairer and more sustainable financing architecture to address the ongoing debt crisis, which continues to disproportionately affect developing countries and constrain investment in SDG-related public services, including education. Currently, 46 governments of developing countries spent more on interest payments than on either education or health. Austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) further restrict progress of the SDGs, while borrowing costs remain significantly higher for the countries most in need of support. As a member of the EU and the OECD, Ireland has a critical role to play in advancing an ambitious UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, which will have far-reaching implications for financing and implementing the 2030 Agenda.

2

What are some of the key challenges in achieving the objectives and actions of the existing NIP and how can these be addressed?

Within the context of Ireland's global commitment to the SDGs, **effective cooperation, communication, and sharing of responsibilities across departments** involved in international policy processes remain a key challenge and should be addressed explicitly.

This is particularly evident in areas related to SDG 4, which is closely interconnected with many other SDGs and where responsibility for international outcomes is shared across departments. Relevant examples include the climate–education nexus, as well as the urgent engagement in the

development of the Fourth Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which seeks to address gaps in access to free pre-primary and secondary education, where up to three different departments must work together.

The chapter on Ireland's international approach to the SDGs in the Third NIP should therefore emphasise the need for strengthened cross-departmental communication and coordination.

3

Do you agree with the NIP's current key objectives? In your view, are there further or alternative objectives that should be included?

In Ireland's global engagement on the SDGs, current **Strategic Objective 3, "Greater partnerships for the Goals,"** is particularly relevant. **The emphasis on international partnerships should be strengthened and explicitly linked to Ireland's development cooperation and assistance**, clearly spelling out its importance as an underlying objective that supports national implementation within a global context of interdependence with relation to the 2030 agenda.

Moreover, as civil society spaces are increasingly under threat, **the NIP should explicitly recognise, strengthen and champion partnerships with civil society as a core objective.** A true partnership means ensuring civil society has a seat at the table, with its expertise and perspectives not only heard but actively acted upon – which needs to be clearly articulated.

5

Stakeholder Engagement – what is working well and what needs to be further developed e.g. better reaching the furthest behind first?

6

How can youth voices and the voices of groups identified as being in danger of being left behind best be included?

10

What role can partnerships play in furthering the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland?

To achieve the objectives addressed in questions 5, 6, and 10, in conjunction with our answer to question 3, it is **crucial to strengthen partnerships with civil society, the stakeholders closest to local realities and lived experiences.** The voices of those **furthest behind, as well as youth voices**, are only fully heard when civil society is provided with a strong and secure space, and when government commitments to civil society are translated into concrete action.

Given the pressures on civil society—particularly on networks and advocacy organisations that interact most closely with the policy space relevant to SDG implementation—it is more important

than ever to **include civil society pro-actively in policy spaces and to support civil society in connecting and forming networks**, which drive collective action, amplify impact, and strengthen the reach and effectiveness of their work, while ensuring diversity and the full range of perspectives are reflected. Especially in the coming years, the partnership with civil society and the **protection of its space, must be safeguarded against anti-democratic threats.**

This should be addressed throughout the NIP as a mainstreamed objective, given explicit attention, and clearly articulated.