



**Statement of Coalition 2030 to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence  
15 October 2020, 11.30am  
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## **Introduction**

I would like to thank the Chair for the opportunity to speak today on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. I'd like to firstly congratulate all members on your new positions on the Committee. I'd also like to add that it is extremely positive that the Committee has decided to address the issue so early in its deliberations and I hope that this proactive approach can be mirrored in other Committees.

I am speaking to you today on behalf of Coalition 2030, which is an alliance of seventy-five leading international and local civil society organisations. The Coalition is made up of both international and domestic NGOs, including Dóchas and World Vision who are subsequently presenting today. Members also include youth organisations, environmental groups, academics, and trade unions. Our members work in a variety of areas – from humanitarian relief to labour rights and environmental sustainability – in Ireland and in over 50 countries around the world.

I will start by providing a brief overview of the Goals and Ireland's response. I will then outline how the Committee has a key role to play in ensuring effective monitoring and accountability. I'll briefly address the policy context and overseas impact of domestic policies and finish by putting forward recommendations on how the Committee can respond to these issues.

## **Overview**

I appreciate that this is far from the first time that many of you will have come across the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the Chair of this Committee in his previous Ministerial roles, but I'd like to briefly provide some background. The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development was adopted by Ireland and 192 other countries in 2015. This Agenda is made up of 17 Sustainable Development Goals which provide an overarching framework “*to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all*”. They are not merely directed at the Global South - all states including Ireland are obliged to adhere to them and ensure they are reflected in domestic policies. The Goals are designed to ensure progress is made globally by 2030 to end extreme poverty, eliminate inequality, respond to the climate emergency and stop environmental degradation. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade played an admirable role in their agreement, having co-chaired the negotiations.

It is essential that this Committee understands that the SDGs cannot be treated at any level of Government or in any state as a type of branding or promotional exercise. Equally, it is not an *à la carte* menu where we can pick and choose which Goals to prioritise. Rather the 2030 Agenda set out an interconnected policy framework for states to follow. Beneath the 17 Goals there are 169 individual sub targets and 231 indicators across a range of policy areas which means progress (or inaction) can be systematically monitored. **The point here is that this is not some vague or lofty exercise; on the contrary the SDG framework is clear, specific and comprehensive, and must be integrated into Ireland's policy-making and planning.**



## Government response

Ireland's progress to date across the 17 Goals has been monitored against these targets and indicators by the Central Statistics Office, as well as EU and UN agencies. The state submitted its first progress report to the UN in 2018 as part of the Voluntary National Review process. In-depth analyses of Ireland's performance have also been carried out by the OECD, EU agencies, as well as Social Justice Ireland. I do not intend to go through the state's performance across the 17 goals, but it has been repeatedly highlighted that Ireland does not compare well with our neighbours on targets related to environment, climate, participation in lifelong learning, and access to employment for women and disadvantaged groups. Challenges also remain in relation to targets on overseas development assistance, policy coherence and tax policy, and my colleagues will discuss some of these issues subsequently.

How has the state responded? Three years after signing the 2030 Agenda, a National SDG Implementation Plan was produced, led by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment. The emphasis in this document on Ireland's SDG leadership at home and abroad was welcomed, as was the recognition of the key role of government in delivering progress, including through departmental reporting and state progress reports every 2 years. The first of these reports was produced in 2018 and the second due in 2020 but this was recently deferred until next year. However, this National Implementation Plan suffered from many of the same weaknesses of approach that we have seen in relation to climate policy. Although it provided a mapping of relevant policies and Departmental stakeholders, **it did not include tangible, time-bound actions across Government Departments and public bodies on how targets would be achieved by 2030.**<sup>1</sup> Certain Goals were only linked to policies of one Department, despite being cross-cutting.<sup>2</sup> In short, it was more of an SDG 'promise' than a SDG 'plan'. It is also important to note that neither the National Planning Framework nor the National Development Plan include a focus on the Goals or sub targets.

Of equal concern has been the seeming absence of leadership to ensure full mainstreaming of the SDGs across all levels of Government. It has never been clear how one unit in one section of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment is supposed to coordinate a 'whole of government approach' to the SDGs. From the outset the Coalition has advocated for the Department of the Taoiseach to take the lead. Concerns have also been raised that while an Inter-Departmental Working Group and the Senior Officials Group on the SDGs were also put in place, these are more aimed at information exchange, rather than ensuring a systematic and coherent approach to meeting the SDGs across Departments.

Until recently the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment had been engaging positively with the Coalition on steps towards the development of a new plan and on necessary consultation through the dedicated SDG Stakeholder Forum. However, we were informed a few weeks ago that progress on a new Plan was on hold due to a restructuring decision to remove the relevant SDG unit in the Department. We understand that coordination is

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<sup>1</sup> Coalition 2030 [SDG Report](#), 2018

<sup>2</sup> See analysis of Ireland's organisation of SDG implementation and policy coherence in M Le Tissier & Hester Whyte, [Report on SDG interactions in context of Ireland Sustainable Development Goals](#), D2.2, UCC MaREI [SDGs4/III Project](#), 2020, Section 4.1



to be assigned to new staff in the Department's climate division. While the situation is far from clear and far from encouraging, **this is in an obvious moment to review how Government is implementing the SDGs and we are again calling for responsibility for coordination and coherence to be transferred to the Taoiseach's Department.**

### **Committee's Work Programme and Recommendations**

So where does the rubber meet the road for this Committee? **The Sustainable Development Goals must be the key guiding benchmark for assessing Departmental performance.** You will be aware that the Coalition wrote to this and other Committees in light of the approved [Dáil motion](#) of the 30<sup>th</sup> of July which sets out that each select Committee must address progress on implementation of the SDGs as part of its work programme.

In the Coalition's letter to the Committee in September, we addressed how the Committee should take forward the motion. We would like to emphasise that the Committee must:

1. Examine the impact of domestic policies on developing countries by inviting relevant domestic policy-holders to address the Committee, such as the Minister for Climate Action.
2. Ensure that SDG targets and indicators are used to assess policy planning and implementation as part of its ongoing deliberations.
3. Ensure vulnerable groups are invited to provide their views on Ireland's response – something perhaps made more possible now that stakeholder inputs to the Committee are being made online.
4. Address SDG implementation as a means of increasing state, regional and local resilience when examining responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Policy Context and Recommendations**

The Covid crisis has seriously jeopardised progress on the SDGs both in Ireland and globally. The effects of the pandemic are compounded by pre-existing drivers of humanitarian needs and injustice, such as conflict, climate change, environmental degradation, unsustainable food systems, human rights violations, poverty and inequality – including gender inequality and discrimination. These root causes need to be prioritised. However, the pandemic also makes the achievement of the SDGs all the more relevant and necessary. UN authorities have emphasised that the SDGs constitute a ready-made framework to increase long-term resilience to the pandemic and other global shocks and to ensure a just recovery for the most vulnerable communities and workers. The strength of the SDG framework lies in its universality - applying equally to countries around the world as it does to Ireland; and in its aim to balance progress across social, economic and environmental objectives.

Yet, the experience of Coalition has been a gap in meaningful systems for accountability for implementation of the SDGs. Mere consideration by Departments and public bodies is insufficient. **It is the time to integrate and prioritise the SDGs across all Government planning and decision-making and ensure coherence between domestic and foreign policies.**



The Programme for Government includes a commitment ‘to implement the SDGs and to promote their implementation around the world’. From a Foreign Affairs and Trade perspective, it is important to monitor Ireland’s delivery of the SDGs **both** in terms of Ireland’s support to the delivery of the SDGs globally, in particular through Goal 17 (international partnerships, including meeting commitments on overseas aid), **and in relation to how progress on key Goals at home can impact people living in the developing world.**

To provide some examples:

1. Making progress on Goal 13 - **climate action** is critical for tackling the devastating impacts of climate change in developing countries who are at the frontlines of the crisis.

Without an urgent step-change, the climate and biodiversity emergencies will dwarf the devastating effects of the current pandemic. Climate impacts are particularly evident in ongoing food crises which threaten the lives and livelihoods of millions in developing countries. The UN World Food Programme warns that “we could be facing multiple famines of biblical proportions” with an estimated 270million people facing food shortages over the coming months. Developing nations face an estimated 75% of the cost of the climate crisis. These impacts are particularly unjust because the poorest half of the world’s population are responsible for only 10% of polluting emissions, while the richest 10 countries are responsible for 50% of all emissions.

2. Making progress on Goals 8 and 10 is crucial to strengthening Ireland’s approach to **Business and Human Rights.**

The 2030 Agenda recognises that the business sector is a key partner for both the UN and governments in achieving the SDGs. The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights has produced a set of important recommendations which note that for business, the most powerful contribution to sustainable development is to embed respect for human rights across their value chains. The UN Working Group has also called on states to replicate legal initiatives to regulate corporate activities, such as the “Corporate Duty of Vigilance” law in France. Ireland should also develop mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence legislation in order to ensure companies operating in Ireland respect human rights across their activities and value chain. We also recognise the need for global regulation and the importance of Ireland’s contribution to the development of a UN binding treaty on business and human rights.

We would emphasise that this Committee should have as part of its agenda both Ireland’s international support to the delivery of the SDGs, as well as oversight of key domestic policies for example, climate action and business and human rights. The Coalition supports Dóchas’ recommendations regarding the need for a mechanism for policy coherence for sustainable development.



In conclusion, **Coalition 2030 asks that the Committee:**

- Writes to the Taoiseach to request that the Department of the Taoiseach take responsibility for leading and coordinating Ireland's SDG response and ensure that a new National SDG Action Plan is produced in 2021 based on early consultation with civil society.
- Writes to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to
  1. support the delivery of the Goals internationally, particularly in Ireland's leadership position on the UN Security Council, and at the Human Rights Council and General Assembly.
  2. ensure that relevant SDG targets and indicators are integrated into the Department's Statement of Strategy and reporting.
  3. develop a transparent and well-resourced mechanism for policy coherence for sustainable development, as recommended by the OECD.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to present and I hope we can assist and engage further over the coming months.

**[Ends]**

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### Sources

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