



Ireland’s progress on the SDGs – are we reaching the furthest behind first?

Chapter submitted to Ireland’s Voluntary National Review 2023

Introduction

Coalition 2030 is a civil society alliance of international development, domestic anti-poverty and equality, environment, and trade union organisations and networks working to ensure Ireland reaches the SDGs by 2030, and contributes to their achievement abroad.

This chapter outlines how Coalition 2030 and its allies perceive SDG progress from the perspective of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first. It is a reminder to the Irish Government and all parties that with just 7 years to go, they must work quickly to unblock obstacles and create an enabling environment to reach the Goals, in Ireland and abroad.

Context

Global events have made progress towards the SDGs extremely challenging. While there has been some progress, these events have slowed, or even eroded pre-pandemic gains.¹

In the Global South, the ongoing effects of Covid-19, the invasion of Ukraine, a devastating cost of living and fuel crisis, and a severe food shortage in eastern and the Horn of Africa, have all stalled or undermined progress towards the SDGs.² Additionally, punitive debt repayments, IMF-imposed austerity, and tax avoidance by multinational companies, have reduced the fiscal space available to make progress on the Goals.³

In Ireland, the continuing effects of Covid-19 and the cost of living and energy crisis have left people struggling to stand still, let alone progress towards the SDGs.

While the State's capacity to deliver on the SDGs has certainly been challenged by Covid-19, other chronic factors such as the ongoing housing and accommodation crisis, meeting the needs of asylum seekers and refugees, and an extremely overburdened health system, are demonstrative of the state's inadequate progress on the SDGs. Moreover, the lack of State foresight and planning in responding to these issues, combined with the effects of cuts to services and the financialisation of housing, has enabled far right sentiment to take hold in some communities as certain actors exploit frustration and a sense of being left behind.

The State has and will always have obligations towards humanitarian aid. Delivering effectively on this *is* within the state's capacity. However, the state must also plan for and address domestic matters. Many countries face crises while simultaneously advancing SDGs. Progress on the SDGs simply cannot be at the mercy of current or future crises.

While we commend elements of the State's response to the invasion of Ukraine and Covid-19 (from which many lessons can be learned), advance preparedness, clear communication and a commitment to developing public understanding can mitigate the social unrest that can accompany reactionary planning. Using the SDGs and

¹ <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/sdgs-report-2022-delivers-reality-check-on-reversal-of-progress/>

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<https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/new-africa-sdgs-report-shows-slow-progress-calls-greater-action-meet-targets#:~:text=Halfway%20towards%202030%2C%20most%20African,350%20million%20people%20by%202050>

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<https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/new-africa-sdgs-report-shows-slow-progress-calls-greater-action-meet-targets#:~:text=Halfway%20towards%202030%2C%20most%20African,350%20million%20people%20by%202050>

human rights in long-term planning would enable policy design that would result in more effective responses to emergencies, as well as continued progress in other domains.

Moreover, Ireland's ongoing inability to address structural impediments to achieving the SDGs - governance, data, accountability, policy coherence, political leadership, and crises preparedness - represents a significant challenge to achieving the Goals. This lack of attention to structural impediments risks contributing towards a political and societal environment whereby progress on the SDGs becomes increasingly challenging.

Housing and Homelessness

Ireland is experiencing a severe accommodation crisis. The failure to build sufficient social and affordable homes and policies that have encouraged the financialisation of housing have been significant factors in this crisis.

A shortage of homes strikes at the fabric of communities, affecting people's health, damaging familial and societal cohesion, and undermining human rights.⁴ The implications of this are felt not just in the lack of quality public housing and affordable homes, but also in mental health outcomes, levels of inequality, and uneven educational opportunity as students face accommodation-based restrictions on where they can afford to live and study.⁵

Children are particularly vulnerable. Along with their families they constitute almost a third of all people homeless in Ireland.⁶ Experiencing homelessness is traumatic, creating an adverse childhood experience with long term psychosocial and developmental impacts.⁷

⁴ Many commentators believe the official CSO figure of approximately 11,000 homeless to be significantly underestimated. Including those on housing waiting lists, in receipt of some form of housing or rental assistance and those living in housing insecurity, the figure is thought to be closer to 270,000 households - or half a million people- based on an interview with Rory Hearne, University of Maynooth.

⁵ <https://www.into.ie/2022/11/22/housing-crisis-threatens-education-system-unions/>

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<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/?referrer=http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

⁷ [Supporting the mental health of children in families that are homeless: a trauma informed approach](#)

Further, between a fifth and a third of people in the widely criticised direct provision⁸ system are children,⁹ the long-term effects of which are still unknown. Privatising direct provision without adequate oversight has resulted in poor accommodation and living conditions, and according to the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, the system violates multiple human rights.¹⁰ Increasingly, refugees and people seeking asylum are being left without any accommodation at all.¹¹

Travellers¹² are strikingly over-represented in the homeless population.¹³ When overcrowding and unsuitable living conditions are taken into account,¹⁴ over 1 in 10 (13.5%) of the homeless population are Travellers,¹⁵ despite accounting for only 1% of the general population. They suffer from discrimination in social housing and the private rental market, with 73% reporting discrimination when trying to rent or buy houses, evidenced by 82% of landlords saying they would not rent to Travellers.¹⁶ Moreover, accessing the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) rental system presents problems for Travellers and migrants, leaving these groups particularly vulnerable to being left behind.

⁸ Ireland's reception system for asylum seekers is known as Direct Provision. Under the Direct Provision system, people are accommodated across the country in communal institutional centres or former hotel style settings. The vast majority of the centres are managed on a for-profit basis by private contractors. The system was designed as a short-term measure in the year 2000

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/direct-provision-the-controversial-system-turns-20-1.4081833>

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<https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2022/06/08/more-than-11600-people-in-direct-provision-as-numbers-rise-to-record-levels/>

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<https://www.iccl.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/190531-ICCL-ORourke-Submission-On-Direct-Provision-System.pdf>

¹¹

<https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2023/01/27/shocking-rise-in-homeless-asylum-seekers-as-55-are-left-without-accommodation/>

¹² Mincéirs (Irish Travellers) are a traditionally nomadic ethnic minority indigenous to Ireland.

¹³

<https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Harvey-B.-2021-The-Traveller-Community-and-Homelessness.-Pavee-Point-Traveller-and-Roma-Centre.pdf>

¹⁴ Official homelessness statistics do not include the "hidden homeless" in overcrowded and highly unsuitable conditions <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41068601.html>

¹⁵

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community/submissions/2021/2021-06-01_opening-statement-bridget-kelly-et-al-community-development-worker-national-traveller-women-s-forum_en.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2017/11/Who-experiences-discrimination-in-Ireland-Report.pdf>

A National Housing Strategy for Disabled People has been released,¹⁷ but people with disabilities remain more likely to be homeless than the general population.¹⁸ The 2016 Census showed that 27% of the homeless population have a disability - double the rate of the general population. According to some advocates, this is partly because many Local Authorities (LAs) do not have adequately trained staff, and many have been refused funding for universally designed social housing.

Moreover, in a 2020 survey, 24% of LGBTQIA+ respondents experienced housing difficulty.¹⁹ In a 2021 youth survey (14-24), 6% of respondents indicated that they had experienced homelessness in the 12 months prior to the research.²⁰

To address this, the State must build more quality social and affordable homes, and underpin housing policy with the recognition of housing as a human right. This would help rebalance a situation that has seen the increasing commodification of the housing market, and peoples' homes.

Refugees and people seeking asylum

The multitude of global crises has tested the veracity of the State's ostensible commitment to leaving no one behind; nowhere more than in how it is responding to the needs of refugees and people seeking asylum.

While the initial response to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine was exemplary in many ways, the response also exposed the two-tiered nature of Irish policy towards refugees. Under Ireland's implementation of the European Temporary Protection Directive, Ukrainian refugees were given an immediate assessment, PPS numbers, access to education and employment supports, and healthcare. By contrast, people seeking international protection from other dangerous situations continue to be processed under direct provision.

This situation has been made worse as years of dysfunction in the Irish housing market, insufficient public services, an absence of government foresight, and policy incoherence have all exacerbated the inability of the State to respond to the needs of refugees and people seeking asylum.

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60d76-national-housing-strategy-for-disabled-people-2022-2027/>

¹⁸ [The Right Home: the Housing Needs of People with Disabilities](#)

¹⁹ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/data-and-maps/2020/lgbti-survey-data-explorer>

²⁰ [LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later](#)

According to the Far-Right Observatory,²¹ far-right groups are exploiting this situation for their political purposes, testing the social cohesion of communities across Ireland and pushing a narrative that threatens marginalised groups, including the LGBTQIA+ community, migrants, and women. Indeed, there are increased reports of racism in Ireland.²²

These are serious threats to societal and political cohesion - both prerequisites to SDG achievement. The recently published and long overdue National Action Plan against Racism (2023-2027) is a welcome development²³. However, a fully funded implementation plan will be required to ensure Ireland meaningfully tackles racism issues across all areas of Irish society.²⁴

If the State is sincere in its commitment to Agenda 2030, then human rights commitments and obligations (including the Geneva Conventions) must be applied, implemented and protected - including for those seeking asylum. This requires robust government planning processes, resourcing of the Department of Justice to process applications, the delegation of sufficient budget and authority to local authorities, and meaningful engagement with the community and voluntary sector, trade unions, employers and relevant agencies. The State should also implement the recommendations of the Report of the Advisory Group on the Provision of Support, including Accommodation to Persons in the International Protection Process.²⁵

Healthcare

The state of a country's healthcare system is a key metric of SDG success, and healthcare also helps enables the achievement of other SDGs. In Ireland, the pandemic exposed the inequity of a two-tier health system, but also highlighted the benefits of an integrated public health system. In providing health care on a *needs basis* rather than on an *ability to pay*, an important precedent for how to achieve a quality public health system was established.

²¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/02/03/far-right-in-ireland-gaining-a-foothold-like-never-before/>

²² <https://inar.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Media-Release-2022-Racism-data-NAPAR.pdf>

²³ [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie) - National Action Plan Against Racism (www.gov.ie)

²⁴ <https://www.youth.ie/documents/submission-on-the-national-action-plan-against-racism-2021/>

²⁵

<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/93440/05b40003-242c-4549-88a5-ba8fc9dc20f60.pdf#page=null>

However, despite life expectancy in Ireland growing, its healthcare system is underperforming. Ireland remains the only country in Western Europe without universal primary healthcare.²⁶ Those on lower incomes present the worst health outcomes,²⁷ with a widening health and social gap evident by the time children are 5.²⁸ Ireland has the worst healthcare for transgender people in the EU,²⁹ and people seeking asylum experience a disproportionately high rate of mental health difficulties, being up to 15 times more likely to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety or PTSD.³⁰ Ireland also has among the lowest breastfeeding rates globally,³¹ which has been shown to contribute to negative health outcomes for children.^{32,33}

People with disabilities report housing affordability as a challenge to meeting their health needs, and the incidence of mental health issues among this cohort is 3 times the state average, while a quarter report their health as 'bad' or 'very bad' compared with a 3% state average.³⁴

Health inequality also exists in the Traveller and Roma communities. Infant mortality rate for Travellers is 3.5 times the rate of the general population,³⁵ and the suicide rate is 6 times higher.³⁶ More than a third of (38.9%) Roma people do not have a family doctor.³⁷

More encouragingly, the Programme for Government commits to introducing a publicly funded model of care for fertility treatment to align Ireland with other European states, which is particularly important for the often marginalised LGBTQIA+

²⁶ [Ireland](#)

²⁷ <https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/health-and-disability-budget-2023>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/2022/10/31/ireland-ranked-worst-for-transgender-healthcare-in-eu/>

³⁰ [Mental Health and Direct Provision: Recommendations for Addressing Urgent Concerns | Doras](#)

³¹ <https://www.unicef.ie/stories/ireland-breastfeeding-worst-world/>

³² Victora CG, Bahl R, Barros AJ, França GV, Horton S, Krasevec J, Murch S, Sankar MJ, Walker N, Rollins NC; Lancet Breastfeeding Series Group. Breastfeeding in the 21st century: epidemiology, mechanisms, and lifelong effect. *Lancet*. 2016 Jan 30;387(10017):475-90. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01024-7. PMID: 26869575.

³³

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/select_committee_on_children_and_youth_affairs/reports/2018/2018-11-14_report-on-tackling-childhood-obesity_en.pdf

³⁴

www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ihsd/irishhealthsurvey2019-personswithdisabilities/healthstatus/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1676568544581806&usg=AOvVaw2D2kQLnM-KXfF3fgCBoTOE

³⁵

www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Suicide-Facts-Figures-A0.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1676566268832937&usg=AOvVaw3c5hCFK3nfSuL-599bABWn

³⁶ Kelleher et al., 2010

³⁷ Curran et al., 2018

community, and the establishment of a child poverty and well-being unit within the Department of An Taoiseach is positive.

Trade Unions and Decent Work

Travellers, Roma, women, lone parents, people with disabilities, migrants, people seeking asylum, and refugees, are continuously overlooked and underserved in the Irish labour market. According to a recent IHREC report,³⁸ these groups are more likely to face restrictions in accessing the labour market; experience barriers in occupational attainment; have lower pay, reduced job security and poor working conditions; and are more exposed to work-related inequality and discrimination. Specifically, Travellers have the highest unemployment rate in the workforce at almost 80%.³⁹ Unaffordable childcare remains the single biggest barrier to women's equal participation in employment and public life,⁴⁰ while Ireland has the lowest rate of employment for people with disabilities in the EU.⁴¹

During Covid-19, the inequalities of the digital divide became apparent,⁴² particularly for people with disabilities. Investment in digital infrastructure and mobile technologies is vital to facilitate remote working. For people living with disabilities, for example, this would include assistive technologies, making it easier to work while also retaining a medical card, and taking the cost of disability into account in disability payments.

The lack of a legal framework for collective bargaining in Ireland has undermined efforts towards the SDGs and in particular, decent work. The manner in which recent

³⁸ <https://www.ihrec.ie/documents/monitoring-decent-work-in-ireland/>

³⁹ <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Factsheets-Pavee-Point-EMPLOYMENT-1.pdf>,
<https://www.ssgt.ie/travellers-in-the-mainstream-labour-market-report/>

⁴⁰

<https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/national-economic-dialogue-lack-of-affordable-childcare-remains-single-big>

⁴¹ According to the most recent EU SILC data, Ireland has the highest percentage of people with disabilities at risk of poverty in Western Europe (37.8%). This is one of the highest percentages in the EU, almost 10% higher than the EU average. 31% of working age people with a disability were at work compared to 71% of those without a disability. Ireland's employment rate for people with disabilities is one of the lowest in the EU, 20% lower than the EU average.

⁴² <https://www.accenture.com/ie-en/about/irelands-digital-divide>

sudden redundancies at certain Irish-based global tech firms were announced⁴³ was a stark illustration of how the absence of union representation can leave employees vulnerable in a globalised financial system. This may be addressed as part of the EU Minimum Wages Directive, due to be transposed into Irish legislation in 2023. This should ensure that collective bargaining is placed on a statutory footing.

Furthermore, to prevent people from being left behind, access to opportunities for education and training must be provided, including recognition of the prior learning of those seeking asylum, and socio-economic discrimination should be added to equality legislation.⁴⁴

A Just Transition Mechanism as workers transition from carbon-heavy to green jobs must also be established. A lack of policy coherence across government has hampered efforts to ensure a just transition and has left employees in carbon-intensive industries vulnerable to unemployment and poverty. The establishment of a Just Transition Commission, as proposed in the current Programme for Government, and endorsed by the multi-stakeholder Just Transition Alliance,⁴⁵ will be crucial in ensuring that the move from polluting industries to greener alternatives does not result in any sector of the workforce being left behind. It is also crucial that we look to provide social and employment opportunities for those affected, and supports for future generations of young people, particularly in the midlands where the transition will be felt most.

Domestic Poverty and Inequality

While targeted budgetary support between 2016–21 helped to reduce poverty levels to close to those before the economic crisis, the absence of *sustained* and *adequate* support continues to leave people and communities vulnerable. The last 3 budgets have been described as regressive,⁴⁶ with the higher paid in Ireland benefiting more

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<https://www.independent.ie/business/technology/tech-companies-expanded-a-little-too-quickly-says-varadkar-as-twitter-to-lay-off-irish-staff-42118440.html>

⁴⁴

<https://www.atdireland.ie/wp/socio-economic-discrimination-add-10th-ground/#:~:text=The%20addthe10th%20alliance%20met%20with,review%20of%20the%20equality%20acts.&text=Support%20the%20campaign%20by%20using,missing%20piece%20of%20equality%20legislation!>

⁴⁵ <https://ictu.ie/publications/just-transition-alliance-joint-declaration>

⁴⁶ <https://www.socialjustice.ie/publication/budget-2023-analysis>

than those on social welfare. This is consistent with an overall economic trend, where small nominal increases in welfare contrast with more pronounced increases in earnings and reductions in income taxation for those on higher earnings. These trends are likely to widen income divides and increase poverty, increasing the 'rich-poor gap'.⁴⁷ Recent research shows that for every \$100 (€93) of wealth generated in Ireland, a third has gone to the richest 1%, while less than 50c has gone to the poorest 50%.⁴⁸

Recent data shows that enforced deprivation increased from 13.8% in 2021 to 17.1% in 2022,⁴⁹ and there is an unacceptable dependence on foodbanks.⁵⁰ Poverty levels remain persistent for lone parents, people with disabilities, people seeking asylum, refugees, migrants, Travellers, and Roma people.

ESRI⁵¹ research shows that the two groups at the highest risk of poverty are people with disabilities and lone parents.⁵² Ireland has the highest rate of people with disabilities at risk of poverty in Western Europe.⁵³ Lone parents have the highest deprivation rate of any demographic at 45.4%.⁵⁴ Additional research by the ESRI and IHREC shows that when all other factors are equal, people with disabilities are twice as likely to experience discrimination as people without disabilities.⁵⁵

Child poverty remains high, with almost a third of those in poverty under the age of 18⁵⁶ - a number that excludes children in direct provision.⁵⁷ In addition, children and young people in direct provision were excluded from the double child benefit in

⁴⁷ <https://www.socialjustice.ie/publication/budget-2023-analysis>

⁴⁸ <https://www.rte.ie/documents/news/2023/01/survival-of-the-richest-full-report.pdf>

⁴⁹ [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\): Enforced Deprivation 2022](#)

⁵⁰ Barnardos 2023 <https://www.barnardos.ie/aldi> ; EAPN Ireland 2022

<https://www.eapn.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Basic-Necessities-Final-Report-Double.pdf>

⁵¹ Economic Social and Research Institute

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<https://www.esri.ie/news/decreasing-poverty-requires-a-mix-of-policy-measures-such-as-increasing-female-labour-force>

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https://www.disability-federation.ie/assets/files/pdf/dfi_prebudget_submission_to_dsp_for_budget_22_final.pdf

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<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2022/>

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<https://www.esri.ie/news/new-esri-ihrec-research-shows-people-with-disabilities-much-more-likely-to-experience>

⁵⁶ 2021 CSO SILC as mentioned in

<https://www.socialjustice.ie/system/files/file-uploads/2022-10/2022-10-05%20SJI%20Poverty%20Focus%20October%202022%20PDF.pdf>

⁵⁷ [Child Poverty Monitor 2022 A](#)

Budget 2023, despite the cost of living crisis,⁵⁸ and despite child benefit being a 'universal' payment in Ireland, many Roma children are not entitled to it.⁵⁹ Many Roma households were also unsuccessful in their application for social protection payments, including child benefit.⁶⁰

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to education, but in Ireland, experiencing poverty significantly affects educational outcomes. A disproportionate number of young people who have experienced poverty become what is termed 'early school leavers'. They are 3 times more likely to be unemployed than others aged 18-24 who are not early school leavers.⁶¹ To reach these young people, the government should expand funding for out-of-school child-centred education alternatives up to the completion of second-level education. Additionally, a person's socioeconomic background is a determinant of their educational attainment, as one is almost 3 times more likely to go on to higher education if their parents have a higher education than someone whose parents have not completed primary-level education.⁶²

Income levels also affect health outcomes for children. For families on low incomes, the costs associated with returning to school increase financial pressures, restricting access to food, energy, and healthcare. This impacts health outcomes and is a barrier to children attending school at both primary and secondary levels.⁶³ The Programme for Government commitment, as well as measures in Budget 2023, will help to address this burden, but the scope of the measures needs to be expanded and should include secondary-level students.

Policy initiatives are often lacking in the necessary *ambition*, such as in the planned housing output, or are not being *implemented effectively*, as in Sláintecare reforms. If Ireland is going to reach those furthest behind, first, a more systematic and effective approach to addressing poverty and social exclusion is required. This should include

⁵⁸ <https://www.childrensrights.ie/resources/press-release-budget-2023-goes-further>

⁵⁹ This is due to the implementation of the right to reside (European Directive 2004/38) and the associated policy, Habitual Residence Condition, by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

⁶⁰ [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - Ireland Joint Alternative Report by a Coalition of Traveller and Roma Organisations:](#)

⁶¹

[https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Evaluation+of+the+National+Youthreach+Programme%E2%80%9D+\(2019\)+Research+Series+Number+82.&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Evaluation+of+the+National+Youthreach+Programme%E2%80%9D+(2019)+Research+Series+Number+82.&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar)

⁶² https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/Chapter-1-Right-to-Education.pdf

⁶³

<https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2022/07/26/it-has-gone-beyond-crazy-large-majority-of-parents-worry-about-back-to-school-costs-amid-cost-of-living-crisis/>

ensuring adequate incomes for all; the introduction of a persistent poverty metric; access to quality public services, with a focus on public delivery and moving away from the current emphasis on a private, market model; ensuring decent jobs for those who can work; and tackling discrimination in all its forms.

Marginalised communities should have a meaningful collective voice in these policy developments, but the decimation of local autonomous community development sector prior to 2010, and particularly the closure of the Community Development Programme, is hindering this.⁶⁴ The Pilot Community Development Programme introduced in 2021 is positive, but must be expanded.

Climate Change and Environment

Climate change disproportionately impacts certain communities within Ireland and globally.⁶⁵ Therefore efforts must be taken across Ireland to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. A significant development in this area has been the establishment of two 5-year Carbon Budgets (2021-25, 2026-30) and sectoral emission ceilings set for each sector of the economy in 2022, as well as the establishment of the necessary governance architecture underpinning the implementation of the Climate Action Plan. While this Plan contains welcome commitments, several weaknesses remain. Energy efficiency measures and supports are not being delivered anywhere near the scale required and are not proactively targeted at the increasing number of households at risk of energy poverty.

Energy poverty interlinks poverty, energy, housing and social inclusion and threatens over a third of Irish households.⁶⁶ However, despite attempts from the government to tackle this through an Energy Poverty Action Plan, systematic and holistic policy responses are lacking. Initiatives to retrofit homes run the risk of leaving some people further behind, as the upfront costs make it inaccessible to many.⁶⁷ Moreover, the free energy upgrade scheme designed to target households in energy poverty is not accessible to tenants in the private rental sector.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ <https://ictu.ie/publications/downsizing-community-sector> and <https://comhlamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/9-Paper-on-the-Destruction-of-Community-Development.pdf>

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<https://communitylawandmediation.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Environmental-Justice-in-Ireland-230322-1.pdf>

⁶⁶ <https://www.esri.ie/news/energy-poverty-at-highest-recorded-rate>

⁶⁷ <https://www.friendsoftheearth.ie/news/friends-of-the-earth-report-reveals-significant-barriers-to/>

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

Travellers experience significant levels of energy poverty, and are largely still dependent on the burning of fossil fuels.⁶⁹ Traveller families in trailers are excluded from access to retrofitting grants,⁷⁰ and current policies and structures make it difficult for Travellers and Roma to switch to using low-emission mobility. For example, Traveller-specific accommodation is typically located outside of city centres, near high-speed roads where there is a lack of public transport and walking and cycling infrastructure.⁷¹

Any emission reduction targets for the residential sector must prioritise policies that result in a radical reduction in energy deprivation. However, a key obstacle is that disaggregated data on energy poverty and deprivation is not adequately measured or reported by the government. Additionally, alongside increases in social welfare payments and the fuel allowance, wider accessibility to government retrofitting schemes, grants, loan schemes and other models of financing are needed.

The government must immediately turn the new sectoral pollution limits into policies and deliver on measures that hold emissions within limits set by the Carbon Budgets – especially as Ireland's emissions are still rising.⁷² Public bodies should be mandated to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and fossil gas infrastructure and connections should no longer be promoted.⁷³ Agricultural policies should stop supporting intensification of livestock farming, which is increasing GHG emissions, damaging water and air quality,⁷⁴ and is the primary contributor to biodiversity loss in Ireland.⁷⁵ There must be greater focus on reducing the use of reactive nitrogen in fertilisers, and payments should be made for ecosystem services. While funding has been increased for peatland restoration, peat extraction from wetlands for horticultural use and export should end.

Many national climate actions will rely on the engagement of local groups and communities. However, funding levels for environmental organisations, traditionally in the vanguard of local activism, have failed to recover fully from the austerity cuts of 2008, creating an operational constraint.

⁶⁹ https://www.ntmabs.org/publications/development/2019/nt-mabs-energy-report-factsheet_.pdf

⁷⁰ [Blockages to Retrofitting and Heat-pump Installation in Ireland](#)

⁷¹ [Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019 – 2024 | Dublin City Council](#)

⁷² <https://www.epa.ie/our-services/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/ghg/latest-emissions-data/>

⁷³ [Network Development Plan 2021 | CRU Ireland](#)

⁷⁴ [Ireland's Greenhouse Gas Emissions Projections - 2020-2040 | EPA.ie](#)

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<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/farming-food/2022/10/13/farming-having-disproportionate-impact-on-falling-water-quality-says-epa/>

International Development

This sector has witnessed stark reversals in progress towards the SDGs. Healthcare systems across the global south struggled to control the worst effects of the pandemic, their efforts hampered by pharmaceutical companies' refusal (supported by European countries including Ireland) to share vaccine-related IP and technology.⁷⁶

The pandemic also saw women and girls fall further behind. The burden of unpaid care on them increased, restricting educational and employment opportunities, increasing gender-based violence and increasing hunger.⁷⁷ Women were disproportionately on the frontline of the pandemic, comprising 70% of the healthcare workers globally, and typically underpaid and under-resourced.⁷⁸

In addition, a severe drought (exacerbated by climate change) combined with the global food insecurity crisis (compounded by the war in Ukraine) has worsened the situation in the Horn of Africa, pushing 22 million people into a hunger crisis not seen in the region for decades.⁷⁹

Responding to crises has been made more difficult in countries where IMF-imposed austerity demanded a slashing of public services to reduce wage bills. At the height of the pandemic, 15 low-income countries were forced to reduce their public wage budgets,⁸⁰ undermining progress on SDGs such as health and education.

Debt levels continue to cripple government efforts to deliver the SDGs with 23 out of 50 sub-Saharan African countries (including Irish Aid partner countries) considered to be in debt distress or at high risk of debt distress.⁸¹ Unsustainable debt levels (compounded by rising interest rates and currency depreciations) cause countries to spend ever-increasing proportions of their national budget servicing debt loans. This reduces already insufficient resources for SDG investment even further.⁸²

⁷⁶ https://peoplesvaccine.ie/#our_demands

⁷⁷ <https://www.concern.net/news/impact-of-covid-19-on-women-and-girls>

⁷⁸ [New ActionAid research shows stark reality of Covid-19's impact on young women's lives in the developing world](#)

⁷⁹ <https://www.wfp.org/stories/horn-africa-extreme-drought-deepens-hunger-region-beset-conflict>

⁸⁰ [The Public vs Austerity \(Executive Summary\)](#)

⁸¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-19/rich-nations-can-stave-off-african-debt-crisis-afdb-says>

⁸² <https://www.financialjustice.ie/what-is-financial-justice/debt-justice/>

A lack of tax revenue also reduces fiscal space for SDG achievement, yet Ireland continues to play an oversized role in facilitating corporate tax avoidance. Last year, research from the Director of the EU Tax Observatory and others estimated that Ireland is the single largest destination of multinational 'profit-shifting' in the world, which sees badly-needed revenue flow out of countries of the global south.⁸³ In February the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed 'serious concern' over Ireland's tax policies, and called on the State to ensure that its tax policies did not enable tax abuse by companies operating in other countries, undermining the available resources for the realisation of children's rights.⁸⁴ Ireland must do more to end tax dodging globally, especially given serious concerns over the extent to which global south countries will benefit from the recent OECD-brokered global deal on corporation tax.⁸⁵

More positively, Ireland has resisted the trend among other EU member states towards more tied aid, and its increasing privatisation. Its policies continue to promote development effectiveness, including Good Humanitarian Donorship principles, and engagement with OECD DAC⁸⁶ recommendations regarding locally-led development and civil society financing and policy engagement.

Ireland's 'A Better World' policy is an illustration of that commitment; however a helpful addition to the policy would be a clear, 'Framework of Action', including a monitoring mechanism. This should demonstrate pathways for SDG implementation that reach the furthest behind first, plus a commitment to work with partner countries and safeguard civil society space both in Ireland and those countries.

It is positive that this policy commits that Ireland's ODA will be poverty-focused, and 100% untied.⁸⁷ What's more, Ireland's ODA⁸⁸ tends to have a strong climate, hunger, gender, human rights and humanitarian focus. Nevertheless, while there have been

⁸³ Tørsløv, Wier and Zucman, 'The Missing Profits of Nations' (Review of Economic Studies) July 2022: <https://www.restud.com/the-missing-profits-of-nations/>

⁸⁴ 'Ireland's role in enabling tax avoidance under spotlight at UN', Christian Aid Ireland 2023: <https://www.christianaid.ie/news/news-and-blogs/irelands-role-enabling-tax-avoidance-under-spotlight-un>
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CRC%2FC%2FIRL%2FCO%2F5-6&Lang=en: "Ensure that tax policies do not contribute to tax abuse by companies registered in the State party but operating in other countries, leading to a negative impact on the availability of resources for the realization of children's rights in those countries."

⁸⁵

<https://www.icrict.com/press-release/2022/12/14/eu-agreement-to-implement-the-global-minimum-tax-is-a-step-forward-but-not-enough>

⁸⁶ Development Assistance Committee

⁸⁷ Least Developed Countries

⁸⁸ Official Development Assistance

welcome increases in ODA in recent years, as a percentage of GNI, it remains low and stagnant. A roadmap and timeline detailing how and by when Ireland will meet its commitment to 0.7% must be established. An increase in ODA should be accompanied by a move to reach the European benchmark of 3% of ODA on Global Citizenship Education.⁸⁹ This would act not just as an SDG target, but as an enabler of all SDGs.⁹⁰

Similarly, Ireland is still falling short on pledged 'climate finance' support to help poorer countries deal with the impacts of climate change. While the *quality* of Ireland's climate finance is recognised as being high, with grant-based flows focused on adaptation in countries most at risk, the *quantity* remains low, with roughly €90m provided per year, representing less than one-fifth of Ireland's fair share based on academic estimates.⁹¹ This is likely to increase further, given the historic agreement at COP 27 to provide additional funding to address unavoidable 'Loss & Damage'.⁹² Climate finance should be *new* and *additional* to ODA.

SDG Governance in Ireland

Significant strides have been made in Ireland's SDG governance and implementation. A lead department has been named for each action in our national plan, the SDG Champions programme has been expanded, and stakeholder engagement has improved.

Additionally, acknowledgement in the Programme for Government of the need to supplement existing economic indicators with new ones, and initiatives such as the establishment of a Wellbeing Framework are welcome.

However, while global events have created a difficult environment in which to progress towards the SDGs, a large number of the actions in the 2022-2024 Plan are vague or focused on finding baselines. This is not demonstrative of the ambition required.

⁸⁹ Global Citizenship Education

⁹⁰ <https://www.ideaonline.ie/press-release>

⁹¹ See Christian Aid Ireland, Presentation to the Oireachtas Climate Committee, October 2022:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_environment_and_climate_action/submissions/2022/2022-10-25_opening-statement-conor-o-neill-head-of-policy-and-advocacy-christian-aid-ireland_en.pdf

⁹² <https://unfccc.int/news/cop27-reaches-breakthrough-agreement-on-new-loss-and-damage-fund-for-vulnerable-countries>

Additionally, the State's failure to date to establish the necessary governance architecture creates additional challenges.

Below we outline a suite of recommendations which, if implemented with urgency, would unblock obstacles and create an enabling environment for Ireland to reach the SDGs.

Coalition 2030's Toolkit for SDG Achievement in Ireland

1. Lead from the top

Currently Ireland's SDG ministry is housed in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. In order to demonstrate the political ambition required for SDG achievement, the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) should have overall responsibility for SDG oversight and implementation. Additionally, Government departments should be held accountable for the delivery of the SDGs with time-bound specific targets, and Government ministers should be mandated to report annually on their department's progress towards the Goals to both houses of the Oireachtas and their respective Committees.

2. Budget for the SDGs

The United Nations Development Programme advises that:

"When SDGs become part of the country's national policy framework, it is crucial that the process is then followed by SDG integration into the countries' budgetary frameworks. This is essential to ensure that the policy prioritizations are expressed in budgets as the latter is the strongest domestic legal basis that reflects countries' commitments to 2030 Agenda and its related SDGs. If not integrated into the budgets, then it is very likely to expect disconnects between the strategic planning frameworks that have made commitments to the 2030 Agenda on the one hand, and public budgets that remain driven by "business as usual" on the other."

The annual Budget process is arguably the most important policy event of the year – yet the SDGs have never meaningfully featured. ‘SDG budgeting’ in the context of Ireland would mean explicit and measurable presentation of SDG targets in budget allocations and reports and use of those in budget decision-making.

3. ‘SDG-proof’ policy

All proposed policies must undergo prospective (advance) SDG-proofing to ascertain their impact on each SDG; both positively and negatively. This would help mitigate trade-offs in policy making, increasing policy coherence.⁹³ In order to reduce unintended negative consequences of policies, the SDGs should be the fundamental framing tool for policy making in Ireland, at all levels of government. Furthermore, local authorities should be guided on how to embed the SDGs in city and county plans, and the PPNs,⁹⁴ LENS,⁹⁵ ETBs⁹⁶ and communities should be true partners in policy design and SDG implementation.

4. Measure what matters

Ireland should have a coherent set of indicators that covers all its contributions and obligations to the achievement of the SDGs, both nationally and internationally. At present, this does not exist. Amending this may involve adapting the Wellbeing Framework which does not account for transboundary effects of policies, and/or developing a set of nationally relevant indicators.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the Central Statistics Office requires additional resourcing to collect relevant data. Without disaggregated, relevant, timely data it is difficult to develop targeted policies to support those furthest behind. Finally, considering the extensive overlap between human rights obligations and the SDGs,⁹⁸ Ireland should integrate its *measurement of and reporting on* human rights obligations with its *measurement of and reporting*

⁹³ Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

<https://www.oecd.org/governance/pcsd/Note%20on%20Shaping%20Targets.pdf>

⁹⁴ Public Participation Networks

⁹⁵ Local Environmental Networks

⁹⁶ Education and Training Boards

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6050a46343a94a74eb25ae61/t/63624c500ab41b3ac12909d2/1667386456433/EN-Policy-Paper-Finland.pdf>

⁹⁸ <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk/en/sdg/report/country/886>

on the SDGs. Tied to this, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission should be resourced to engage with questions of SDG/human rights alignment.

5. Establish a Commissioner for Future Generations

In Wales, the role of the Future Generations Commissioner is to act as a guardian for the well-being and interests of future generations in Wales, and it is our strong view that this role be established in Ireland.

Conclusion

The government's response to Covid-19 and its initial response to accommodating Ukrainian refugees showed that the State can respond to crises quickly and effectively. The previously strongly held conviction that certain policies and actions were not possible was cast aside in a commendable effort to assist those who needed assistance most.

This creative and ambitious policy mind-set is what is needed for SDG success. That a lack of government planning and foresight has begun to derail support to those seeking protection, only serves to underline the need for the SDGs to be more centrally embedded in the policy-making process.

Further global crises that threaten SDG progress are inevitable. The State has demonstrated that it has the capacity to respond deftly.

However, to avoid a situation whereby every crisis sets the SDGs further back requires a State prioritisation of the SDGs hitherto unseen.

Coalition 2030 would like to thank its members and allies that contributed to this chapter.