

HLPF 2026: Why Ireland Must Champion a Coherent, Rights-Based and Future-Focused Sustainable Development Agenda



Picture 1: From Right, Niall McGuirk, Catherine Carty, Mahbub Kabir - representatives of Coalition 2030 Ireland at HLPF 2026, where governments, civil society and other stakeholders discussed accelerating implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and shaping the future beyond 2030.

At the 2026 UN High-Level Political Forum in New York, Coalition 2030's message was clear: the final years of Agenda 2030 cannot be delivered through fragmented policy systems.

With less than four years remaining until the 2030 deadline, governments met against a backdrop of escalating climate impacts, widening inequalities, rising debt burdens, persistent conflicts and growing concern that progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals remains far too slow. The Forum also looked beyond 2030, raising urgent questions about how the international community can build a more coherent and effective framework for sustainable development in the decades ahead.

For Ireland, the lesson is clear. Climate action, human rights, disability inclusion, social justice, future generations and economic transformation cannot be pursued as separate agendas. They must be connected through a whole-of-government approach to SDG implementation, grounded in the commitment to Leave No One Behind.

COALITION 2030 representatives at High Level Political Forum (HLPF)

C2030 coordinator Niall McGuirk and steering Committee members Mahbub Kabir and Catherine Carty held meetings with international organisations, the Irish Permanent Mission, Ministers Darragh O'Brien and James Browne among others.

Minister O'Brien said the Irish Government are committed to redoubling their efforts on SDG implementation. C2030 Plenary output [document](#) became our advocacy document on SDG's 6,7,9,11 and 17 representative of the view of our 75 civil society member organisations representing over 3 million people. We redoubled C2030s [Call to Action](#) for a Future Generations Commissioner for Ireland at side events including "From Declaration to Delivery: How Future Generations Governance Drives Transformative SDG Action". It was a very fruitful Conference for the Coalition, and this document reflects our thoughts post conference.



Picture 2: Coalition 2030 representatives with Ireland's Climate Minister Darragh O'Brien, and Ambassador David Donoghue among others during HLPF 2026. Ireland's leadership on climate action, sustainable development and multilateral cooperation provides a strong foundation for championing policy coherence across the SDGs.

A Critical Moment for the SDGs

The 2026 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) took place at a defining moment for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With less than four years remaining until the 2030 deadline, governments met against a backdrop of escalating climate impacts, widening inequalities, rising debt burdens, persistent conflicts and growing concern that progress towards the Goals remains far too slow. At the same time, discussions increasingly turned towards what comes after 2030 and how the international community can build a more effective framework for sustainable development in the decades ahead.

One of the most closely watched moments of the Forum came during negotiations on the Ministerial Declaration, when an [amendment](#) introduced by the Group of 77 (G77) and China was adopted by vote. The amendment removed a reference to the [UAE Consensus](#) and sparked broader discussions about mandates, ownership and the relationship between different international processes.

While much attention focused on the specific wording under debate, the wider significance of the discussion lies elsewhere. HLPF 2026 reminded us that

sustainable development cannot be achieved through fragmented approaches. Whether addressing climate change, human rights, biodiversity, disability inclusion, peacebuilding or economic development, the world's challenges are interconnected. Our policies and institutions must become more interconnected too.

Sustainable Development, Human Rights and Climate Action Are One Agenda

The SDGs were never intended to be simply a development framework. They are, at their core, a roadmap for advancing human dignity, equality, participation, accountability and social justice while respecting planetary boundaries.

Yet too often sustainable development, human rights and climate action are pursued through separate systems. Governments report on international human rights obligations through one mechanism, climate commitments through another and SDG implementation through a third. Different ministries, institutions and stakeholders frequently work in parallel despite pursuing many of the same objectives. This fragmentation weakens outcomes.

A human rights-based approach to the SDGs reminds us that development is not merely about economic progress or service delivery. It is about ensuring that every person can enjoy their rights and participate fully in society. The principles of non-discrimination, equality, participation, accountability and inclusion are not additional considerations. They are the foundation upon which sustainable development must be built.

The SDGs therefore cannot be separated from commitments under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CEDAW, climate agreements, biodiversity frameworks and other international obligations. They should be understood as mutually reinforcing parts of a common agenda. The challenge facing governments today is not a lack of commitments. It is a lack of coherence.

The Cost of Working in Silos

Siloed policymaking remains one of the greatest barriers to sustainable development.

Climate action is often viewed primarily through the lens of emissions reduction, while social inclusion is treated as a separate agenda. Housing policies may focus on supply without fully addressing accessibility and universal design. Economic strategies can prioritise growth while overlooking wellbeing, inequality and environmental sustainability. Human rights reporting often occurs independently of SDG implementation despite significant overlap. These divisions make little sense when viewed through the lens of people's lived experiences.

A young person struggling to secure affordable housing is simultaneously affected by labour market conditions, transport systems, education opportunities and climate resilience. A woman with a disability may experience overlapping barriers relating to gender inequality, accessibility, poverty and access to services. Communities facing climate-induced flooding also face challenges relating to

housing, public health, infrastructure, employment and social protection. People do not experience problems in silos. Public policy should not respond to them in silos either.

Ireland's own experience demonstrates both the value of integration and the risks of fragmentation. The [Climate Action Plan](#) recognises the importance of a just transition, yet discussions on retrofitting, energy poverty, accessibility and housing quality are still too often pursued separately. An energy-efficient home that remains inaccessible to a person with disability cannot be considered fully sustainable. Likewise, a housing strategy that increases supply but overlooks climate resilience, public transport connectivity and community infrastructure misses opportunities to deliver multiple SDG outcomes simultaneously.

The same is true in transport policy. Investment in public transport and active travel can reduce emissions, improve public health, strengthen social inclusion and support regional development. However, those benefits are realised only when climate change, accessibility, affordability and universal design are embedded from the beginning rather than treated as secondary considerations. Breaking down these divisions is essential if we are serious about delivering on the promise to leave no one behind.

Climate Change Is a Sustainable Development Issue

Perhaps nowhere is the need for policy coherence clearer than in the climate crisis. Climate change is often framed as an environmental issue, but its impacts extend across every dimension of sustainable development. It affects health outcomes, food security, education, employment, housing, access to water, migration patterns and social cohesion. It exacerbates existing inequalities and disproportionately impacts those who have contributed least to the problem.

For persons with disabilities, climate-induced disasters can expose critical gaps in accessibility, emergency planning and social protection. For children and young people, climate change threatens future opportunities and wellbeing. For communities already experiencing poverty and marginalisation, climate shocks can deepen exclusion and vulnerability.

A rights-based approach to climate action therefore requires more than reducing emissions. It requires ensuring that climate policies are inclusive, accessible, equitable and participatory. It means recognising that climate justice, social justice and sustainable development are inseparable.

If climate action is pursued without addressing inequality, human rights and inclusion, it risks leaving people behind. If sustainable development is pursued without addressing climate change, it risks becoming unsustainable. The two agendas must advance together.

Ireland's Unique Opportunity to Lead

Ireland's international credibility will depend on whether leadership abroad is matched by coherent implementation at home. Ireland is particularly well placed to champion this integrated approach. The Government's international development policy, [A Better World](#), is built on commitments to reducing inequality, strengthening human rights,

promoting gender equality and responding to climate change. It recognises that poverty, governance, resilience, social inclusion and environmental sustainability cannot be addressed in isolation.

Ireland's growing partnerships with [Small Island Developing States \(SIDS\)](#) provide a further example of this understanding. For SIDS, climate vulnerability, biodiversity loss, food security, debt sustainability, disaster resilience and social inclusion are inseparable. Their experience demonstrates why sustainable development requires integrated solutions rather than fragmented interventions.

Ireland also benefits from a distinctive institutional arrangement. Responsibility for coordinating the SDGs sits within the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment. At a time when many countries continue to manage climate and sustainable development agendas separately, this creates a potentially powerful foundation for integrated policymaking.

The next phase of implementation should focus on connecting these agendas more effectively and positioning the SDGs as the overarching framework through which climate commitments, equality obligations, human rights standards and social inclusion goals are pursued together.

Combined with the vision set out in *A Better World*, Ireland's commitment to multilateralism and its partnerships with SIDS, this creates a compelling opportunity for Irish leadership on policy coherence both nationally and internationally.

Ireland's EU Presidency and Human Rights Leadership Opportunity

Ireland enters this pivotal period with two significant opportunities to shape international thinking on sustainable development. As Ireland assumes the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, it will have an important platform to promote greater alignment between climate action, social inclusion, human rights and sustainable development across EU policymaking.

At the same time, Ireland's campaign for election to the UN Human Rights Council for the 2027–2029 term provides an opportunity to show how a rights-based approach can strengthen SDG implementation. The growing international debate on the post-2030 agenda requires countries that can bridge development, climate and human rights communities. Ireland is well positioned to play that convening role.

Together, these opportunities provide Ireland with a unique chance not only to advocate for policy coherence internationally, but also to showcase how integrated approaches can be implemented nationally. Leadership abroad will be most influential when matched by coherent action at home.

Inclusion Must Remain at the Centre

A coherent agenda must also be an inclusive one. The commitment to leave no one behind requires more than targeted programmes. It requires the meaningful participation of those who are too often excluded from decision-making and whose rights remain insufficiently realised.

Persons with disabilities, women and girls, children and young people, older persons, migrants, Traveller communities, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ communities and people experiencing poverty continue to face barriers to participation and opportunity.

Disability inclusion illustrates why integrated policymaking matters. Accessible transport, education, employment, healthcare and climate preparedness demonstrate how rights and sustainable development objectives are mutually reinforcing.

Ireland has made important progress through the implementation of the CRPD and the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. These frameworks offer practical tools for translating the SDG commitment to leave no one behind into policy and practice. However, stronger connections between human rights monitoring and SDG reporting could help ensure that progress is measured not only through outputs and indicators but through meaningful improvements in people's lives.

Policies must also recognise intersectionality. People experience inequality in different and overlapping ways. Understanding how disability, gender, age, ethnicity, poverty and migration status interact is essential if public policy is to reach those furthest behind. True inclusion requires that those most affected by decisions are involved in shaping them.

Future Generations Must Have a Voice Today

As discussions increasingly turn towards a post-2030 agenda, there is growing recognition that governments must think beyond electoral cycles and short-term outcomes.

The choices made today on climate action, biodiversity protection, public investment, infrastructure and social policy will shape lives for decades to come. Future generations will inherit the consequences of today's decisions, yet they have little formal voice in current policymaking structures.

Recent debates on housing, climate adaptation and renewable energy investment have highlighted the tension between short-term political pressures and long-term sustainability. Ireland should therefore explore the creation of a [Future Generations Commissioner](#) or a similar independent mechanism to strengthen long-term thinking across government. Such an institution could help assess the long-term impacts of public policy, promote greater policy coherence and strengthen accountability across climate, sustainable development, equality and wellbeing agendas. The SDGs challenged us to think beyond immediate interests. The next phase of sustainable development must deepen that commitment.

Civil Society as the Bridge Between Agendas

Governments cannot achieve this transformation alone. Civil society has a unique role in connecting agendas that institutions frequently treat separately. While public bodies may organise themselves around departmental mandates, communities experience the world in a far more interconnected way.

Coalition 2030 Ireland reflects the value of this approach. By bringing together organisations working across diverse sectors and constituencies, it demonstrates the kind of partnership needed to realise the SDGs.

Civil society does more than participate in consultations. It strengthens accountability, brings lived experience into policymaking, supports innovation, identifies blind spots and helps ensure that international commitments translate into meaningful local action. It amplifies the voices of those who are too often excluded from decision-making and reminds policymakers that sustainable development is ultimately about people, not processes. This bridge-building role must also include higher education. The 2026 Higher Education Sustainability Initiative policy messages recognise universities and higher education institutions as strategic implementation partners for the SDGs, with a role in research, policy advice, local innovation, community partnership, skills development and evidence-informed reporting. Munster Technological University is among the contributors to these messages, reflecting the important role higher education can play in connecting knowledge, policy and practical action.

If policy coherence is the goal, civil society is one of the most effective mechanisms for achieving it.

Looking Beyond 2030

As the world enters the final years of Agenda 2030, the central lesson from HLPF 2026 is clear - the challenge is no longer simply one of implementation. It is one of integration.

As discussions on the post-2030 framework gather momentum, Ireland has a genuine opportunity to help shape the next generation of sustainable development governance. Its current EU Presidency, strong commitment to multilateralism and growing profile in international human rights leadership provide platforms from which it can advocate for a more coherent and rights-based global agenda.

The challenge is no longer simply delivering individual commitments. It is ensuring that climate action, human rights, disability inclusion, social justice and economic transformation are pursued together. In an increasingly fragmented world, countries that can connect these agendas will help define the future of sustainable development. Ireland has the experience, credibility and opportunity to be one of those countries.

About the authors

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