

Transforming Education: Education's role in the Sustainable Development Goals

SDG Summit

The United Nations SDG Summit on 18–19 September 2023 marked the midway point of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015a). Seven and a half years into the UN's Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015b), only 15% of the Goals have been achieved. Bringing together heads of state and government from UN members, the summit aimed to galvanise action on the transformative approaches needed to achieve the Goals by 2030.

António Guterres, UN secretary-general, urged leaders to deliver a 'Rescue Plan for People and Planet' (UN, 2023a). Member states were encouraged to make forward-looking national commitments on priority transitions and areas for investment to drive progress across the Goals. One of these priority transitions was the Transforming Education initiative, which aims to further SDG4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

This initiative began in September 2022 at the Transforming Education Summit (UN, 2023b). The summit's aim was to tackle the twin crises in education – equity and access; quality and relevance – and to mobilise solutions to accelerate national and global efforts to achieve SDG4. Five Thematic Action Tracks were identified as 'key levers to transform education' (UN, 2022):

- » inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools
- » learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development
- » teachers, teaching, and the teaching profession
- » digital learning and transformation
- » financing of education.



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The United Nations SDG Summit in 2023 marked the midway point of the Sustainable Development Goals, just 15% of which have been achieved to date. This article sounds a note of optimism and pragmatism, urging focus on action that will help transform education in Ireland and beyond. It stresses the need to make global citizenship education and education for sustainable development central to government policy.

Like the SDGs, these tracks apply to all countries. The first two are particularly relevant to Ireland. There have been important policy developments on this in recent years, with the adoption of ‘ESD to 2030: the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development’ (Department of Education, 2022) and the Irish Aid Global Citizenship Education Strategy (Irish Aid, 2021): policy developments that build on decades of work by Irish educators working in development education (UNESCO, 2022).

The Transforming Education Summit underlined the importance of national-level action, policy change, and scaling-up of good practice. It represented a significant development in prioritising education and recognising it as an enabler of all the SDGs. It also recognises that: ‘Transforming education means empowering learners with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to be resilient, adaptable and prepared for the uncertain future while contributing to human and planetary well-being and sustainable development’ (UN, 2022).

This requires more support for holistic learning that includes global citizenship education, education for sustainable development, socio-emotional learning, civic education, and peacebuilding. Transforming education requires a power shift and significant investment along with the meaningful participation of learners in decision-making and accountability processes. Education needs to become radically inclusive and prioritise the knowledge, skills, and competencies that matter most to learners as they fight for a more sustainable, equal, and just world. In Ireland, this requires us to scale up and build on existing good practice, and to prioritise transforming education.

Action and initiatives

The work of the summit was furthered during the SDG Action Weekend, which took place immediately before the SDG Summit and was attended by 5,000 representatives from member states, civil society, education, academia and science, local authorities, business, farmers, and many other groups, all working to deliver the SDGs. The Action Weekend events highlighted the UN’s High-Impact Initiatives, which aim to achieve transformative progress and mobilise leadership and investment to scale up progress between now and 2030.

Transforming Education was one of these initiatives. It was addressed by Leonardo Garnier, UN secretary-general’s special representative on transforming education, who spoke at the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) conference in 2023, and Stefania Giannini, UNESCO assistant director-general for education. The SDG Action Weekend provided a foundation for upcoming conversations while providing greater visibility for youth, teacher, and civil society movements.

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The initiative is aiming to increase the number of member states with: demonstrated progress delivering on SDG4 and transforming education; larger, more equitable, and more efficient educational budgets; and whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to education decision-making, including the voices of youth, teachers, and civil society (UN, 2023c). These commitments made by our governments at the UN provide an important opportunity for educators to advocate for policies, funding, and action to make the changes needed to transform education, in Ireland and globally.

Ireland's role

At national level, we need to take collective, focused, and urgent action and prioritise funding for transformative education.

Ireland has played a hugely important role in the SDGs, co-chairing the initial negotiation of the Goals, and co-chairing the UN process to develop and agree the Political Declaration adopted at this year's summit, aimed at accelerating their delivery. At UN level, we have consistently been global leaders for the SDGs. Our challenge now is to be global leaders in their implementation, especially in education.

Educators in Ireland have the expertise and experience needed in formal, informal, and non-formal education to be leaders in the transforming education movement. Education has been central to the formation of our society and worldview, going back to the idea of hedge schools and Thomas Davis's famous imprimatur, 'Educate that you may be free.' Ireland supports transformative education globally through the work of Irish NGOs and the Department of Foreign Affairs. We are a respected political voice for education internationally, and our policies, both domestic and international, are informed by the rich expertise of educators, civil society, and learners in Ireland.

At national level, we need to take collective, focused, and urgent action and prioritise funding for transformative education. As António Guterres said, we must elevate transformative education to the top of the political agenda. To do this, policies on transformative education, particularly global citizenship education and education for sustainable development, must be central to government policy, ensuring a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to achieving the SDGs. We need to scale up existing global citizenship education and education for sustainable development, building on the work and expertise of Irish educators throughout lifelong and life-wide learning.

We need to celebrate and share our excellence internationally. As well as great expertise, and even greater potential, in delivering transformative education, Ireland's expertise is respected, heard, and acted upon internationally. This voice comes from the state, from civil society, from educators and academics. If we can match Ireland's political leadership at the UN with action on transforming education, we can make a huge contribution to achieving the SDGs in Ireland and globally.

At previous meetings on the SDGs, such as the High Level Political Forum, I have often come away feeling despondent. The SDG Summit and Action Weekend, despite the stark figure that only 15% of the goals have been achieved, had the opposite effect. There was a palpable sense of focus and of pragmatism, underlined by the seriousness of the threats and the disastrous impact of the lack of progress on the Goals.

There is a vital role for education at this crucial moment. If we can focus our attention on that role, and focus our actions clearly, we can and will have a major impact. At the SDG Action Weekend, Fergal Mythen, Irish ambassador to the UN, called on us to make change and not give in to despondency. That sense of active hope, that is pragmatic and laser-focused on change and action, will enable educators in Ireland to transform education and society.

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