



Adult and Community Education as a tool to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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On 6th June, IDEA hosted the conference entitled: *Transformative Education for Global Citizenship – SDG 4.7 in Ireland* in collaboration with AONTAS and the National Youth Council of Ireland. In this paper Niamh O’Reilly, discusses how adult and, in particular, community education can contribute to SDG 4.7.

Introduction

At the heart of adult learning within the adult and community education field is a general agreement that education has four pillars: learning to be, learning to do, learning to know and learning to live together. Therefore in addition to attaining skills, adult learning has a broader social purpose and thus has much to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs.

On September 25th 2015, more than 150 world leaders committed to [17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) to: end extreme poverty; fight inequality & injustice and fix climate change over 15 years. Building on the [the Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\)](#) the SDGs call for action by all countries, rich, poor and middle-income to promote prosperity while protecting the planet by including strategies that build economic growth and address social needs, whilst tackling climate change. While the SDGs are not legally binding, governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for the achievement of the 17 goals. Ireland has set about in delivering on its commitments as outlined in [The Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020](#).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Quality Education

Sustainable Development Goal 4 has seven targets which are expected outcomes and three targets which are means of achieving these targets (effective learning environments, scholarships, teachers & educators). Four of the seven targets link to adult learning: SDG 4.3, equal access to technical / vocational and higher education; SDG 4.4. Relevant skills for



decent work: SDG 4.5. Gender equality and inclusion and 4.7. Education for sustainable development and global citizenship.

Lifelong Learning - SDG 4.7

SDG 4.7 requires that by 2030, all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

In terms of monitoring success, whilst Target 4.7 is closely aligned with a lifelong learning framework, it does not specify the education levels or age groups to which its themes apply. Also, the proposed global and thematic indicators mainly focus on children and adolescents in formal education. Unfortunately, none of the proposed thematic indicators explicitly capture adult learners in non-formal and informal education, [further information is here](#). (UNESCO, 2016). The indicators for this target have been set by the UN as the: 'Extent to which **(i)** global citizenship education and **(ii)** education for sustainable development, including gender equality and human rights, are mainstreamed at all levels in: **(a)** National Education Policies, **(b)** Curricula, **(c)** Teacher Education **(d)** Student Assessment'.

Why is the field of adult and community education interested in SDG 4.7?

The theme of the IDEA conference, which views SDG 4.7 as 'Transformative Education for Global Citizenship' is very much in keeping with our understanding of education at AONTAS. Adult learning is transformative at an individual level but also collective at a societal level. AONTAS' view of adult learning is rooted in a Freirean view of adult learning whereby learning facilitated through a dialogical process offers a deep understanding that exposes structural inequalities triggering social change through collective action, particularly by people experiencing oppression. The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) is made up of 100 community education organisations from across Ireland who aspire to a social action model of community education, it seeks to have recognition for education as a



process to support communities address issues of inequality, the violence of poverty and structural inequality as a collective, resulting in increased agency to address these issues. At the IDEA conference Suzanne Kyle, CEN coordinator held a joint workshop with Helena McNeill from [LYCS](#) to explore the role of community education in achieving the SDGs.

The [Global Education Monitoring Report](#) (UNESCO, 2016) states that: “More than any other target, 4.7 touches on the social, humanistic and moral purposes of education. It explicitly links education to other SDGs and captures the transformative aspirations of the new global development agenda.” Showing acknowledgement that it is very much focusing on the broader purpose of learning.

In terms of 4.7, in particular, human rights, gender equality and indeed the promotion of peace, and appreciation of cultural diversity are very much part of adult and particularly community education. For example, in Warrenmount Community Education Centre in Blackpitts, Dublin 8, statistics from 2017 reveal that of the **478 learners** engaged in the learning programmes, **54 different nationalities** from across all age ranges are in attendance. In particular, their Failte Isteach programme is very much about cultural diversity, where Irish senior citizens volunteer to teach migrants Basic English classes but also engage in intercultural learning. Community education is a microcosm of cultural diversity.

So the SDGs have policy relevance to adult learning?

It would be a fair assessment to state that national policy influencing adult and community education mainly centres on the [Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019](#), [Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025](#), and [The Action Plan for Education 2018](#). At European Level, it is the [Upskilling Pathways Recommendation \(2016\)](#) and the [European Agenda for Adult Learning \(2011\)](#). These national and European policy documents generally focus on skills for meeting skills demands of employers, the skill needs of the economy as a means to address unemployment and equip people for the changing world of work. Of course it is vital that people have the opportunity to gain secure employment as a way out of poverty, it is however, just one part of the power of adult learning.



Adult learning contributes so much more however recently, community education, has struggled particularly after the economic collapse with a reduction in funding. Furthermore, the emphasis on funding of employment - focused programmes rather than non-accredited or non-vocational courses (yet also important for gaining employment in terms of confidence building) e.g. women's studies, peace and cultural programmes and personal and community development has been problematic.

Creating a space for the SDG 4 to influence national adult learning policy within this context seems challenging. The broad, quite holistic view of adult learning of the Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 appears narrower when translated into its national policy implementation document: *The Sustainable Development Goals - National Implementation Plan 2018-2020*, which refers to plans for SDG 4.7 in the perhaps even more contracted understanding of adult learning in the Further Education and Training section in *The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014-2020*.

The Strategy (DES, 2014) refers to the national policy documents: *Delivering Our Green Potential*, *The Action Plan on Jobs* and *Our Sustainable Future*. So whilst the document *Our Sustainable Future, A Framework for Sustainable Development in Ireland* calls for a need to embed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at every level of the education system, the focus of the Strategy (DES, 2014) for the further education and training sector centres mainly on:

- Educational inclusion – Educational provision to people who left school early
 - Relating to ETB provision, full and part-time programmes including community education
- To developing skills for the green economy (p.19)
 - by way of training for green economy based on EGFSN and baseline provision by ETBs

Community education is mentioned but as a means for educational inclusion rather than the delivery of the more holistic understanding of education as outlined in SDG 4. It seems that adult education policy is trapped in the skills agenda – focused national policy space.

Perhaps, as it is only framed in the Strategy as further education and training. What appears

to be missing is peace education in a community education context, specific commitment to community education for sustainable lifestyles, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and the appreciation of cultural diversity through adult and community education. Where is the space for broader learning? Where is the policy commitment to it? It has so much to offer but is continually limited in a narrow view of the potential of learning.

Opportunities of SDG 4.7 in the Irish context

Whilst *The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014-2020* aims to ensure that education contributes to sustainable development by equipping learners with the relevant knowledge, the key dispositions and skills and the values that will motivate and empower them throughout their lives to become informed active citizens who take action for a more sustainable future (DES, 2014, p.3) and notes that ESD needs to be an ‘agent for positive change’ and is being proactive and transformational (DES, 2014, p.4) there appears to be a lack of focus on the broader potential of adult learning. Although it states that ESD is education for sustainable development rather than education about sustainable development its interpretation in the Strategy seems more narrowly focused.

On the one hand, the strategy sets out the key principles that underpin the overall objective of the strategy which seems like an ideal link with community education (DES, 2014, p.4) as it notes the need: to promote lifelong learning, to engage all sectors of the education system, as well as the non-formal education sector, be locally relevant while also linking the local to the national and international; use a variety of pedagogical techniques that promote active and participatory learning and the development of key dispositions and skills; emphasise social justice and equity; focus on values and promote active democratic citizenship and inclusion as a means of empowering the individual and the community; be an agent for positive change in reorienting societies towards sustainable development. There seems to be a huge space for community education within the key principles.

There is an opportunity to open up the value of transformative education that is about critical thinking, social action, engagement, community development and empowerment, gender equality and about living together.



National FET policy is focused on people in employment, it is about reskilling and upskilling, which is important in its context but it does fall short the power of adult learning and its broader contribution to society. Hopefully the SDGs offer a window of opportunity to revive that and what's needed additionally is funding for such kinds of education programmes. Why should we consider supporting the broader purpose of learning? Adult learners are continually asking for it.

As one learner stated "I think they should recognise the invaluable contribution to the wider environment, because it's so good for people's mental health, physical health, and general wellbeing. If you think of a child looking at their parents as role models, learning becomes a path for life not just academic levels... There is learning across all areas of life. It's self-financing is basically what I'm saying, because it most definitely benefits the whole community."