

Policy Submission

National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development

**Submission to the Departments of
Education & Science and
Environment, Heritage & Local Government**

2007



**Submission to the
Department of Education and Science and the
Department of Environment, Heritage and Local
Government on a National Strategy for Education for
Sustainable Development**

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1. Introduction

Vision without action is merely a dream

Action without vision is merely passing time

Vision with action can change the world

(Nelson Mandela –quoted in Combat Poverty Agency Annual Report, 2005, P 12)

Combat Poverty believes that a fulsome commitment to the development, implementation and monitoring of a National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has the potential to contribute to such change.

The Combat Poverty Agency is a state advisory agency which develops and promotes evidence-based proposals and measures to combat poverty in Ireland. Combat Poverty works for a poverty-free Ireland by striving for change which will promote a fairer and more just, equitable and inclusive society. In line with its statutory role (Combat Poverty Agency Act 1986) Combat Poverty promotes advice to Government on policies pertaining to poverty, informed by its research, its demonstration programmes and engagement with groups experiencing poverty. It also works to create awareness of the nature, extent and causes of poverty in Ireland through working with specific target audiences including policy makers and influencers, local authorities, students, teachers and teacher educators and a wide range of statutory as well as community and voluntary organisations.

2. Poverty in Ireland

Despite recent economic progress 7% of the Irish population remain in consistent poverty, i.e. living on a low income (60% of median national income) and deprived of basic necessities like food, clothing and heat. Using the EU poverty comparator 18.5% of the Irish population are at risk of poverty, i.e. living below 60% of median national income.

The main groups at risk of consistent poverty are:

- lone parents
- people who are unemployed
- people who are ill or disabled
- non-Irish nationals and
- children.

Older women are at high risk of income poverty particularly those living in rural areas.

Because of the nature of household surveys some other groups at risk of poverty are not included in the national poverty figures. These groups have a high risk of poverty and require access to good quality services and supports. These groups include: members of the Travelling community, homeless people, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and drug users.

3. Combat Poverty's School Programme

As part of its public awareness work the Combat Poverty Agency promotes and supports the inclusion of social/political education, education for citizenship and poverty awareness education into the post primary curriculum. The following outlines some examples of this work:

- Involvement in feasibility and pilot phase of Junior Cycle (JC) Civic, Social Political Education (CSPE) including unit development and in-service training for teachers. Ongoing involvement includes development, delivery and evaluation of a model of training CSPE trainers, in teaching controversial issues
- Design of a Contemporary Issues module for pilot phase of Leaving Certificate Applied Programme in partnership with the National Committee-for Development Education (NCDE) and subsequent input into in service, resource material provision and evaluation of the module
- In-service and resource material provision for Transition Year including the development of resource Poverty in Focus and currently involved in developing a Transition Unit entitled Ireland a level playing pitch? which will supports students to engage in community based work with an anti-poverty groups
- Provision of resource material and in-service for specific subject areas including Religious Education and Home Economics
- Development of submissions and teacher guidelines for range of subjects including Geography, Economics, Home Economics, Social Physical and Health Education (SPHE) and Religious Education
- Promotion and support of social justice education, with a global perspective, as part of WEBS (formerly DETY) Network, this included production of a shared vision of education, development of the concept approach to an exploration of issues both in a local and global context and in-service for teachers using this approach
- Funding and joint management of a curriculum development project "Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom" within the CDVEC-CDU, which developed, demonstrated and evaluated a model which supported students to explore and engage with poverty issues through community involvement. This approach included the development of a model of partnership between schools and local community development groups, thus linking the formal and non formal sectors
- Organisation of a national seminar on Issues, Opportunities and Challenges for Social, Political and Development Education in the Post-Primary Classroom with National Committee for Development Education and Network of Grassroots Organisations in Development Education

- Publication of *Education for Reconciliation, A Curriculum Investigation* with the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, Pobal (formerly ADM Ltd) and CDVEC CDU
- Collaborated with the Equality Authority and a number of NGOs to develop of a website dealing with poverty, equality and children's rights for CSPE
- Development and delivery of a Poverty Awareness Module for teachers in Killinarden with the CDVEC- CDU and through the work of Combat Poverty's Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage
- Advocacy and support for the development of a Senior Cycle subject in the area of social and political education, including co-hosting (with CDU) a seminar series entitled *Charting the Future*, development of a submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and membership of the Citizenship Education Network (CEN)
- Gold sponsorship of the Young Social Innovator (YSI) programme
- Combat poverty also engages in education/awareness work with a wide range of adults as outlined earlier and in particular through engagement with community development organisations.

4. Combat Poverty's perspective on education

In addition to the belief that all children and adults have a right to quality, accessible and appropriate education (without which they are exposed to the risks of poverty), Combat Poverty also believes that:

- the education system should provide a vision of society that is committed to the values of social equity and justice. This ethos should permeate all levels of education and all subject areas and should enable all participants in the education system to learn to respect and value themselves and others (Combat Poverty Agency -Submission to the Education Green Paper, p.7/8).

This principle is also reflected in the Agency's educational approach which promotes:

- Skills development e.g. critical thinking, communication, skills of reflective action
- Positive attitudinal development e.g. empathy, respect for diversity, commitment to social justice and social solidarity
- Conceptual understanding e.g. justice, human rights, relative poverty
- Knowledge/understanding e.g. causes of poverty including the structural nature of these), as well as extent and nature of poverty.

In its submission advocating the development of a Senior Cycle subject Combat Poverty states:

Perhaps one of the most fundamental understandings that students might achieve is that societies and their political and economic systems are shaped by human beings and therefore can be changed by them. Also that they come to understand that they can influence change both personally and in the wider society and world and that they can do this now and not only in the future when they are adults. The importance of stressing human agency in shaping the world is central as issues and phenomena are often presented as if they are immutable or moved by unseen non- human forces. This is particularly true in the area of economics which is often discussed in this way, e.g. the market fluctuates, as opposed to highlighting how these are affected by the actions of human beings making conscious choices to move investments around. (Combat Poverty Agency, 2000-Submission to NCCA¹)

Combat Poverty believes that the foregoing is relevant to the development of ESD.

5. Poverty and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a contested concept, however most discussion of it refers back to the Brundtland Report entitled *Our Common Future* which defined it as:

- development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; 43)

More recent debates have stressed that it also needs to include an emphasis on intra generational distribution and also that the concept of 'needs' should be strengthened/replaced with a rights discourse. (Wealth, Power and Inequality: Challenges for Community Work in a New Era, Community Workers Co-operative, 2003)

The Earth Conference in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro is seen as seminal in the forefronting of the concept of sustainable development where three interdependent and mutually reinforcing 'pillars' were identified; social development, economic development and environmental sustainability .

UNECE (United Nations Economic and Social Council) identifies the following key themes associated with sustainable development in local and global contexts: poverty alleviation, citizenship, peace, ethics, responsibility, democracy and governance, justice, human rights, gender equality, cultural diversity. (UNECE 13/2005/3/rev.1 2005, P4)

The Irish National Sustainable Development Strategy 1997 affirms that meeting the needs of the present in a sustainable way involves equity in access to and use of

¹ This submission which is also relevant to the development of ESD is available at www.combatpoverty.ie.

resources as well as equitable opportunities in decision making. (Community Workers Cooperative, P57)

Thus the elimination /alleviation of poverty is at the heart of sustainable development. Kofi Annan, speaking at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002, stressed that the world today is facing the twin challenges of poverty and pollution and that we need to usher in 'a season of transformation and stewardship' (CORI , 2007)

However historically the emphasis in sustainable development debates, especially in many European countries has tended to focus on environmental issues although in countries of the South, environmental and antipoverty concerns are clearly linked (Community Workers Cooperative, 2003, P57).

Combat Poverty believes that this linkage also needs to be made in an Irish context and this needs to be reflected in the development of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

This is also confirmed by CORI (2007) in its discussion of sustainability which states that conventional economic models of development or progress fail to meet the needs of millions and millions of people and this failure is evident 'even within better off countries such as Ireland'.

Also of relevance to the development of ESD is Combat Poverty's view that a concern with poverty is not simply about providing basic needs. Whilst acknowledging these are important, it stresses the importance of providing opportunities and support for meaningful participation in all aspects of social, economic and political life for vulnerable groups(Combat Poverty, 2006-Submission to the Taskforce on Active Citizenship).

6. Poverty, Rights and Sustainable Development

In the development of ESD, recognition of the link between sustainable development, poverty and human right is also important. The UN World Summit in South Africa in 2002 emphasised the link between the elimination of poverty as an indispensable requirement of sustainable development. Elsewhere the UN also stresses that human rights can only be successfully realised in the context of total development.

A recent report published by Border Action² (2007), emphasises the emerging realisation that development and human rights are inextricably linked. The authors refer to the increasing acceptance of the principle that the enjoyment of all human rights is both the means and the goal of development and that human rights based approach 'is the scaffolding of development policy'. The authors go on to refer to a view which is gaining support that a rights based approach;

- ...involves not charity or simple economic development but a process of enabling and empowering those not enjoying their economic social and cultural rights to claim their rights (Schabas and Fitzmaurice, 2007, p26)

² Border Action is jointly managed by Combat Poverty and Pobal (formerly ADM Ltd)

Combat Poverty (2003) also stresses the link between the realisation of rights and poverty and development:

- People in poverty experience not only income adequacy or material deprivation but powerless, voiceless and the experience of shame humiliation and exclusion in political social and cultural contexts. (Combat Poverty Agency Submission to Human Rights Commission, 2003³)

Thus a whole range of rights are denied. It goes on to state 'poverty prevents people from being agents of their own development'.

Through its work in the border regions through Border Action, Combat Poverty has also identified the links between tackling poverty and peace-building. A study published by Combat Poverty and the IPA (2005) finds that poverty can be either a cause of conflict as well as a consequence of conflict. It concludes that anti-poverty policies in Ireland, north and south, need to incorporate conflict resolution and conflict prevention as well as being underpinned by recognition of the importance of economic, social and cultural rights (P xxii/xxiii)

7. Education for Sustainable Development

Drawing on the UNECE background document referred to above, Combat Poverty understands that ESD is still developing as a broad and comprehensive concept encompassing interrelated environmental, economic and social issues. The concerns and analysis outlined above which link poverty, human rights, sustainable development and peace building on the island of Ireland as well as in Global contexts should inform the development of the ESD strategy.

Combat Poverty also endorses many of the principles outlined in the UNECE document including:

- Emphasis on knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values
- Adoption of a holistic approach
- Emphasis on key themes including poverty
- Reorientation of education towards sustainable development
- Encouragement of all learners at all levels to use systematic critical and creative thinking and reflection in both local and global contexts as a prerequisite to action
- Address the ethical dimension including issues of equality and solidarity.

Combat Poverty also endorses the recognition of ESD as a lifelong learning process, which includes starting with children at a young age and the recognition that ESD is

³ Submission to the Human Rights Commission on Joint Committee Pre-Consultation document on an All-Ireland Charter of Rights.

a life wide process which should permeate all learning programmes. Furthermore that it should be based on participatory learning approaches.

In line with Combat Poverty's support for the enhancement of participative democracy (as well as representative democracy) for those experiencing social exclusion, it also supports the view in the UNECE document that ESD should develop and enhance participative democracy as well as contributing to the resolution of conflicts and the achievement of justice .

In addition to proposing that these principles and analysis should inform the development of ESD, Combat Poverty also proposes the following as an initial input to inform the development of a National Strategy for ESD. It welcomes the opportunity to do this and also hopes that it can make further inputs into the more comprehensive consultation process which is to follow.

7.1 Integrated Approach

The development of ESD should be integrated with other current related developments. The following outlines just a small number of such initiatives

- Review of Senior Cycle programme and the development of a Senior Cycle subject related to social and political education
- Development of Assessment and Teaching and Learning approaches e.g. Assessment for Learning Approach being developed and tested by NCCA
- Development of early childhood education
- Development of intercultural education
- Development of models of poverty and equality proofing
- Implementation of Taskforce Report on Active Citizenship
- Current considerations of the next stage of development of the Community Development Programme by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
- Proposed national structures for adult and lifelong learning
- Increased funding for support of development education (Irish Aid).

7.2 Learning from other relevant initiatives and programmes

The development of ESD should draw on documented and evidence based learning from other related initiatives. The following are just a few examples of a wide range of such initiatives:

- Council of Europe - European Year of Citizenship through Education CDU-CDVEC
- Human Rights Education Initiatives (CDU-CDVEC, Amnesty)
- Evaluation of the Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom Project (Combat Poverty and CDU)
- Education for Reconciliation CDU-CDVEC and ADM/CPA
- Curricular investigations regarding Development Education, Trocaire, CDU CDVEC, Irish Aid
- Consultation process undergone as part of the Senior Cycle review
- NCCA sponsored research review of CSPE and conducted by Nexus
- Multiple Intelligences Project, UCC.

7.3 Need for overarching framework

The breadth of themes highlighted earlier is a strength and a challenge to the development and implementation of ESD .Related to this is the fact that many related educations are already being implemented within the Irish formal and non formal contexts which share similarities in approach, content and desired outcomes. Many of these have resulted in considerable positive outcomes at a number of levels: learners; teachers/tutors/trainers; whole system /school; communities. They have also resulted in the development and testing of models and approaches, as well as highlighting what needs to happen in terms of further development.

However it has also been observed that a good deal of fragmentation exists and that organisational agendas can sometimes act as a block to more comprehensive approaches. The lack of an overarching structure to guide the development, implementation and monitoring of the related educations has also been identified as a contributing factor to fragmentation.

Equally there are systemic issues particularly within the formal education system which result in implementation being piecemeal and overly dependent on the commitment and goodwill of individual teachers. Some of the factors identified include:

- over loaded curriculum, the overly broad nature of subject specific curricula, limited curricular space e.g. one class session per week for CSPE
- initial teacher development –limited/non-mandatory regarding opportunities for the development of relevant knowledge/understanding as well

pedagogical approaches; examination orientated nature of the second level system

- limited use of interdisciplinary /cross curricular approaches
- the need for more whole school approaches.

It is worth noting that much of the emphasis on developing approaches and initiatives in education relevant to ESD has been on primary and second level , (some work has also been done by Trocaire on early child hood education), with less emphasis on third level other than perhaps as pertaining to teacher development. This is an issue which the development of ESD will need to address. However the work of interdisciplinary centres in the areas of gender equality, women studies, equality, human rights , peace, development and so on offer opportunities for learning regarding the development of ESD.

With regard to the non formal sector, which is hugely diverse, the main efforts have been in the youth sector, although there are also examples from work with farming organisations, trade unions, employer bodies, statutory agencies and local authorities from which learning can be gained regarding development in the wider arena. Equally the community education and community development sectors have perhaps not been given the same opportunities to be involved in the forms of education under discussion. However valuable learning can be gained from those initiatives which do exist e.g. university outreach programmes in equality studies, women studies, gendered development education through Banulacht and local community groups e.g. Lourdes Youth and Community CDP, action research commissioned by NCDE⁴ regarding community development in Ireland and development education, social analysis component of community development courses e.g. CAN.

The prioritising of the latter sector will be important in ensuring that people affected by poverty and social exclusion in Ireland are also given opportunities and resources to participate in ESD. Participation in these forms of education is part of the development process and contributes to empowering vulnerable groups.

The above points reinforce the need for an overarching framework which will allow ESD to be integrated into current curriculum. This will be a particular challenge within the formal education sectors:

As the author of ESD Toolkit (www.esdtoolkit.org) points out :

ESD is more than a knowledge base related to environment, economy, and society. It also addresses learning skills, perspectives, and values that guide and motivate

⁴ This resulted in the publication of a report entitled *Same Issues Worlds Apart* , Bassett and Hayes (1999)

people to seek sustainable livelihoods, participate in a democratic society, and live in a sustainable manner. ESD also involves studying local and, when appropriate, global issues. Therefore, these five (i.e., knowledge, skills, perspectives, values, and issues) must all be addressed in a formal curriculum that has been reoriented to address sustainability. Simply adding more to the curriculum will not be feasible in most schools; they already have a full curriculum. Deciding what to leave out - what does not contribute to sustainability or is obsolete - is an integral part of the reorienting process.

This approach will necessitate an audit of existing subject areas, including economics, to establish to what extent they are contributing to sustainable development. Commentators in an Irish context are also arguing for the need to critically reflect on the over emphasis on economic growth as an end in itself and to the detriment of social development.

- In the context of an educational system where economic considerations have an increasing centrality, it is even more important to create “a new inspiring language and social vision that goes beyond the valorization of economic growth as an end in itself and as the hegemonic discourse of human endeavour and human achievement” (Ó’Tuathaigh, cited in Murphy p. 49).

In line with the links discussed earlier between human rights and sustainable development, it is also worth considering a human rights framework to underpin ESD.

7.4 Consultation and Participation

As already noted, meaningful participation by excluded groups in the development of policies is crucial in tackling poverty and in promoting sustainable development. Therefore the consultation process which informs the development of the National Strategy for ESD should make every effort to involve members of groups experiencing poverty and social exclusion as well organisations which represent them. This process will not necessarily be easy as people affected by poverty may not understand the concept of sustainable development or ESD or may not see the relevance to their lives. However for the consultation process to mirror the concerns of ESD it will be necessary to devote time and resources to this process. Working in partnership with antipoverty and community/local development organisations who are already working on issues of sustainable development and with links on the ground could contribute to this process.

It is important that the composition of the current steering group be reviewed to ensure that the perspectives of those affected by poverty and social exclusion are included.

8. Conclusion

The development of the National Strategy for ESD offers great opportunities as well as challenges. It has the potential to embed an emphasis on the holistic development of learners/citizens in our education/training systems in conjunction with the development of a more just and equitable society and world. However it can only begin to contribute to these ambitious outcomes if inclusive mechanisms are put in place to support its development, implementation and monitoring including the allocation of adequate resources.

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