
3. What would progress on the environment look like?

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Introduction

The question this paper aims to address is what would progress on the environment look like? This question is set within the wider context of this conference, which asks the question: how is Ireland's progress in the past, present and future measuring up? These are very broad questions and merit the time given at this conference to answering them; but from my perspective it is difficult to formulate answers without deferring to the significance of the adoption on 25 September 2015 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals by the 193-Member United Nations General Assembly. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon hailed the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals as

“a universal, integrated and transformative vision for a better world.” “The new agenda is a promise by leaders to all people everywhere... an agenda for the planet, our common home”³¹

The new framework, “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, is composed of 17 goals and 169 targets to wipe out poverty, fight inequality and tackle climate change over the next 15 years. The Secretary General exhorted us all to:

“engage all actors”, “include parliaments and local governments”, “work with cities and rural areas”, “rally businesses and entrepreneurs”, “involve civil society in defining and implementing policies – and give it the space to hold us to account” and “listen to scientists and academia”.

³¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/newsletter/september2015>

He also sounded a cautionary note when we stated that:

“We can no longer afford to think and work in silos....Institutions will have to become fit for a grand new purpose.”

This **new sustainable development agenda** and the Secretary General’s words provide a challenge for agencies, like the EPA, that are set up for a specific purpose defined in legislation and that sit within a national governance and budgetary framework of distributed leadership and defined responsibilities that flow through Ministers to their Departments and onto the Agencies they have responsibility for. The system is not naturally set up for whole of government approaches, which is not to say that such approaches do not happen or are not successful, but such approaches do need clarity of purpose in addition to cross-departmental support and unity of endeavour. The Action Plan for Jobs has been one recent successful example of such an approach. I believe that if we are to take up the challenge that “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” poses and deliver the 169 targets over the next 15 years a similar clarity of purpose, overwhelming support, and unity of endeavour will have to be brought to bear.

The Challenge that faces my Agency also faces everyone in this room; the Sustainable Development Goals compel us to look at where we fit into “this grand new purpose”, to realign our priorities and to seek opportunities to collaborate for a better future. So what does this mean for my own Agency whose primary role is to:

Regulate by implementing effective regulation and environmental compliance systems to deliver good environmental outcomes.

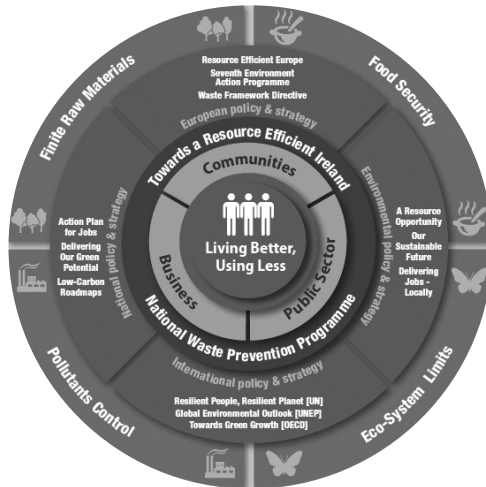
Generate Knowledge by providing high quality targeted & timely environmental data, information and assessment to inform decision making at all levels.

Advocate by working with others to advocate for a clean, productive and well protected environment and for sustainable environmental behaviour.

In my view, it means that we have to first look at our own work programme to see how our work in the environmental sphere can be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and redefine the outcomes we want to

achieve. This in turn will lead to a realignment of our work and our resources. Secondly we will have to map other actors that are in this space with similar goals, so that we can begin to build the networks we need to create more impactful outputs that set us on the right course to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

This will mean partnering with communities rural and urban, NGO's, universities, agencies, businesses, local authorities and government departments in a different way. Some of these groups will have very little awareness, capacity or even interest in such collaboration but without their cooperation and endeavour little will change. In particular we need to look to where there are synergies between environmental sustainability, social inclusivity and sustainable competitiveness and with the groups that represent these constituencies.



The EPA has already begun its Journey with the development of its “Resource Efficient Ireland” strategy encapsulated by the by-line “living well-using less”, which pulls together the work of the EPA in resource efficiency, waste prevention, controlled substances, producer responsibility and waste reporting. This work is supported by the EPA Research Programme that aims to use knowledge to protect and improve our natural environment and human health and the National Hazardous Waste Plan which sets out how reduce the risks posed by hazardous waste to communities and the

environment. The EPA Research Programme is focussed on identifying pressures, informing policy, and developing solutions in the areas of climate, water and sustainability. The key themes we are researching in sustainability are resource efficiency, health and wellbeing, natural capital and ecosystem services, and finally the socio-economic aspects of a sustainable Environment.

The EPA will continue this work through its new 5 year strategy, currently out for consultation, by the renaming of the Office of Climate, Licensing, Research and Resource use as the Office of Environmental Sustainability in recognition of the importance of this area and the ambition we set for ourselves.

What would environmental progress look like?

Now to address the question of what would environmental progress look like? As a starting point it is worth noting that Recent WWF data shows that living like an average EU citizen required 2.6 planets earths to sustain us; and in Ireland it is even worse as we live as if we have 3.2 planets at our disposal. This analysis is supported by European data that would suggest our resource productivity at €1,371/tonne is below the EU average of €1,544/tonne and less than half that of Holland at €3,077/tonne. So we have a long way to go to attain environmental sustainability.

In summary, future environmental progress will be attained when we have

A carbon neutral and climate resilient Ireland where our energy, transport and agricultural systems are decarbonised. This will have been achieved through a significant change in our behaviours and structures and the adoption of sustainable production, management and consumption systems.

The risk of articulating a view of the future in this way is that the task is perceived as overwhelming and acts as a demotivater for many except the most committed.

Therefore I am going to confine this paper to a selection of the Sustainable Development Goals that should have a resonance to individuals and communities. In doing so, I hope to give support to the “Internal Agency” of those groups for engaging with the world and also to provide some

analysis in an Irish context. I have focused on 6 themes that touch upon many of the Sustainable Goals but they are, by no means, meant to be exclusive of other Goals but rather indicative. I have included, at the end of this paper, the primary Sustainable Development Goals that the following themes, listed below, relate to. The Themes are:

- 1 Community led initiatives for social change initiated and supported
- 2 Communities facilitated to make the best choices
- 3 Access to the environment by Communities
- 4 Access to Community produced energy sources and efficiencies
- 5 Access to Community produced food processes
- 6 Community driven resource efficiency

Community led initiatives for social change initiated and supported

In 2012 the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, developed an Action Programme – *‘Putting People First’* – which outlines Government policy reform and development across the local government system. The main vision for this policy reform is that local government will lead economic, social and community development locally. It will be the main vehicle of governance and public service at local level leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably.

For this local reform to be successful it must advocate for and support:

- community-led initiatives for social change;
- the importance of social norms in behaviour change policies;
- community managed social resources;

- community-based social marketing strategies;
- mapping the social resources of communities such as clubs and societies – (hillwalking, bridge, choirs, bowling, historical societies);
- green Infrastructure that enables physical activity (abled/disabled);
- mapping of our natural heritage, (geoparks, bird colonies, waterways);
- long-term resilience in the face of the resource challenge.

The new networks of public participation that are being organised through the country will be an important factor in delivering on these objectives. The EPA is assisting through its work in developing:

- Guidance to community groups/volunteers on the establishment of governance structures for community led initiatives in the sustainability space (administration, legal / liability issues, financial control, funding opportunities, support services, etc.);
- a toolkit for successful drawdown of LEADER funding;
- a template for mapping community assets, activities, and actors.

Communities facilitated to make the best Choices

The EPA's most recent report on the state of Ireland's environment highlighted that the responsibility of protecting and managing the environment is a shared responsibility involving all citizens. We identified the need to mobilise each of the more than four and a half million people living in Ireland to ensure that the environment is placed at the heart of everyday decisions and actions. Clear, accurate and timely information is a vital component in raising awareness among the public and among key policy and decision makers.

The EPA has invested heavily in developing new approaches and tools, with a particular emphasis on the provision of accessible information to allow people to make informed choices for themselves and their families such as:

- **Air Quality Index for Health** - real time air quality data for your location combined with health advice if air quality is poor.
- **My Local Environment** - online map based information about the environment close to where people live or work, including local air & water quality and details of nearby EPA-regulated activities section of the EPA website.
- **SPLASH**: an online map-based website which provides the public with bathing water quality information for all of the identified bathing waters – including notifications via Twitter.
- **See it? Say it!**: a Smartphone App to help people to report environmental pollution in their towns and villages – allowing the public to photograph a pollution incident, input GPS location coordinates, which are sent to the relevant local authority for follow up.
- **Ireland’s Environment** - an EPA web resource with easy links to information for citizens on how to “Get Informed” and “Get Involved”. The emphasis here is on empowering people and providing them with accessible information to help them make informed choices.
- **Radon map** - resource that allows you to see mapped Radon levels for your area.

More work by more Agencies combined with rollout nationally of adequate Broadband will facilitate just in time information to communities so that they can make the right environmental choices.

Access to the environment by Communities

The link between environmental conditions and health has long been established. The evidence shows that motivating people to spend time participating in one or more of a range of outdoor activities in natural environments will help maintain good health. When people are outdoors they tend to be active, whether taking a walk, a dip in the sea or something more vigorous such as long-distance running. The availability of high-quality green spaces (parks, woods, countryside) and blue spaces (ponds, river banks, lakeshores and seashores) encourages activity on the road to better health.

Exposure to the environment, nature and biodiversity encourages the active lifestyles needed to prevent issues such as obesity, cardio-vascular disease and type-2 diabetes that are affecting much of our population. In an Irish context data presented at the recent European Obesity Congress by the World Health Organisation (WHO) paints Ireland as the ‘Fat Person’ of Europe with over 85% of Irish people predicted to be overweight by 2030. So there is a pressing need to encourage healthier living including engaging in regular physical activity. In an ideal situation, this activity would take place outdoors – in pleasant green spaces, breathing clean air and in a well-protected environment.

For this reason, sustainable communities will require recreational spaces and also areas of wildness. This ‘green infrastructure’ has to be provided via informed planning at Local Authority level, and then actively maintained by local groups & public bodies.

Local Stewardship of our environmental resources whether it is a stretch of river, coast or wild area near you will be the most important link in the chain needed to protect our local environment into the future and achieve full compliance with Environmental Directives for Water, Biodiversity, the marine and Air.

Schemes such as LEADER could be used to support this by developing projects to deliver, for example: Infrastructure that enables mapping of our natural heritage and safe access to it. Integration of these factors into sustainable tourism is a key measure in the protection of the environment, the health of communities and enabling gain through future economic development.

Access to Community produced energy sources and efficiencies

A key indicator of our transition to a climate neutral society will be the rate of decarbonisation of fossil based energy systems. Fuel switching and increased use of renewable energy in electricity generation means that Ireland’s CO2 emissions intensity has reduced from a peak of over 12 tonnes

³² www.seai.ie

³³ Ireland’s Sustainable Energy Supply Chain Opportunity

³⁴ McKinsey & Company - Resource Revolution: Meeting the world’s energy, materials, food & water needs

per person to just over 8 tonnes per person in 2012. The EU average is just over 7 tonnes, so our carbon emission intensity is going in the right direction but this transition is not fast enough.

The SEAI Better Energy Communities³² website is a great resource for communities that are interested in reducing their energy bills through community cooperation. The programme assists in the reduction of energy consumption as well as increased energy efficiency. In a recent analysis of the economic opportunities by SEAI³³ the skill sets required at a local, business and national level were mapped out to provide a sustainable energy supply into the future. SOLUS – The Authority for Further Education and Training have identified these skills as a key gap and are targeting their development; even though there are already 1,000 education places in the sustainable energy area. This training will focus on deep and shallow retrofit of buildings for better energy conservation; develop understanding of passive building systems and efficient boiler systems. This work has also the benefit of reducing fuel poverty and increasing community resilience to the effects of climate change and providing local employment.

Access to community produced food sources

The UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 (to halve per capita food waste at retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains including post-harvest losses) and the McKinsey & Company in its assessment of the top ten global resource efficiency gains³⁴, both clearly articulate the need to reduce food waste.

Grow your own, seasonal produce, local product development, farmers markets, food pantries and distribution, and the Wonky Vegetable movement are all manifestations of a need for a greater connection with our food but also the realisation of the need for less food miles and therefore reduced carbon emissions; of a stronger local supply chain and therefore increased resilience to climate change.

Schemes such as these have the same societal benefits of reduced food poverty and reduced social isolation. The Meals On Wheels Programme is an outstanding example of community led action in this regard. Food company start-ups and export substitution are sources of local employment and economic benefits.

Surplus food redistribution is an environmentally sensitive, socially responsible and business friendly alternative to wasting good food. Until recently, very little was happening in the area of food redistribution in Ireland. Since 2013, **FoodCloud** have rolled out a technology solution to redistribute surplus food at a retail level from businesses to charities within communities. This approach has proved successful and is now working across the country. However, there are challenges for the charity sector in maximising the potential of this supply of surplus food in a way that is financially sustainable and meets the aims of reducing food waste and alleviating food poverty. An EPA funded project aims to identify and address some of the challenges and barriers faced by charities in the utilisation of surplus food with the ultimate outcome of increasing the volume of surplus food that can be redistributed to charities and therefore contribute to the reduction of surplus food being sent to landfill, animal feed or AD.

In an Irish context the EPA-funded **Stop Food Waste** campaign is a programme working with householders, communities, schools, local authorities, tidy towns groups and businesses providing comprehensive information about food waste. Recognising that there will always be some food waste (and other 'green' wastes) the programme has also established a network of community-based Master Composters to train individuals and groups in this technique.

Community driven resource efficiency.

The EU Commission have committed to eliminate landfilling, recycling more materials, ensuring high quality recycling and developing functional markets for secondary raw materials by 2020 to make sure that recycling and re-use of waste is the economically attractive option for communities. From a community perspective, the framework of the circular economy must be well aligned with local and community development (L&CD) so that local enterprises can provide services that repair and maintain products in place of purchasing new (imported) items. By doing this local development will be aligned with the Action Plan for Jobs ambition "to stimulate the domestic economy and generate employment in locally traded sector".

An example of this is the **Siopa Glas** in Ballon Co. Carlow. The shop's aim is to minimise waste in the community by providing a friendly service for taking unwanted items off peoples' hands, while at the same time giving a

local opportunity to get high quality clothes, furniture, household items, books and vintage bits and pieces at affordable prices. Bird boxes and bird tables made by the local Men's Shed have also been sold from the Siopa. The Siopa Glas is now the main source of funding for the Ballon Improvement Group and the money raised is used to enhance the village, the Ballon school garden and the wildlife area. A regular garden swap shop is held too.

Other examples include:

Local Authority Prevention Network: a cooperative programme between the EPA and Ireland's local authorities to build capacity for promoting waste prevention at a local and grassroots level.

Community Re-Use Network: the all-Island representative body for community based re-use, recycling and waste prevention organisations. Its objectives are to jointly promote re-use and social inclusion at national and local level.

Conclusion

The examples given above are all in operation and can be scaled up to reach out to all the population, with adequate support. These and many other initiatives like them will form the backbone, I believe, to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. Communities must decide for themselves what environmental progress will look like for their local area and therefore dictate what environmental progress in Ireland will look like. Agencies, such as the EPA, must orientate themselves to this work. Our success in empowering communities to achieve progress in these areas will ultimately determine our environmental progress and answer the question 'will Ireland's environment in the future measure up?'



2.4 By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality.



3.9 By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination



6.b Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management



7.3 By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency



8.9 By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products



11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities



12.2 By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources

- 12.3 By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses
- 12.4 By 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment
- 12.5 By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse



- 14.1 By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution.



- 15.5 Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species



- 16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels
- 16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements



- 17.17 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships