

Policy Objective: To ensure that all development is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

Sustainable Development

Ireland has experienced a “bust to boom to bust” economic cycle since the 1950’s. Each “bust” has led to assurances that lessons have been learned and that changes will be made to ensure that the next recovery will be sustainable. Election 2016 occurs at the cusp of such discussions and offers us an opportunity to vote for policies which can indeed break the “boom-bust” cycle and deliver a more stable future. Real sustainability will require a long term vision and a capacity to develop and implement policies which will have their impact in 10 or even 20 years’ time.

Sustainable development is defined as “development which meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs¹.” The Sustainable Development Agenda recognises that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combatting inequality within and between countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent.²

Global Goals for Sustainable Development

193 Governments signed the Global Goals in September 2015 signalling a global realisation that sustainability must be a constant factor in all development. The Global or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commit all signatory countries to working towards eliminating poverty and hunger, reducing inequalities, promoting decent work, good education, health and wellbeing, responsible consumption and production, affordable clean energy, industry, innovation, infrastructure,

peace and justice. As one of the co-facilitators of the SDG negotiations, Ireland should now commit to becoming a global leader in setting national targets and implementing the global goals.

While Ireland and the EU continue to see economic growth as the key to recovery, it is this very growth that may be damaging the possibility of securing sustainable development in the Global South. The current migrations and displacement of peoples across Africa and Asia illustrate clearly that we can no longer see ourselves in isolation from the world as a whole.

Climate Change

In recent years there has been an increased awareness of climate change and the need for climate justice. Commitments made at the COP21 conference in Paris in 2015 were based on the growing realisation that our environment is finite - a fact that had often been ignored in the past. The need to change behaviours and policies to try to contain global warming below 1.5°C is urgent and requires the immediate attention of the 32nd Dáil. If current policies continue, the projection is that Ireland will exceed our emissions target by 2017. The greatest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions are agriculture (33%), transport (19.5%) and energy generation (19%)³. This provides Ireland with a particular challenge as it manages the recovery and seeks to develop the agri-food industry.

Energy

Reducing Ireland’s energy usage and the proportion which is generated from fossil fuels is essential to mitigate climate change. Improving insulation and retrofitting buildings to be more energy efficient is a

good first step which will also go some way towards addressing fuel poverty.

We are fortunate in having natural resources which can be harnessed for electricity generation. Innovative alternative energy solutions which involve local communities where appropriate must be devised and implemented.

Priority should also be given to waste reduction via reuse, re-purposing and recycling, resource efficiency and sustainable land use. All of these actions can lead to the development of a green or circular economy and sustainable growth.

Preserving our natural environment and balanced regional development

Our natural environment is one of our greatest assets, contributing to the quality of life for our citizens as well as tourist income. Pollution, over-exploitation of natural resources and the spread of non-native species are causing a decline in biodiversity and environmental quality in Ireland. This needs to be reversed.

At present the greatest bulk of job creation and employment is concentrated in the main urban centres, while rural areas continue to stagnate. Policy must ensure balanced regional development through the provision of public cultural, economic and social services and capital spending. The adoption of a new National Spatial Strategy, which could be formulated through a deliberative national debate would make a major contribution.

New indicators of progress needed

Creating a sustainable Ireland requires the adoption of new indicators to measure progress. GDP alone is unsatisfactory, as it only describes the monetary value of gross output, income and expenditure in an economy. New indicators measuring environmental and financial sustainability, well-being, and happiness are required. Developing “satellite” or “shadow” accounts for Ireland must be prioritised.

TTIP and other Trade Agreements

TTIP, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is a series of trade negotiations being

carried out, mostly in secret, between the EU and US which will have far reaching implications at home in Ireland and across the whole world. Its focus is on reducing the regulatory barriers to trade for big business in areas such as food safety law, environmental legislation, banking regulations and the sovereign powers of individual nations. Those who criticise TTIP fear that its implementation will lead to reduced standards and threats to safety. They suggest it will have a negative impact on society and sustainability for the benefit of large multinational corporations.

8 things Government can do

1. Become a global leader on the development, implementation and monitoring of national targets for the Sustainable Development Goals.
2. Give priority in policy frameworks and business models to renewable energy, resource efficiency and sustainable land use.
3. Reinststate Comhar, the sustainable development council to advise Government.
4. Ensure our climate mitigation plans support implementation of ambitious emissions reduction targets.
5. Implement a plan of energy conservation (including retrofitting) and waste reduction.
6. Develop and promote sustainable transport and agriculture practices to reduce Ireland's emissions.
7. Develop new indicators of progress and implement shadow national accounts which will incorporate social, cultural and natural/environmental capital.
8. Oppose trade agreements such as TTIP which have the potential to limit Ireland's ability to protect our environment and develop sustainably.

¹ <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>

² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

³ <http://www.epa.ie/irelandsenvironment/environmentalindicators/#climate>