

# HOW IS IRELAND PERFORMING ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

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**Abstract:** This article presents a summary of the findings of the Sustainable Progress Index 2019. The Index is an annual publication commissioned by Social Justice Ireland which examines Ireland's performance toward implementing the Sustainable Development Goals and compares us to our peers and neighbours in the European Union (EU)15 (OECD, 2007).

**Key words:** Economic growth; Economy; Environment; Society; Progress; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) proposed and adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) and identified 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets and over 230 indicators. In January 2016, the SDGs came into force. The SDGs are designed to refocus efforts towards policies that directly help people and communities toward sustainable development. They aim to provide both a pathway out of poverty for about a billion people in the world, and a pathway to a sustainable future for all countries and peoples.

The SDGs have become an essential part of scoring economic, social and environmental progress and have given national governments clear economic, social and environmental standards against which established policies should be judged and prospective policies should be measured. Equipped with these goals as tools for guidance and accountability, the Irish Government has the opportunity to lead the way towards a new generation of politics shaped by the economic, social and environmental needs of a truly healthy society. This article presents a summary of the findings of the

Sustainable Progress Index 2019 (Clark and Kavanagh, 2019). The Index is an annual publication commissioned by Social Justice Ireland which examines Ireland's performance toward implementing the Sustainable Development Goals and compares us to our peers and neighbours in the European Union (EU)<sup>15</sup>.

### **The importance of the sustainable development goals**

Some of the measures used to pursue economic growth (policies and values) are often barriers to social progress and environmental sustainability. Increasingly, policy analysts and international agencies are promoting a more direct approach to address these issues rather than pursuing the old strategy of economic growth with the hope that the benefits will trickle down to eradicate poverty, protect the environment and promote social exclusion. Social Justice Ireland's argument is that such a narrow way of thinking about economic growth leads to policies that only promote one aspect of what can be called sustainable social progress, and either ignores or harms other aspects. We are not arguing against prosperity. Rather, we are arguing for a view of prosperity that is inclusive of all and is socially and environmentally sustainable. Driving up Gross Domestic Product (GDP) leads to a false prosperity; temporary in its benefits, lasting in its costs.

The SDGs provide an ambitious, comprehensive plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. The aim of the SDGs is to change the perspective of public policy. Directly focusing on social and environmental goals, rather than waiting for economic growth to trickle down and produce desirable outcomes, is what underpins the SDGs and makes them revolutionary. The SDGs are a rejection of the paradigm of one-way causality of economic growth leading to everything else. Clearly the economy and economic growth are important, but they exist in a context, and economic growth is as much an effect of social progress as a potential contributor to social progress. A disposable society that uses up and discards people and

resources with the single goal of ensuring the continuation of the process of capital accumulation is not sustainable, socially or environmentally.

## **The index**

The Sustainable Progress Index 2019 is the third in a series of reports that examine Ireland's performance toward achieving the SDGs in the context of its peers in the European Union 15. The main aim of the index (Clark and Kavanagh, 2017; Clark, Kavanagh and Lenihan, 2018a; 2018b) is to provide an analysis of Ireland's track record in achieving the SDGs over time and in examining the challenges Ireland faces in achieving the SDGs relative to these countries, over time. Social Justice Ireland believes this is valuable, because as noted by Klaus Schwab, Chairperson of the World Economic Forum, in his commentary on the SDGs: '[w]e must continually measure progress on the ground, at local, national and international levels' (Sachs et al, 2017: 4). Comparing relative performance among countries from a similar regional or income group is valuable. Sachs et al (2016) have emphasised that the substantial variations observed in small groups of similar regions should encourage policymakers to better understand reasons for divergence and design strategies for achieving the SDGs by 2030.

Data collection for the analysis in the index was far-ranging. The starting point for data selection is the UN Indicator Set (2017) and we attempted to align our indicator set as closely as possible with this list. We employed some simple rules to guide our choice of data. *Relevance and applicability*: the data must be directly related, similar, or relevant to monitoring the SDGs. For some SDGs, indicators are chosen because they are more applicable to EU policies and initiatives (Eurostat, 2017). *Quality*: to ensure the best measures are used to capture the SDGs, we only use officially published data from international sources such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations (UN), etc and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Gallup and Transparency International. *Coverage*: data must be available

for all 15 EU countries. *Most recent available*: all data must refer to the most recent year available.

In so far as possible, we align our indicator set with the official UN list of indicators. However, for some of the SDGs, we replace some of the official indicators (e.g. the incidence of extreme poverty, mortality rate of under 5s), with variables that better reflect the high income countries in the EU, and also, to allow for greater variance in the data (it is important to differentiate between countries performance). For example, obesity – a major risk factor for a number of chronic diseases - is increasingly becoming a problem in high-income countries (and also some low-middle income countries) and we use this as one of the indicators for SDG 2. Other indicators, although not official UN indicators, are included to capture the theme of a particular SDG and monitor progress. Data coverage across the goals is unequal. For some SDGs (SDG1, SDG17), because we only use officially published data, only one indicator is available for all countries to reflect the objectives of the goal. This is far from ideal. Notwithstanding these issues, our data selection criteria identify 65 indicators across the 17 goals (for a full outline of our data selection process and a list of all 65 indicators see Clark and Kavanagh, 2019: 30; 58-59).

Agenda 2030 sets ambitious targets across the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. Although we fully recognise that all goals are interdependent and interconnected, we think there is value in attempting to understand how countries are doing on the three aspects of progress. Hence, using our judgement, we cluster the goals by these three dimensions: economic, social and environment. These three dimensions combined make up the composite SDG index.

## **Key findings for Ireland**

The Sustainable Progress Index is an aggregate across all 17 goals. Equal weight is assigned to each SDG (and each indicator under each goal). The scores allow us to rank the countries on the aggregate measure, to identify the countries that are making most progress in achieving the SDGs. The composite Sustainable Progress Index is presented in Table 1. Sweden, Finland and Denmark top the rankings and Ireland’s overall ranking is 11.

<b>Country</b>	<b>Index Score</b>	<b>Country Rank</b>
Sweden	71.45	1
Denmark	66.60	2
Finland	62.11	3
Netherlands	57.37	4
Austria	57.14	5
Germany	53.42	6
United Kingdom	50.71	7
Belgium	49.39	8
France	48.32	9
Luxembourg	46.06	10
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>45.91</b>	<b>11</b>
Portugal	38.38	12
Italy	37.66	13
Spain	37.15	14
Greece	28.12	15

**Source:** Measuring Progress: The Sustainable Progress Index 2019

Table 2 outlines how Ireland is performing on all 17 SDGs. The data shows the scale of the challenge facing Ireland under the headings of economy, society and environment. Ireland’s overall ranking on the SDGs relative to its EU peers is 11. On the economy dimension, Ireland ranks 11th, on society

Ireland ranks 10th and on the environment Ireland ranks 13th. This is the lowest score Ireland has overall.

<b>Table 2: Ireland's Rank by Dimension and by SDG</b>		
<b>Ireland Overall Rank on the SDGs</b>		<b>11</b>
<b>Economy</b>		<b>11</b>
SDG 8	Good Jobs and Economic Growth	9
SDG 9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	11
<b>Society</b>		<b>10</b>
SDG 1	No Poverty	7
SDG 2	Zero Hunger	10
SDG 3	Good Health and Well-being	9
SDG 4	Quality Education	2
SDG 5	Gender Equality	10
SDG 10	Reduced Inequality	11
SDG 16	Peace and Justice	4
SDG 17	Partnerships for the Goals	11
<b>Environment</b>		<b>13</b>
SDG 6	Clean Water and Sanitation	5
SDG 7	Affordable and Clean Energy	12
SDG 11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	8
SDG 12	Responsible Consumption and Production	14
SDG 13	Climate Action	11
SDG 14	Life Below Water	9
SDG 15	Life on Land	8

**Source:** Measuring Progress: The Sustainable Progress Index 2019

## **Analysis of the findings**

The Sustainable Progress Index provides a simple report card to track Ireland's overall performance on the SDGs compared to its EU peers; countries that have experienced similar levels of development. Ireland ranks 11<sup>th</sup> out of the EU15 in the 2019 index, showing no change from its ranking in 2018 (Clark, Kavanagh and Lenihan, 2018a). Although Ireland performs well on three SDGs, poor scores in many other areas drags our ranking down towards the bottom of the index.

Ireland performs well on the indicators for SDG 4 (Quality Education), with an overall ranking in second place for this SDG. This is Ireland's most impressive score overall, and is indicative of the progress Ireland has made in areas such as levels of tertiary education in the population and expected years of schooling, amongst others. On SDG 16 (Peace and Justice) Ireland is ranked fourth, with the data indicating that Ireland is a relatively safe society. Ireland also scores well on the indicators for SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) indicating that we are making progress in this area. The ranking on these SDGs shows that Ireland is performing well in some areas, and that we are making progress. It is important that we learn the policy lessons from what is working in the SDGs and apply them to those areas where we are not doing well.

Notwithstanding the strength of Ireland's performance on SDG 4, 6 and 16, our overall ranking is dragged down due to a very poor performance on other goals. Ireland ranks second last out of the EU15 on SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). This is Ireland's lowest SDG score and is a result of a combination factors: Ireland has a higher waste generation rate than the EU average, our poor record on waste water treatment and we have the lowest recycling rate among the EU15. Ireland's second lowest score is on SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy). Ireland's share of renewable energy is low relative to our EU peers and we perform poorly in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from energy fuels. Ireland also performs poorly on



SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals), ranking 11<sup>th</sup> on each of these goals. Significant challenges lie ahead if Ireland is to achieve its objectives on these goals.

If Ireland is to improve its performance in the years ahead, action is required in a number of areas. There is a need to gather evidence and track progress on policies that drive outcomes in order to implement the 2030 Agenda. The implementation of ambitious emissions reductions policies is vital, in conjunction with gathering better evidence on environmental indicators. Satellite National Accounts should be developed and published. All 17 SDGs must be integrated into the policy making process and be given the priority they require. This would ensure Government policy is not at odds with the SDGs which is the case with the current policy of generating economic growth by increasing agricultural production which runs counter to the objectives of the SDGs.

## **Conclusion**

The world needs a new development model based on a broader understanding of what it means to be human and how humans relate to one another and to their common home. The message of the Sustainable Progress Index 2019 is that the SDGs are not just another list of suggestions for poor countries; they can be a tool for all countries, informing decision making and public policy. Social Justice Ireland does not believe there is a single policy solution to solve every problem; in fact, we doubt one exists. But the analysis in the Sustainable Progress Index suggests that Ireland can improve its performance in specific areas such as responsible consumption and production, affordable and clean energy, innovation, reduced inequalities and climate action. We can learn from the other countries and pursue policies that ensure we achieve our SDG objectives. Some countries have discovered how to pursue growth while also reducing the impact on the environment. Others can provide higher levels of public services. Of course,

countries can also learn from what Ireland does well. There are no natural advantages in promoting social well-being; it is a matter of social choices.

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