

Capturing Transformative Change in Education: The Challenge of Tracking Progress towards SDG Target 4.7

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Abstract: Target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to ‘ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development’ (UN General Assembly, 2015: 17), thereby calling for transformative educational change all over the world. Target 4.7 offers many opportunities for Ireland, such as: providing legitimacy for development education (DE), Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and education for sustainable development (ESD); connecting Irish practitioners to a diverse global community of educators committed to social justice and sustainability; and creating a platform to showcase the impact of DE and related educations.

However Target 4.7 also throws up challenging questions. What are the ‘knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably’, and who decides which ones are the most important? What sort of education programmes are needed to build the required knowledge and skills for sustainable living and global citizenship? And how will we know if these programmes are working? Irish practitioners of DE and related educations have been working at ways to measure meaningful change in the areas of Target 4.7. These methods aim to balance the need for ‘results’ with the need to do justice to the complex learning that takes place in DE.

To move forwards in this challenging area, we need: co-operation and sharing between the various ‘educations’ named in Target 4.7; critical dialogue between the global North and South about the complex nature of global citizenship; recognition that progress towards Target 4.7 requires diverse approaches to outcome measurement; and respectful conversations between practitioners, policy makers and donors, especially in terms of using targets as means of learning and development, rather than as a means of control.

Key words: Sustainable Development Goals; Global Citizenship Education; development education; education for sustainable development; measuring impact; sharing practice.

A new element in the SDG agenda

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 set the agenda for international development for the next fifteen years. With seventeen ambitious goals, the SDGs seek to ‘build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what they did not achieve’ (UN General Assembly, 2015:1). The SDGs have been praised by some for being rights-based, universal, and collaborative (Clarke, 2015) and criticised by others for reinforcing an unsustainable economic model and for failing to address the root causes of global poverty and inequality (Makwana, 2016). Beneath the big debate about the overall SDG agenda, there are smaller, yet no less intense, discussions unfolding about each of the 169 targets that underpin the seventeen goals. This article focuses on just one target and the challenges of measuring progress towards it.

Goal Four aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’. Within this Goal, Target 4.7 states:

“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the 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” (UN General Assembly, 2015:17).

By stating that *all* learners must acquire the knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably, Target 4.7 calls for a transformative change in education not just in the global South, but throughout the world. This is an enormous widening of scope in comparison to the MDG Education Goal, which

focused exclusively on improving education provision in poorer countries. The inclusion of a goal of this nature in the SDGs was foreshadowed in 2012 when UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon launched the Global Education First Initiative (GEFI). GEFI named Global Citizenship Education (GCE) as one of its three main pillars, and set out a clear rationale for the inclusion of a GCE element in global education goals:

“It is not enough for education to produce individuals who can read, write and count. Education must be transformative and bring shared values to life ... helping people to forge more just, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies. It must give people the understanding, skills and values they need to cooperate in resolving the interconnected challenges of the 21st century” (GEFI, 2012).

GEFI mobilised those working in GCE, as well as in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Development Education (DE) and other related educations (such as Human Rights Education, Intercultural Education, Peace Education) to press for a GCE-related education target in the SDGs. Target 4.7 was the result of a long campaign to ensure that the SDGs highlighted the need for all learners to engage in transformative education on issues of global justice and sustainability.

Opportunities arising from Target 4.7

For the DE community in Ireland, the inclusion of Target 4.7 in the SDGs brings important benefits and opportunities. Firstly, it provides increased legitimacy for DE, and related educations, in Irish educational policy. Target 4.7 supports and amplifies Ireland’s ‘National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development’ (DES, 2014) which was developed within the national context of Ireland’s strategy on sustainable development (DECLG, 2012) and Ireland’s policy on international development (DFA, 2013), and within the broader international context of the UN Decade on ESD (UN DESD, 2005). The aim of the national ESD strategy closely aligns with Target 4.7 in that it aims to equip learners with:

“the relevant knowledge (the ‘what’), the key dispositions and skills (the ‘how’) and the values (the ‘why’) that will motivate and empower them throughout their lives to become informed active citizens who take action for a more sustainable future” (DES, 2014:3).

Therefore Target 4.7 reinforces Ireland’s ESD national strategy, through connecting it to a global mandate of similar intention. It is worth noting that the ESD strategy acknowledges that DE has important synergies with ESD and that the DE community has a key role to play in achieving the aims of the ESD strategy (DES, 2014: 9).

Secondly, Target 4.7 has the potential to connect Irish practitioners to a diverse global community of educators active in GCE, ESD, DE and related areas. The language of Target 4.7 is very inclusive, naming at least six types of education and adding ‘among others’, so as to encompass all educations which aim to help learners to acquire the ‘knowledge and skills needed for sustainable development’ (UN General Assembly, 2015: 17). Under the banner of Target 4.7, there is the opportunity for a broad coalition of educators to share practice and work towards a common aim. Of course there are important distinctions between ESD, GCE, and DE, but there are also many overlapping areas of interest (Fricke, Gathercole and Skinner, 2015: 18). Stakeholders need to resist squabbling amongst themselves over which ‘brand’ of education is best placed to deliver on Target 4.7, and instead look to see what synergies they can build.

The idea of a global community of educators working together towards Target 4.7 is very appealing, but there is the troublesome issue of just how ‘global’ the global education community really is. Dower (2008:39) provocatively asked, ‘Are we all global citizens, or are just some of us global citizens?’ and certainly it is true that ‘global’ education to date has existed primarily in a privileged, Northern domain. The universality of Target 4.7 brings an opportunity for global educators in Ireland to reflect on their practices and to enter into meaningful dialogue with Southern, postcolonial

and/or marginalised voices. Initiatives such as the ‘Bridge 47 Network’ (2015) offer possibilities for this, but real dialogue will require us to address uncomfortable questions around power, inequality and injustice. Andreotti (2011: 392) has asserted that critical CGE practitioners must attend to how they imagine ‘the globe’, how they imagine themselves as ‘global educators’ and their students as ‘global citizens’, and how they imagine ‘knowledge and learning beyond Eurocentric paradigms’. Therefore Target 4.7 offers an exciting platform for Irish educators to share practices globally, but only if we are willing to risk critical engagement with contested and uncomfortable issues.

A third potential benefit which could arise from Target 4.7 is the amassing of evidence on the impact of DE programmes. DE practitioners in Ireland and elsewhere have been wrestling with the question of impact for years, and this has been exacerbated by pressure from donors who have demanded measurable ‘results’ in return for their investment in DE. Therefore the establishment of agreed global and national indicators around DE/ESD/GCE could help to create a robust evidence base and encourage donors to increase budgets in this area. However, a note of caution should be introduced here, as it would be quite possible to officially establish a poorly thought-out, restrictive impact measurement system which measures what is easy to measure instead of what is important to measure; this would be worse than no system at all.

What are we trying to measure, and how?

Although the introduction of Target 4.7 offers an opportunity for establishing agreed frameworks for measuring DE and related educations, ‘results’ in these areas are notoriously difficult to define, let alone measure (Think Global/Charities Evaluation Services, 2011). To measure progress in relation to Target 4.7, it is necessary to establish firstly, what are the ‘knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably’, and secondly, how we will know if our education programmes are helping us to acquire them? In terms of the first question, ‘What are the knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably?’ there is a huge range of possible responses. For example: is it about

acquiring ‘fixed knowledge across a selection of topics in environmental science and geoscience’ (UNESCO TAG, 2015: 12)? Is it about nurturing ‘adaptability, creativity, self-reliance, hope and resilience’ (Sterling, 2008: 65)? Or does it mean empowering people to create a world ‘structured according to a radical hope of global justice’ (Swanson, 2015: 28)?

Given the breadth of opinion over what we should be measuring, it is inevitable that there is very little consensus on how we should measure it. O’Flaherty and Liddy (in preparation) completed a systematic review of the literature from 2000 to 2015 relevant to the research question ‘What is the impact of intentional development education (ESD/Global Education) interventions?’ In this context ‘impact’ was conceptualised as ‘measured change in knowledge, skills, attitudes, ethics, and actions’ arising from the particular intervention. Of the over 300 articles retrieved, just forty-three met the criteria for this review. Furthermore, the approaches used in the studies varied considerably, e.g. there were exams/knowledge tests, ethics/values measures and even randomised control trials. Overall, the review suggested that measuring the impact of DE/ESD/GCE is not at all a straightforward endeavour. Some commentators have suggested that measuring Target 4.7 is a near-impossibility from a methodological point of view; for example a World Bank blog stated that ‘the challenges of developing a consensus on how to measure skills needed to promote “global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity” are simply overwhelming’ (Fiszbein and Bustillo, 2014).

The indicators game

Given the complexity and challenges outlined above, it is not surprising that when the UNESCO Technical Advisory Group (TAG) drafted indicators for Target 4.7, they favoured ones that were relatively straightforward to measure, especially at global level, the highest of the four tiers of indicators (national, regional, thematic and global). The initial proposal for the single global indicator for Target 4.7 was ‘Percentage of fifteen year old students enrolled in secondary school demonstrating at least a fixed knowledge of a selection of topics in environmental science and geoscience’ (UNESCO

TAG, 2015: 12). However, in March 2016, the UN Inter-Agency Expert Group (IAEG) proposed that the global indicator should be the:

“Extent to which (i) global citizenship education; and (ii) education for sustainable development are mainstreamed in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education; and (d) student assessment” (UN IAEG, 2016).

If this indicator is confirmed, it would appear to acknowledge that outcomes for Target 4.7 are too difficult to measure at global level, and that it would be preferable to focus on the efforts within countries to promote sustainable development through education (Global Campaign for Education Netherlands, 2016). The new proposed indicator also acknowledges that change needs to happen on various levels and cannot just be measured in terms of student assessment (Fricke, Gathercole and Skinner, 2015: 41). By choosing an indicator that focuses on provision rather than outcomes, the UN IAEG appears to have side-stepped the thorny issue of impact, perhaps leaving it to be taken up by countries when they formulate national indicators.

However, the proposed global indicator still presents many contested aspects. Most importantly, what is the nature of the GCE or ESD that is being mainstreamed? Andreotti (2006: 46-48) set out a framework comparing ‘soft’ versus ‘critical’ citizenship education, where in the soft approach, the potential benefits of GCE are ‘greater awareness of some of the problems, support for campaigns, greater motivation to help/do something, and feel good factor’ and in the critical approach, the potential benefits are ‘independent/critical thinking and more informed, responsible and ethical action’. Mainstreaming ‘critical’ GCE would be a much more challenging and meaningful undertaking than mainstreaming ‘soft’ GCE, and this distinction somehow needs to be captured in the indicator.

Furthermore, the use of ‘mainstream’ is unclear, as mainstreaming does not necessarily involve depth or integration. The ‘mainstreaming’ curricular requirement could mean as little as one required stand-alone

module, or it could mean an ambitious attempt to weave GCE/ESD/DE knowledge, skills and values across the breadth of formal and non-formula curricula. There is a danger that a ‘light’ approach to curricular engagement with GCE/ESD/DE could miss the opportunity to deeply engage learners, and instead would create a ‘general, largely de-personalised and de-politicised sense of global awareness and global belonging’ (Fricke, Gathercole and Skinner, 2015: 36).

Finally, there is a danger that the establishment of this, or any other, global indicator would preclude other types of measurement of DE work. An indicator is simply a piece of measurable information which shows us whether or not our desired change is happening. In order to be measurable, indicators have to be tied to specific sites, target groups and timeframes. Using one indicator does not mean that other valuable types of progress towards the same overall aim are *not* happening in different ways and on different sites. When the global indicator for Target 4.7 is eventually agreed, we need to stress to donors and policy makers that this is not ‘the only show in town’, and that national indicators need to be developed that reflect the diversity of DE/GCE/ESD practice, particularly in the non-formal education sector.

Examples of innovative practice from Ireland

If the proposed global indicator for Target 4.7 is confirmed, Ireland will have to consider how to track the ‘mainstreaming’ of GCE/ESD/DE in educational policies, curricula, teacher education and student assessment. In some of these areas the ground is already well prepared; for example in DICE (Development and Intercultural Education) at primary level and Ubuntu at post-primary level, we have well-established programmes for ESD/GCE/DE in initial teacher education, both of which have systems in place for capturing the impact of their work.

But while we in the Irish DE community await final versions of indicators, we should take advantage of current interest in the measurement of Target 4.7 to showcase some of the innovative and effective systems that

have been developed to measure the outcomes of DE-related work. A number of organisations in Ireland have designed and implemented ways to track meaningful change, balancing the need for ‘results’ with the need to do justice to the complex learning that takes place in DE. The final section of this article provides three examples of innovative approaches, one relating to the assessment of learners, one to measuring changes in schools, and one to tracking actions taken as a result of education.

Within the formal education system, an innovative approach to assessing the knowledge and skills needed for sustainable development can be seen in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) specification for a Junior Cycle short course in Citizenship, which under the proposed curricular reforms will become available to all students aged 12-15. The Citizenship course aligns closely with Target 4.7 in that it aims to ‘inform, inspire, empower and enable young people to participate as active citizens’ and to build the ‘awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably’ (NCCA, 2013: 4-5). Assessment for the course is based on the students’ projects, and allows students considerable choice as to what they present for assessment and how they present it. Therefore in assessment:

“...a sense of student agency and efficacy is promoted, which are important characteristics of active citizenship. Students are not only learning *about* democracy, human rights and responsibility. They are exercising responsibility and decision making in the ways they are learning and being assessed. Where the material used in the assessment tasks derives from issues of genuine interest and concern to students, assessment in CSPE can contribute to the empowerment of young people to become more active and reflective citizens” (ibid: 17).

Although other proposed Junior Cycle short courses may not have such an explicit affinity with DE, the overall Junior Cycle reforms provide what GENE (2015: 36) has described as ‘the broadest opportunity for DE

integration into Irish post-primary education in decades’, and there is the possibility to implement learner-centred, empowering assessment across a range of Junior Cycle interventions.

In terms of measuring changes in schools, WorldWide Global Schools, Irish Aid’s programme for DE in post-primary schools, has implemented a ‘Global Passport’ system (WWGS, 2014), which is a voluntary, self-assessed, externally audited accreditation scheme. Schools are invited to accumulate points and thereby collect ‘stamps’ for their Passport in seven areas: curricular work; extra-curricular activities; teacher capacity and engagement; student capacity and engagement; school leadership and management; school ethos, policy and governance; and respectful relationships within and beyond the school. Together, the seven areas create a composite picture of a globally-minded school. Within each of the seven areas, the WWGS team has set out parameters for emerging, established and exceptional levels of activity. The Passport system allows schools to be assessed on their own terms, e.g. some schools may especially concentrate on the integration of DE subject knowledge into delivery of the curriculum, while others may put a particular focus on inculcating DE values into whole-school structures. Therefore the Passport can generate an overall numerical ‘score’ for a school which can be collated and analysed at national level, yet each score reflects the complex reality of DE in the participating school. Ninety-five schools have been awarded the Global Passport to date, with many others reporting that the Global Passport framework has provided them with a much-needed planning tool for DE in their schools.

In terms of measuring actions taken as a result of educational interventions, there is an interesting example from Suas, a Dublin-based charitable organisation addressing educational disadvantage in Ireland and in the global South. GCE is a core element of Suas’ work, particularly in their Global Citizenship Programme, a non-formal education programme aiming to promote university students’ progressive engagement with global issues (Malone, Carley and Bracken, 2014). One desired outcome of the programme is that students will take action as a result of participation in the

programme. Aware of the many challenges in tracking and measuring actions as a result of learning (e.g. contribution vs attribution, deep engagement vs ‘clicktivism’), Suas has opted to measure the action dimension not simply by *what* actions are taken but also by *how* participants engage with action options. Suas set as an outcome of the programme that ‘Participants will be familiar with a range of action pathways which they can take to create positive change in the world’. An indicator of progress toward this outcome is ‘change in participants’ level of awareness of different ways that they can bring about positive change’ using a multi-method approach to data collection, including participants’ self-evaluation using a ‘Progression Pathway Rubric’. The Pathway is completed by participants at the end of the Global Issues Course and Volunteer Programme and is designed to support students to reflect on the different opportunities for continuous engagement, what they have done and what they would like to do as a result of their participation on the course. It suggests a series of seven general action pathways and captures participants’ inclination to engage with each pathway. The pathway is not intended to compel participants into particular actions; participants are free to opt out of further engagement and/or suggest their own action pathway. However it does provide concrete suggestions and enables Suas to provide tailored supports to students wishing to go further. Suas also track the number of participants who progress through the three strands of the programme and follows up with a proportion of alumni online to ascertain other actions they have taken on foot of their involvement in global citizenship. Overall, this approach has enabled Suas to effectively track the complex relationship between education and action, and to build up a strong evidence base for the effectiveness of their programme.

The examples set out above are just three illustrations of how Irish practitioners are tackling the challenging area of measuring change in DE. There is also much that we can learn from global education practitioners from abroad. For example, in the UK, the ‘How Do We Know It’s Working?’ toolkit (RISC, 2015) provides a creative model for tracking changes in pupils’ attitudes about global issues, and in Belgium, some

organisations have used effectively used Outcome Mapping to measure the effects of global education programmes (Van Ongevalle, 2013: 146).

The way forward

In conclusion, the introduction of Target 4.7 brings many opportunities. It increases the visibility of DE/GCE/ESD and affirms its value. It creates a platform for sharing educational practice at a global level, and it opens up a space for dialogue on how to meaningfully track the outcomes of our work. However Target 4.7 also throws up many difficult questions, such as: What are the ‘knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably’, and who decides which ones are the most important? What sort of education programmes are needed to build the required knowledge and skills for sustainable living and global citizenship? And how will we know if these programmes are working? To move forwards constructively in this challenging area, we need: co-operation and sharing between the various ‘educations’ named in Target 4.7; critical dialogue between the global North and South about the complex nature of ‘global citizenship’; recognition that progress towards Target 4.7 happens at different sites and in different ways and therefore requires diverse approaches to outcome measurement; and respectful conversations between practitioners, policy-makers and donors, especially in terms of using targets as a means of ongoing learning rather than as a means of control. If Target 4.7 is to deliver on its promise of a citizenry who have the knowledge and skills to live sustainably, we need to ensure that the systems we use to measure progress towards this goal reflect the complex, challenging nature of the task at hand.

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