CENTRE FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION

LET'S TALK SDGS

Supporting Critical Perspectives on the Sustainable Development Goals

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Centre for Global Education, October 2020

Centre for Global Education
9 University Street
Belfast
BT7 1FY
Tel: (028) 90241879

E-mail: info@centreforglobaleducation.com
Web Site: www.centreforglobaleducation.com
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/centreforglobaleducation
Twitter: @CGEbelfast
Subscribe to our E-Bulletin: www.centreforglobaleducation.com/ebulletin

Written by: Caroline Murphy, Programme Manager, Centre for Global Education

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Introduction – Stephen McCloskey, Director

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as 'a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere'. The 17 Goals and 169 targets represent an ambitious agenda for sustainable development with a 15-year plan for delivery that has been adopted by governments, development ministries, civil society organisations, development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and multilateral bodies as the principal global policy framework for international development. In the global education sector, the 17 Goals have been adopted almost universally by practitioners as the basis for their global learning practice and advocacy work. Conventional wisdom suggests that the Goals represent an international platform to propel global learning to new heights of awareness, support and take-up by governments and NGOs across the world. The Goals' combination of local action, global action and people action represents an 'an unstoppable movement pushing for the required transformations'. At least that's the theory, but five years into their delivery the Goals are already sending out signals of distress amid concerns that the development model underpinning the Goals is not fit for purpose.

In 2019, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, admitted that progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals is 'seriously off-track'. 'A narrow focus on growth', suggested Guterres, 'regardless of its true cost and consequences, is leading to climate catastrophe, a loss of trust in institutions and a lack of faith in the future'. And, in July 2020, Philip Alston, in his final report as UN Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, delivered a withering critique of the Goals suggesting that 'The UN and its member states are sleepwalking towards failure...Five years after their adoption, it is time to acknowledge that the SDGs are simply not going to be met'. The criticisms levelled at the SDGs by Philip Alston's report include the following:

- *Eradicating poverty*: the SDGs, like the Millennium Development Goals before them, use the International Poverty Line of $1.90 a day as a barometer of poverty. This means that even if their targets are met, billions of people will still face serious deprivation as the IPL represents at best 'a bare subsistence'.
- *Human rights:* the SDGs fail to frame their targets in the context of human rights with the Rapporteur suggesting that 'there is not a single reference to any specific civil and political right, and human rights in general remain marginal and often invisible in the overall SDG context'.
- *Finance:* Because of 'backsliding in substantial key areas' among supporters of the Goals there has been a heavy dependence on private sector funding which calls into question their sustainability as a public good.
- *Inequality:* SDG 10 focuses on inequality but the Rapporteur finds evidence of low levels of attention by governments with this issue, particularly in regard to gender. At the current rate of growth, he argues, 'closing the gender pay gap in economic opportunity is projected to take 257 years'.
- *Evaluation:* The Rapporteur finds the annual High-Level Political Forum as a mechanism for monitoring SDG progress as weak and characterised by its 'voluntary nature'. He suggests that 'instead of promoting empowerment … the energy surrounding the SDG process has gone into generating portals, dashboards, stakeholder engagement plans, bland reports and colourful posters'.

- *Growth:* The Rapporteur questions the sustainability of the SDGs' commitment to achieving 7 per cent GDP growth in least developed countries as 'likely unattainable' and 'at odds with emerging challenges to the traditional growth paradigm' (Ibid). The Goals appear to be complicit with the same neoliberal growth agenda which has precipitated the existential crisis of climate change, and undermines achievement of the IPCC target of limiting global warming to 1.5°C of the pre-industrial average.

One of the weaknesses of the SDGs not addressed in Alston's report but of a great deal of significance to global educators is the absence of any analysis of the historical origins of current inequalities between the global North and South. As the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) suggests: development education 'works to tackle the root causes of injustice and inequality, globally and locally, to create a more just and sustainable future for everyone'. The 'root causes' of contemporary inequities between North and South include centuries of colonisation, indentured slavery, the extraction of commodities and precious metals, and the eradication of indigenous peoples and their cultures, values and lifestyles. As Hickel suggests, 'the colonies developed Europe' rather than the current development narrative propagated by the IMF and World Bank of the global North supporting the 'development' of the global South.

Philip Alston stops short of calling for the Goals to be abandoned, but believes they need to be 'recalibrated' and 'revitalised', with more stringent mechanisms introduced for monitoring and evaluation. The question for supporters of the Goals is whether the SDGs have the agility, flexibility and resolve to change their methodology mid-stream, especially when so many of their multilateral partners and sponsors are wedded to the high-growth imperative that underpins mainstream conceptions of 'development'? Even more challenging, can they do it in the midst of the COVID-19 health pandemic and a climate emergency? As the Rapporteur suggests: 'COVID-19 is a pandemic of poverty exposing the parlous state of social safety nets for those in lower incomes or in poverty around the world'.

This resource, written by my colleague Caroline Murphy, is an invitation to educators to critically interrogate the Goals and determine their capacity to deliver upon their intended outcomes. It invites users to ask if the SDGs can support effective global learning and represent a sound critique of the international system. Supporters of the Goals who are invested in their success from an advocacy and practice perspective will want to ensure that they represent a sustainable, just and equitable model of development that can address the underlying causes of poverty and injustice. This resource has been designed to support that critical interrogation of the Goals which will hopefully result in a robust discussion on their capacity for change with two-thirds of their journey yet to be taken.

Centre for Global Education

The Centre for Global Education was established in 1986 by eight development agencies to provide education services that enhance awareness of international development issues. Its central remit is to provide learning that will enable individuals and organisations to address the causes of poverty, inequality and injustice at local and global levels. The Centre believes that in the current era of accelerated globalisation our society is becoming increasingly interconnected with the wider world. Development education equips individuals and organisations to understand the cultural, economic, social and political influences on our lives that result from our growing interdependence with other countries and societies. It also provides learners with the skills, values, knowledge and understanding necessary to facilitate action that will contribute to poverty eradication both locally and globally.

The Centre endorses the United Nation's definition of development education which states that 'the objective of Development Education is to enable people to participate in the development of their community, their nation and the world as a whole'. Development education practice is based on active learning methodologies that support analysis, reflection, debate and an action outcome. The Centre for Global Education provides training and resources to local target groups that tailor development education content and practice to their needs. We consider the development process in Ireland within the context of the global South and support multiculturalism and mutual respect by providing opportunities to learn about other cultures, faiths and lifestyles.

The Centre supports the view that we can learn more about ourselves and local communities by extending our knowledge and experience of the wider world. We deliver our services to learners in formal and informal education sectors and work with partners at local and global levels to increase knowledge and understanding of international development issues. The local and global axis of development education is central to its learning methodology and informed by the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher.

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Information Officer
Centre for Global Education
9 University Street
Belfast BT7 1FY

Tel:	028 90 241879
Email:	info@centreforglobaleducation.com
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Overview of Resource - Caroline Murphy, Programme Manager

Let's Talk SDGs emerged from a sense of disillusionment with the dominant discourse that positions the SDGs as the 'end goal' for the eradication of poverty and inequality. It emerged from a sense of fear that development educators are failing to dissect the SDGs through radical pedagogical approaches. It emerged from a sense of guilt that, by promoting the goals, development educators are complicit in the reproduction of a neo-liberal system premised on protecting and growing the wealth of the most powerful.

However, *Let's Talk SDGs* also emerged from a sense of hope that development educators have reached an opportune moment for reflection and debate. Now, more than ever, we have the space to pause and explore more deeply the world that the SDGs is envisioning. We have the opportunity to work together to harness new possibilities for positioning the SDGs within a radical and transformative global education.

Let's Talk SDGs is therefore aimed at development educators in the global education sector and related 'adjectival educations' such as human rights education, education for sustainable development, environment education, education for sustainability and all those interested in transformative education. It is intended to stimulate debate and to encourage educators of all stripes to pause and reflect on the usefulness of the SDGs for transforming our world.

Let's Talk SDGs presents four key challenges:

1. To reflect on the SDGs and consider the extent to which each of the goals is fundmental to the themes and values of development education;
2. To explore the extent to which the Global Indicator Framework directly tackles the strutural causes of poverty and inequality;
3. To critique the targets and indicators set against an SDG of your choice, and examine the extent to which these address the previaing power structures which maintain injustice and inequality;
4. To reflect on the extent to which the SDGs can contribute to a radical development education approach.

Let's Talk SDGs makes a number of assumptions**:**

1. You are already aware of the SDGs and familiar with how they have become hooked to development education;
2. You are already informed of the theory and practice of development education and are familiar with radical and transformative education perspectves and debates;
3. You are familiar with global development issues and the prevailing power structures which perpetuate the root causes of poverty and injustice.

Overall, *Let's Talk SDGs* is offered to you as a reflective practice tool. It is hoped that you find it useful and engaging, and that it helps strengthen development education practice and how we engage with the SDGs overall.

Note about Terminology:
There are different terms to describe the sector in which global learning is practiced. These include development education, global education, global learning, development awareness, development studies, global citizenship education and global dimension. The author takes the view that they are equally valid and can all be used interchangeably.

1 The Goals

Development educators across the island of Ireland, Britain and Europe are well versed on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2015, the SDGS set the agenda for international development until 2030, marking a global commitment to transform our societies and economies for sustainable development and global justice.

Most development education (DE) training courses, resources and events are framed within the SDGs, with development educators holding the goals up as a structure to legitimise why various issues and topics are important. Since 2015, development education events have become adorned with SDG branding. Posters, pop-ups, flyers, and toolkits display the goals in their array of rainbow colours. Whether promoting Goal 1: No Poverty, Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing, or Goal 13: Climate Action, the SDG branding has become ubiquitous with development education providers and associated International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs).

At face value, the presentation and branding of the SDGs appear important for transforming the world. What development educator could argue, for example, that 'no poverty', 'zero hunger', 'gender equality', or 'reduced inequalities', are key aspects for achieving global justice? In this respect, it seems that, on the surface, each goal is essential for global citizenship and inspiring actions for change.

CHALLENGE 1

Reflect on the SDGs presented above, and explore the extent to which each of the goals is fundamental to the themes and values of development education.

2 The Global Indicator Framework

The Global Indicator Framework sets out various targets against each SDG alongside key measurable indicators, which are monitored and tracked to assess the extent of progress being made. Across the 17 goals, there are 169 targets and 232 indicators. This framework was developed by the United Nations' (UN) Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), and agreed at the 48th session of the UN Statistical Commission held in March 2017. The global indicator framework was later adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017. The framework's indicators are intended to monitor all 193 member states of the UN and track their progress against the targets aligned to each individual goal (https://unstats.un.org/wiki/display/SDGeHandbook/Home).

Overall The Global Indicator Framework is presented as a roadmap to ending global poverty and building a life of dignity and opportunity for all. It is positioned as a catalyst for gender equality, sustainability, peace, prosperity, and equality leading to a world that is transformed for the better by 2030.

CHALLENGE 2

Click on The Global Indicator Framework and open the document. Hit Ctrl and F to open the word search box. Type the below words and phrases associated with global injustice into the search box. Type other words or phrases which you feel are essential elements to include in targets and indicators so that radical change and global justice is achieved.

Patriarchy	Mass Consumption	Injustice	White Supremacy	Western
Colonialism	Activism	Structural Causes of Poverty	Privatisation	Tax Havens
Extraction	Asylum Seekers	Vulture Funds	Corporate Tax	Tax Evasion
Wealth Distribution	Corporate	Power	Arms Trade	Land Grabbing
Military	Neoliberalism	Off-Shore Tax	Climate Justice	Resource Depletion
Campaigning	Nuclear Weapons	Genetically Modified	Water Rights	Global Markets

- Do your typed words or phrases appear in the Framework?
- If so, what goals, targets and indicators are they connected to?
- If not, why do you think this might be the case?

3 SDGs: Transforming Our World?

It appears that nowhere in The Global Indicator Framework do we see clear targets and indicators which directly address the prevailing inequalities and injustices inherent in the international system. Nowhere do we see targets and indicators which address the existing international structure, values, and power relations. Nowhere do we see targets or indicators which address the global economic system which perpetuates injustice and poverty. If anything, the SDGs are underpinned by 'business as usual', promoting economic productivity, with the assumption that Gross Domestic Production (GDP) growth is a panacea for transforming our world.

> **"Basically, the SDGs want to reduce inequality by ratcheting the poor up, but while leaving the wealth and power of the global 1 percent intact. They want the best of both worlds. They fail to accept that mass impoverishment is the product of extreme wealth accumulation and overconsumption by a few, which entails processes of enclosure, extraction, and exploitation along the way. You cannot solve the problem of poverty without challenging the pathologies of accumulation"** (www.therules.org).

CHALLENGE 3

- Choose one SDG and examine its targets and indicators in The Global Indicator Framework;
- Do the targets and indicators address the prevailing inequalities and injustices inherent in the international system which might be relevant to your chosen SDG?
- Do the targets and indicators address the existing international structure, values, and power relations which might impact your chosen SDG?
- Do the targets and indicators address the global economic system which perpetuates injustice and poverty relevant to your chosen SDG?
- Do the targets and indicators address extreme wealth accumulation, extraction and overconsumption?
- If so, what targets and indicators address the above?
- If not, why do you think this might be the case?

4 SDGs: Safe or Radical Development Education?

Safe	Radical
Raises awareness of the SDGs and aligns social justice issues to a relevant SDG.	Explores social justice issues and promotes critical, visionary active citizens who are prepared to demand change and challenge the legitimacy of the SDGs for transforming society and the wider world.
Does not directly involve a critical analysis of the agenda behind the SDGs.	Makes visible the history and legacy of European colonialism, including the ways in which the wealth of the global North has been acquired and maintained through a history of exploitation, and examines how it continues to shape the SDGs and international agenda.
Promotes active citizenship and critical thinking which evokes actions which are 'reactive' to the already existing power structures and SDG agenda, without necessarily contesting the legitimacy of the SDGs in the first instance.	Promotes overtly political and proactive actions which directly challenge the prevailing international power structures and underpinning neoliberal agenda that shapes the SDGs and fuels global injustices.

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Paulo Freire).

CHALLENGE 4

Reflect on the following questions:

- Is it possible for development education to premise its interventions in line with the SDGs in a way that is radical, or is radical development education compromised by promoting the SDGs as a framework for the eradication of poverty and injustice?
- Working within the SDG framework, is it possible to encourage actions which take back power from the global elite and transfer that power to the people through collective struggle in solidarity with others?
- Should development educators take an approach which nurtures pro-active citizens who are supported to disinvest and disengage from the existing SDG framework and scope alternative futures by finding better ways of doing things?

Further Reading

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CENTRE FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION

The Centre for Global Education (CGE) is a development non-governmental organisation that provides education services to increase awareness of international development issues. Its central remit is to promote education that challenges the underlying causes of poverty and inequality in the developing world and effects action toward social and economic justice.

The Centre equips individuals and organisations to understand the cultural, economic, social and political influences on our lives that result from our growing interdependence with other countries and societies. It also provides learners with the skills, values, knowledge and understanding necessary to facilitate action that will contribute to poverty eradication both locally and globally.

Centre for Global Education
9 University Street
Belfast
BT7 1FY

Tel:	(0044) 2890 241 879
E-mail:	info@centreforglobaleducation.com
Web Site:	www.centreforglobaleducation.com
Facebook:	www.facebook.com/centreforglobaleducation
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