



# Lessons in Sustainable Development for Community and Voluntary Organisations

# Introduction

Our planet, our island and our communities provide us with finite resources which support our development. Our individual and shared actions have impacts that affect our societies, our economies and the natural environment around us. All of us have a responsibility to take steps today to use the resources we have in a sustainable way so that future generations can continue to maintain a balance between social, environmental and economic development.

But what exactly is sustainable development, and what drives it in our communities? To answer these questions, The Wheel, Trinity College Dublin and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) came together in 2018 to launch the Spark Change programme.

The goal of this programme was to increase our understanding of how community and voluntary organisations are contributing to sustainable development in Ireland, specifically in the context of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations (UN).

This guide offers a summary of what we learned from the Spark Change programme and how these lessons can be applied to the work of community and voluntary organisations. It draws on the EPA’s [official research report for the Spark Change Programme](#)<sup>1</sup>, and the experience of the programme team.

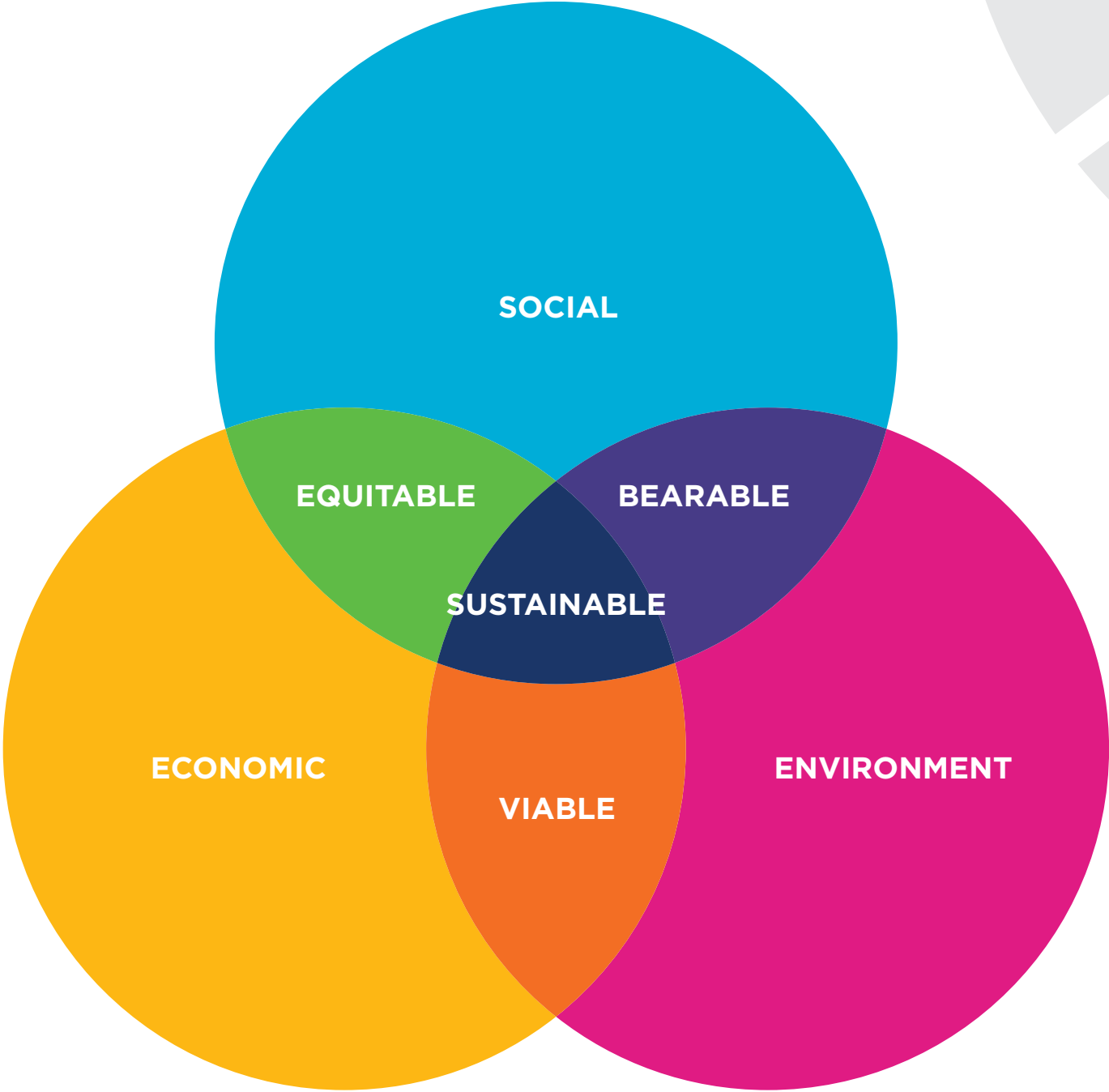
1 Carragher, V. & O'Reilly H. (2021). Piloting Innovative Approaches in Sustainable Communities towards Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland. Report No. 374. Environmental Protection Agency. Available online at [https://www.epa.ie/publications/research/socio-economics/Research\\_Report\\_374.pdf](https://www.epa.ie/publications/research/socio-economics/Research_Report_374.pdf)

# What is sustainable development?

Sustainable development is economic and social activity that meets our needs without depleting natural resources. While it is often linked to environmental issues, there are also economic and social dimensions to sustainable development. These are known as the three pillars of sustainable development (see Fig. 1).

Sustainable development is a goal all of us can work towards, whether it is reducing our carbon emissions, planting a community garden, supporting a sustainable employment scheme, campaigning for gender equality or promoting health and wellbeing, we all have a responsibility to hand down our planet to our children and our grandchildren to live in true sustainability.

*“ ....we all have a responsibility to hand down our planet to our children and our grandchildren to live in true sustainability.”*



**Fig. 1:** The three pillars of sustainable development

# What are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all UN member states in 2015, is a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on the three pillars of sustainable development, these 17 global goals address humankind’s biggest local and global challenges, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice.

The SDGs call for action by countries to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recommend strategies to end poverty, to cater for economic growth, to educate, to provide health, social protection and job opportunities, and to protect the planet and its climate.

# Ireland’s commitment to the SDGs

Ireland, alongside Kenya, was instrumental in leading the negotiations to develop the SDGs and adopted them in 2015. To help coordinate the national implementation, the Government published the [Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020](#).

While the Government carries the most responsibility for implementing the SDGs, every sector of society has to play a role to help Ireland meets its commitments.

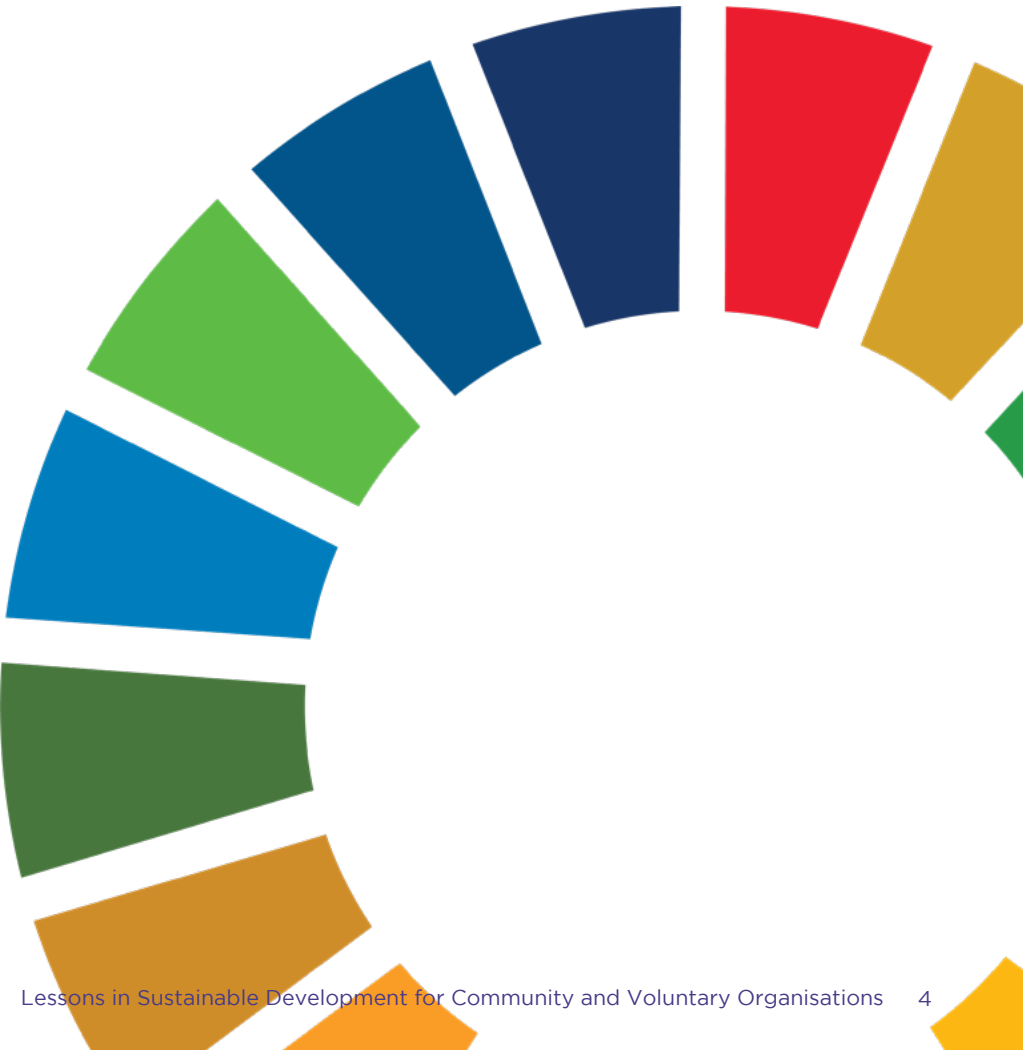
# The role of community and voluntary organisations

Community and voluntary organisations are set up to help people address their shared challenges and needs. They mobilise people to take collective action, and they are key drivers of positive social change in society. As such, they can play a significant role in driving the implementation of the SDGs from the bottom up.

Ireland is committed to implementing the SDGs at every level from local development plans to national level strategies to meeting our international obligations. Community and voluntary organisations across Ireland are already contributing to the achievement of the SDGs, many without realizing it.

The Spark Change programme was created to find out how community and voluntary activity is contributing to the implementation of the SDGs and the factors driving this transition to sustainability.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



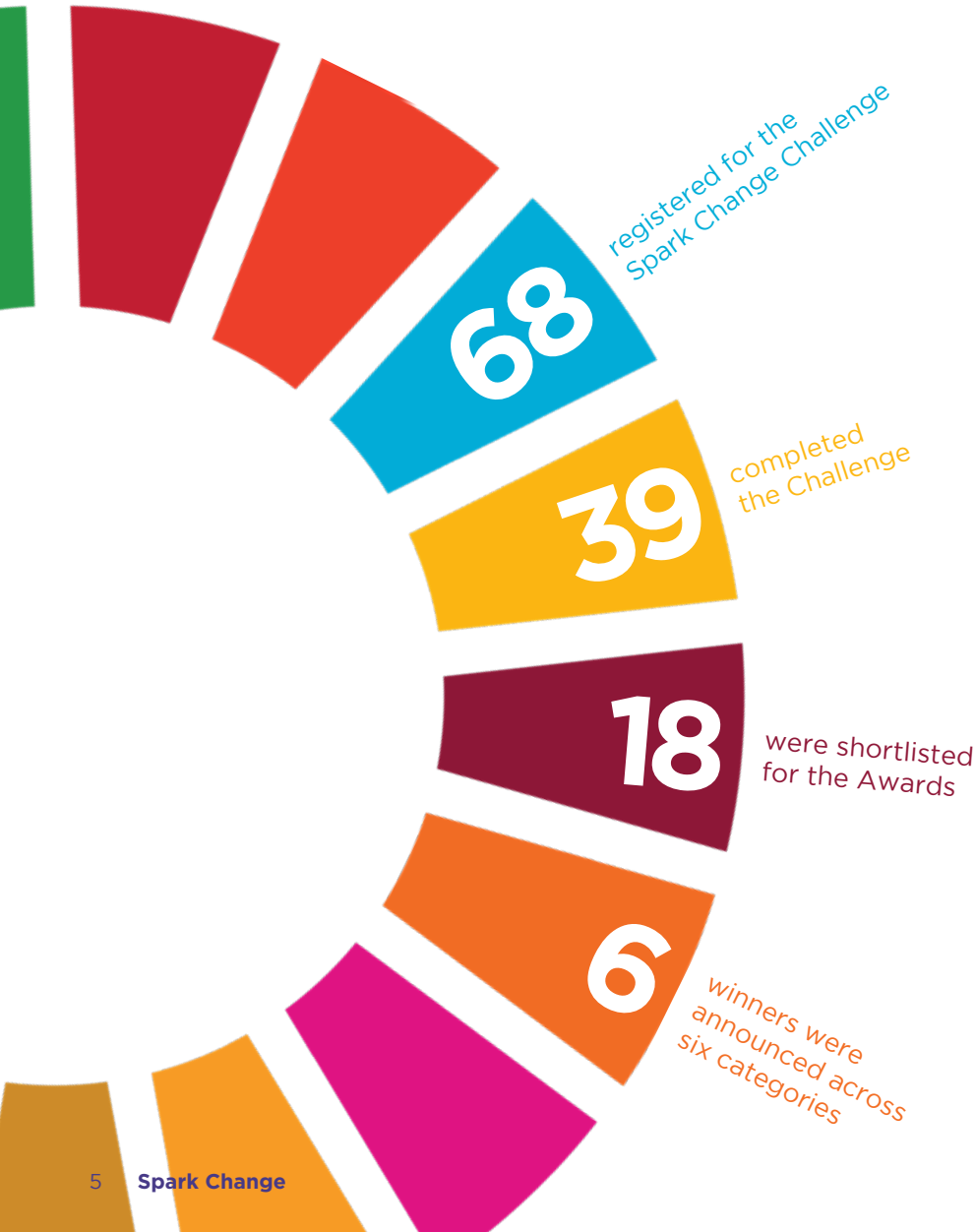


# The Spark Challenge and the Spark Change Awards

In January 2019, programme coordinators issued a call to community and voluntary organisations across Ireland to take up the Spark Change Challenge. Those who took part linked their work to relevant SDGs and tracked their progress through a series of surveys. In return, they were offered mentorship, information and access to [The Wheel's Sustainable Communities Toolkit](#). Throughout the challenge, 55 success stories were documented on [www.sparkchange.ie](http://www.sparkchange.ie)

Among those who completed the challenge, impacts were recorded in the SDGs related to global human welfare, rights, solidarity and environment. The biggest impact was recorded in SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 11(Sustainable Cities and Communities), 14 (Life below Water) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Eighteen of the 39 projects that completed the challenge were nominated for the Spark Change Awards, which took place a Dublin Castle on 18 October 2019. A panel of independent judges chose a winner in each of the six categories.



## Belturbet Zero Waste

Winner of the Campaigner Award for the most impactful or innovative communications campaign to raise public awareness about the SDGs and/or people's role in SDG action.

Belturbet Zero Waste emerged from a Tidy Towns group in Belturbet, Co Cavan. Its vision, which is set out in a charter, is to reduce the waste impacts of its citizens and businesses. It has committed to reducing its waste volumes by 50% over five years by 2024. Belturbet Zero Waste engaged comprehensively with Spark Change, and multiple focus groups and workshops, together with the measurement of the residents' ecological footprint, have taken place. Its sustainability efforts and the diverse initiatives it has adopted have been impressive.

### Top three SDGs:



## Cheshire House Residents Band (Cheshire House Elastic Band)

Winner of the Creative Award for the most impactful or innovative initiative that harnesses artistic expression to spur SDG action and awareness through creativity, empowering and connecting people.

The project is based in Cheshire House in Galway City, where residents live with both physical and neurological conditions and often cope with very complex and high support needs. Residents have formed a music group with the support of the social supports facilitator and have played at events.

### Top three SDGs:





## Community Wetlands Forum

Winner of the Connector Award for the project that demonstrated innovative or impactful ways to engage multiple stakeholders or build networks to generate the transformational change needed to make the SDGs a reality.

An umbrella organisation based in Moate Co. Meath, which supports 21 community organisations. This project encourages local engagement and collaboration, promotes the benefits and services of the natural environment and builds greater capacity and resilience in the wider community. Established in September 2013 as a representative platform for community-led wetland conservation groups, it is based on the principles of community development, namely empowerment, participation, inclusion, self-determination and partnership.

### Top three SDGs:



## Family Addiction Support Network (FASN)

Winner of the Includer Award for the project that makes the most innovative and impactful effort to ensure that excluded groups become part of the SDG dialogue and decision-making in their community or at international levels.

An organisation supporting the needs of families affected by addiction in the counties of Cavan, Monaghan, Meath and Louth. FASN emerged organically from the needs of family members who were affected by a loved one's addictive behaviour. This helped them to understand the impact of addiction, and to improve their current living situation and coping skills. FASN has thus been developed, managed and serviced by service users. Its goal is to assist families in achieving a greater understanding of addiction, help them improve their quality of life and help them fulfil a positive role in the recovery of their loved one, should they choose to. Today, the network is led and run by volunteers who have lived with addiction. These peers act to support families affected by drugs and alcohol and believe that no one should have to live with the isolation and stigma that problem drug use can bring.

### Top three SDGs:



## Go Greener Grangecon

Winner of the Mobilizer Award for the project that demonstrates the greatest successes with mobilizing individuals, organisations or networks for collective action for the SDGs.

Based in Grangecon, County Wicklow, the initial purpose of this project was to measure and reduce the waste produced by the school's parent association and its events. Through this the project aimed to educate the children and community on waste issues and solutions. This evolved into a community ecological footprint campaign in which the waste, water, household energy, food and transport impacts of the residents were measured, disseminated, discussed and reinterpreted. The aim is to reduce Grangecon's ecological footprint by working together. Significant numbers of workshops and focus groups have been facilitated by Spark Change, supporting its ecological footprint measurement and reinterpretation and providing advice about low-carbon options.

### Top three SDGs:



## St Patrick's Cathedral

Winner of the Storyteller Award for the most impactful or innovative project to capture powerful human stories to help communicate the interconnectedness of the SDGs in people's lives through different mediums.

Saint Patrick's Cathedral is the national cathedral of the Church of Ireland and serves the community on the whole island of Ireland. Through the distribution of the annual funds and cooperation throughout the year, the impact of the Cathedral is as an empowering SDG conduit. It wants to build awareness of the SDGs and spread the vision that collective, seemingly small actions can create a collaborative impact larger than if we each act alone. Through its Charitable and Community Fund, applicants are asked to choose the SDG that applies to their chosen project and describe the impact that they hope to achieve with the funds should they succeed. The Cathedral has seven categories of organisations who receive funding annually: Christian Faith in Action, Education, Community Support, Alleviation of Suffering, Conservation and Restoration, Health and Well-being, and Inclusivity. In 2017, the Cathedral distributed €127,000 to 53 charities locally, nationally and internationally. Over the past decade the Cathedral has contributed €700,000 in direct awards as well as another €500,000 of in-kind contributions, providing event space at cost as well as other forms of support. These contributions to organisations assist in the achievement of the SDGs and in creating a more harmonious, healthy and sustainable world now and for future generations.

### Top three SDGs:



# What did we learn?

When asked what influenced people in local communities to be more sustainable, the projects shortlisted for the Spark Change Awards identified some factors (or ‘drivers’).

## The Top 5 Drivers of Sustainable Development in Communities

1 Friends



2 Children



3 Storytelling



4 Local Narrative



5 Neighbours



*“To spark change in a community, start a conversation with friends, family and neighbours. Share success stories and change the local narrative.”*

Trusted people such as friends, children and neighbours, and the conversations and stories they shared, were named as the most important factors driving a transition to sustainability in communities.

The participants expressed their frustration with the gap between the government and themselves when it comes to the suitability of national policies and the impact these policies have on their communities. Our communities reported that online information and guidance in the form of “toolkits” is not enough; policies need to be brought to life in communities and SDG actions and conversations should be stimulated managed at the grassroots. The Spark Change participants expressed their preference for a flexible support system that can help explore opportunities locally.

Additional drivers identified included the need for recognition and the role of friendly rivalry. Several participants commented that initiatives like Spark Change boosted these drivers.

*“Trusted people such as friends, children and neighbours, and the conversations and stories they share, were named as the most important factors driving sustainability in communities.”*

Nearly all the organisations who took part in the challenge acknowledged that changing norms is an important driver, effectively increasing the performance of all those in a community. Local authorities and politicians leading by example was also named as an important factor.

Spark Change highlighted the importance of community as one of the key factors promoting SDG action, and it provided a platform for communities to connect, share their stories and celebrate their successes. The organisational support and progress provided through the programme were recognised by the participants as key to their success.

We believe these lesson can be applied in every community to drive sustainable development from the ground up.

The research report *Piloting Innovative Approaches in Sustainable Communities Towards Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland* by Dr Vincent Carragher and Hugh O’Reilly can be accessed at [www.epa.ie/publications/research/socioeconomics/Research\\_Report\\_374.pdf](http://www.epa.ie/publications/research/socioeconomics/Research_Report_374.pdf)

### How your organisation can spark change

1. Identify the SDGs that are aligned with your organisation’s mission, vision and goals.
2. Start local conversations about the SDGs and how they relate to your community. Involve families and groups of people with wide social connections in their communities.
3. Use storytelling to drive engagement.
4. Generate ideas for action with the Sustainable Communities toolkit ([www.sustainabletoolkit.ie](http://www.sustainabletoolkit.ie)).
5. Integrate these actions in your work programme, track your impact and share your story on [www.sparkchange.ie](http://www.sparkchange.ie).



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