

Towards the Sustainable Consumption of Distance?

Mobility and Transport Policy in the Republic of Ireland

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Overview

1. Introduction
2. ConsEnSus project overview
3. Actors, arenas, discourses: A sociological analysis of transport policy
 - How, by whom, for whom?
 - 'React and provide'? *Transport 21*
 - Moving towards '*smarter travel*'? Sustainability in Irish transport policy and practice
4. Conclusions

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Introduction

- Physical mobility – set of social practices with significant material consequences
- Diverse spatial mobilities connect sites of production with places of consumption
- Car dependency and increasing 'consumption of distance' in the Republic of Ireland
- BUT: significant number of people with unmet transport and mobility needs
- Recent shift in transport policy towards '*smarter travel*' – too little too late?

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The rise of (auto)mobility

Key changes in mobility patterns (1996-2006)

- Increase of 38% in the number of private cars per 1,000 population
 - e.g. 235,000 new private vehicles registered in 2000
- Increase of 72% in total number of vehicles registered
- Doubling of energy consumption in transport sector
- 36% of Ireland's energy-related CO₂ emissions from transport sector (2007)

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Consuming distance: Key influences

- Structural and economic changes
- Technology
- Social and cultural factors
- Policy decisions

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Project Overview

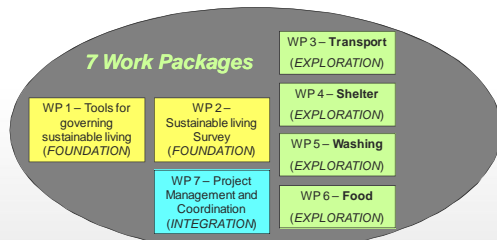
Consumption, Environment, Sustainability
(ConsEnSus)

- Interdisciplinary collaboration between Trinity College Dublin and NUI, Galway
- Largest Irish project on Sustainable Consumption (4 years, funded by EPA-STRIVE, >€1m)
- Aims:
 - Produce baseline data for Ireland: [transport](#), energy, water and food
 - Address key issues in sustainable consumption: measurement, evaluation, behavioural analysis, quality of life, governance
 - Develop policy recommendations for policy makers and action plans for sustainable lifestyles
 - Cooperation with state/non-state organisations
 - Establish cross-border research network (SCRN)

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ConsEnSus - Project Structure



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Work Package 3

Transport, Mobility and the Consumption of Distance

- Theoretical framework seeks to connect
 - Sociology of consumption
 - Sociology of transport and mobilities studies
 - Social-scientific approaches to sustainability
- Three-pronged empirical approach
 - Baseline survey data (WP2)
 - Case study
 - Policy analysis

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Work Package 3

Transport, Mobility and the Consumption of Distance

- Sociological institutionalist approach to transport policy analysis to identify changes in policy discourses, actor networks and policy arenas
- Relational view of the social world that focuses on institutional power relations that link different sites of authority (Vigar 2002)
- Institutions – organisations and “established way[s] of addressing [...] social issues” (Healey *et al.* 1999)
- Part I of analysis focuses on Rol transport policy
 - e.g. *Transport 21* (2006-2015), *Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future* (2009)

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Transport policy in the Republic of Ireland: A sociological analysis

- Path dependence theory suggests that certain policies become ‘locked in’ and reflect past chains of decisions
 - e.g. (over)reliance on motorcar for individualised mobility reflects past public and social policy decisions in areas of transport, housing and land use, energy etc.
- Modern Irish transport policy largely dominated by desire to facilitate individualised (auto)mobility (‘predict and provide’ paradigm) → reflects social and economic changes in Irish society
- Recent shift in policy focus towards more sustainable transport embedded in European and global sustainability debates
- BUT: Social and cultural causes and consequences of increased consumption of distance receive little attention

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Transport policy making Processes, actors, measures

- How?
 - Predominantly top-down (central government)
 - Reaction to perceived economic needs
 - Transport planning and policy debates often confined to economic/technical/practical arguments
- By whom?
 - Multitude of (un)elected policy actors
 - Department of Transport
 - (Semi-)state authorities and ‘QUANGOs’
 - Various lobby and partnership groups
 - BUT:
 - Limited opportunities for citizens, local campaigns and NGOs to influence transport policy
 - Adversarial relationship between state and civil society actors

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Transport policy:

Collisions, conflicts, consultations

- Transport infrastructure development as source of conflict
- Consultation and oral hearings - dominant forms of citizen involvement in transport decisions that emphasis on technical-pragmatic solutions and ‘the practical’
 - e.g. N6 Ballinasloe-Galway, GCOB hearings
- ‘No real argument takes place’ (Garavan 2008)
- ‘Anti-road protests’ as a form of resistance that challenges conventional politics, economic thinking and the ‘hegemony of the practical’
- Strategic infrastructure legislation harbours potential for further large-scale hearings and protests



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Rationality, Power and Conflict

In most societies, conflicts have been viewed as dangerous, corrosive, and potentially destructive of social order and therefore, in need of being contained and resolved. There is evidence, however, that social conflicts themselves produce the valuable ties that hold modern democratic societies together and provide such ties with the strength and cohesion they need; that social conflicts are themselves pillars of democratic society (Flyvbjerg 1998: 6).



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A shift towards sustainability?

Recent developments in transport policy

- Introduction of *Smarter Travel* policy – the end of 'predict and provide' (*Transport 21*) or 'business as usual'?
- Emphasis on public consultation, participation and involvement of civil society actors in implementation – who benefits?
- Continued exclusion of questions of social (in)equality from transport debates

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Transport 21

- Key transport policy launched in 2005
- Ten-year capital investment programme of €34bn (2006-2015)
- Key aims:
 - increase accessibility
 - ensure sustainability
 - expand capacity
 - increase use (overall network and PT)
 - improve quality of services
- Reaction to a) social and economic changes and b) pressure from various interests
- Limited consultation and public involvement

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Transport 21

- Emphasis on road construction and regional airport development
- Patterns of expenditure resemble pre-*Transport 21* spending (2000-2005)
 - Roads: €6.65 billion (exchequer)
 - PT: €2.5 billion (exchequer and EU)
- Social and environmental considerations marginalised
 - e.g. Rural Transport Programme (RTP) and Smarter Travel Initiative located outside *Transport 21*

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Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future

- Consultation document in 2008
- 500+ submissions by individuals and organisations
- Launch of policy document in 2009
- *Smarter Travel* bids by local authorities in April 2010
- Dramatic drop in spending → emphasis on 'low cost' or 'no cost' transport solutions

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Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future

- Changes in four key areas:
 - Reduction in distance travelled by car and suppressed journeys
 - Alternatives to the car
 - Improved efficiency of motorised transport
 - Changes in institutional arrangements

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The Road to Sustainable Transport?

- Smarter Travel policy provides some opportunities for new/alternative forms of citizen involvement and participation
 - Bottom-up 'smarter travel' initiatives at local level
 - Increase local government responsibility
 - Greater involvement of CVS and NGOs

BUT:

- Prioritisation of economic, QoL and CC/GHG-related environmental goals
- Social justice and equality issues remain marginalised
- Technical-pragmatic framework for public consultation largely unchanged

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Conclusions

- Shift in transport policy discourse towards sustainability and 'smarter travel'
- Some possibilities for novel forms of participation but continued focus on economic and technical issues
- Transport-related environmental issues framed by global climate change/GHG reduction discourse
- Social and cultural concerns remain marginalised both within conventional transport politics and outside

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Thank you!



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