

## Conflict, compromise and ConsEnSus:

Opportunities and challenges of policy relevance in sustainable consumption research

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## Overview

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## Introduction

- New forms of knowledge production and dissemination shape policy and (academic) research
- Expectations that research needs to be both applied and policy-relevant
- Sustainable consumption and policy relevance
  - Search for concrete solutions to consumption problems
- Paper provides an opportunity to reflect on the impacts of 'expectations to be policy relevant'

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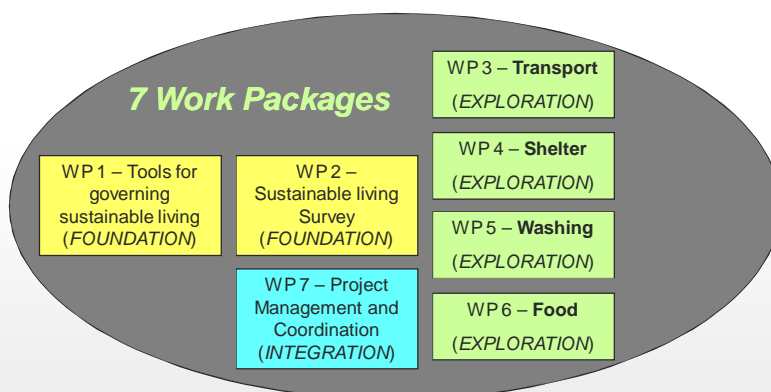
## ConsEnSus – Project overview

- Largest Irish project on Sustainable Consumption (4 years, EPA-STRIVE funding, >€1m)
- Interdisciplinary collaboration between Trinity College Dublin and NUI, Galway
- Aims:
  - Baseline data for Ireland: **transport, energy, water and food**
  - Research on key issues in sustainable consumption: measurement, evaluation, behavioural analysis, quality of life, governance
  - **Policy recommendations and action plans for sustainable lifestyles**
  - **Exchange and cooperation with state and non-state actors**
  - Establish cross-border research network (SCRN)

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## ConsEnSus - Project Structure



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## Context (I)

### Policy and Research Landscape in Ireland

- Rapid growth in demand for policy-relevant sustainability research
- Fragmentation and limited integration of results
- Privatisation and reliance on consultancy
- Limited role of third level institutions
- Prioritisation of particular thematic areas

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## Context (II)

### Policy and Research Landscape in Ireland

- Separation of policy-making and implementation in key sectors
- Adversarial relationship between some policy actors; 'blame game' (Flynn 2007)
- Clash of competing knowledge claims in the context of public consultation, hearings etc.

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## Content (I)

### Theory and Research Questions

- Reduction in conceptual complexity in research design to accommodate diverse audiences
  - e.g. framing of Sustainable Consumption
- Research design and timeframe
- Dilemma: assumes that the relevance of the work is known from the outset

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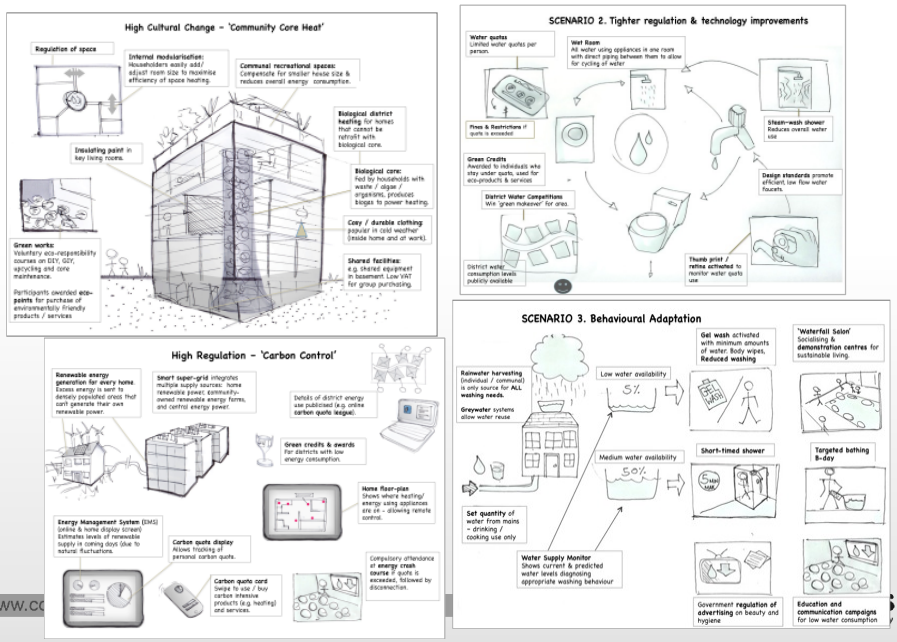
## Content (II) Choice of Methodology

- Prioritisation of **conventional designs and methods** over more innovative ones
- Policy actors tend to prefer **large-scale quantitative work** based on **representative samples**
- Preference for research designs that promise **fast turnaround of results**

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## Consensus Vision Development



## Content (III)

### Research Outputs and Dissemination of Results

- Nature of **acceptable evidence** within SC research
- Reduction in conceptual complexity in research outputs
- **Compromise** when disseminating sustainability research results, **appeal to all audiences**
- Can result in tensions over:
  - Terminology used
  - Visual representation of results
  - Choice of media
- Time consuming

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## Consensus Dissemination

Examples:

- Factsheets: survey data
- Innovative dissemination



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## Conclusions

- Participation in policy-relevant research offers both opportunities and constraints
- Dissemination of results to targeted communities (e.g. policy makers, practitioners) may or may not affect change
- Unintended benefits of policy-relevant research (e.g. use by local networks of NGOs and campaign groups, community projects)

Thank you!



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