Future visions for heating and washing practices in Irish households

A discussion of the methodological framework employed by the Consensus Research Project

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Consensus Research

**Consensus**: Consumption, Environment, Sustainability

- Trinity College Dublin & National University of Ireland Galway
- Focused on household consumption
- Sustainable Consumption Research Network established (SCRN)
Ireland: Home energy consumption issues

- Only 2% residential heating delivered from renewable energy

- Residential sector consumes over ¼ of total primary energy consumption (70% goes towards space heating)

- Energy inefficient housing stock

- Fuel poverty – 20% Republic Irl, 34% Northern Irl.

- Trends: larger houses, fewer occupants, individualization, rebound effect

- Design of heating technology
Ireland: Household water consumption issues

- Poor water infrastructure – (leakage 40%)

- Households consume 60% water at cost of €650 per person pa

- Water shortages predicted in Greater Dublin Area by 2015 – search for alternative resources in south-west Ireland

- No domestic water charges (only country in OECD)

- Low awareness of need to conserve water

- Increasing cultural standards of cleanliness
Policy Limitations

• Current response - “small scale tweaks”

• Developed world needs to achieve Factor 10 – 20 improvement in resource productivity by 2050 to remain within planet’s ecological limits (Schmidt-Bleek, 2007)

• *Where in the past we focused more on wealth, growth and efficiency, the future will need to be about well-being, quality and sufficiency*” (SCORE, 2009:3)

More holistic approaches:
• Identifying ‘lock-in’ practices of habitual consumption
• Social, technological and organisational factors (systems thinking
• Social practices emphasis
• Backcasting techniques
Backcasting Approach

Desirable future visions

• What could sustainable heating practices be like in the year 2050?
• What could sustainable washing practices be like in the year 2050?

Use of resultant scenarios:

• As a background for opinion-forming & decision-making (widen perceptions about future opportunities and policy options)

• To develop recommendations for policy measures, R&D directions, business agendas and partnerships for transition towards most promising scenario elements
Research Steps

Steps modified from ‘SusHouse’: Strategies Towards Sustainable Household Consumption (Vergragt, 2000)
Visioning Workshops (1)

Three hours

- Introductory presentation (problem orientation)
- Brainstorm session (1 hour)
- Clustering and voting session *1 hour)
## Visioning Workshops (2)

### Energy Workshop
- **21 Attendees**
- Futures Academy DIT (2)
- Architects (2)
- Designer (1)
- Policy researchers (2)
- Planner (1)
- Energy auditor (1)
- Energy poverty agency (2)
- Regulator (1)
- Heating plumber (1)
- Energy agency (2)
- Engineer (2)
- Communications (3)
- Energy supplier (1)

### Water Workshop
- **21 Attendees**
- Water supply (2)
- Bathroom / washing industry (2)
- Engineers (2)
- Planning / urban design (3)
- Architects (4)
- Product designer (2)
- Regulator (1)
- Consumer / behaviour (3)
Visioning Workshops (3)

Prompts for visioning exercise

People
- Norms & Needs
- Motivation & Awareness
- Wellbeing & Equality

Technology
- Built environment
- New products
- Alternative energy sources

Organisation
- Regulation
- Economic structure
- Methods of provision

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Visioning Workshops (3)

Clustering & Voting, Schnelle (1979)

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Visioning Workshop (4)

Feedback

• “Refreshing to commentate on the positive without having to ‘over-think’ the plausibility [of ideas]. It did prompt me to think in a different way. Will consider using this technique in my own work”

• “There were some great commercial ideas which could be considered for individual engineering / innovation projects within the university”

• “Group sessions were very open with an interesting mix of backgrounds prompting circulation of ideas from different perspectives”
Scenario Development

Need to analyse proposals from visioning workshops

Potential framework:
• Goals – Strategies – Proposals
  (Vergragt 2000)

Final scenario:
• Vision
• Essential Characteristics
• Products / Services
Sustainability Assessment

- Integration of work by:
  - Seyfang (2006) on ‘new economics’ criteria for sustainable consumption;

- Qualitative examination of future scenarios against the following sustainable consumption criteria:
  - Localisation
  - Reduced ecological footprint
  - Community building and collective action
  - Individual wellbeing
  - Economic sustainability
  - Building new infrastructures of provision
Citizen-Consumer Workshops

- Six workshops in total
  - Cross-section of consumers
  - Different locations around Ireland

- Feedback on scenarios
  - Levels of acceptance
  - Barriers to adoption
  - User-friendly?

- Modifications
  - ideas / innovations to improve scenarios
Backcasting workshop

- Stakeholder feedback on scenarios and sustainability assessments
- Establish extent of stakeholder support for scenarios and results
- Develop transition plan for realisation of scenarios containing recommendations for:
  - Policy measures
  - Research and development agendas
  - Stakeholder cooperation and responsibility
Concluding Thoughts

- Limitations of current governance systems for sustainable consumption

- Little examination of sustainable consumption in an Irish context or use of backcasting techniques in research or policy-making

- Participatory backcasting approach provides opportunities to develop alternative innovations for sustainable home energy and water practices (changes in technology, culture, organisational elements)

- Challenge:
  - Scenario development
  - Translation of scenarios into specific recommendations for current policy measures, R&D and collaboration