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Developing Policies and Instruments for Sustainable Household Consumption: Irish Experiences and Futures

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Abstract In recent years, the concept of sustainable consumption (SC) has received increased attention. Overconsumption in industrialized countries still presents major challenges to achieving sustainable development goals despite the global economic crisis. This paper offers an in-depth analysis of national influences on consumption patterns in the Republic of Ireland, focusing in particular on the role of governance in the design of policy instruments for sustainable consumption. It is argued that country-specific political conditions and policy frameworks fundamentally shape everyday household consumption. After an initial discussion of the effectiveness of three key types of policy instruments—legislative, economic, communicative—the paper compares SC policy making and implementation in Ireland with examples of good practice from Europe. An agenda to

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progress Ireland's sustainable consumption policy framework is proposed in the concluding part of the paper.

Keywords Sustainable consumption · Governance · Ireland · Policy instruments

Introduction

Sustainable consumption (SC) has attracted considerable attention in recent years as is evidenced by this special issue dedicated to the topic. The discussion has developed from the wider debate on sustainable development (SD), which has been on the international political agenda since the 1980s. More specifically, household consumption in industrialized countries has been identified as a key contributing factor to global problems addressed in the SD debate, such as climate change, depletion of energy resources and biodiversity loss. Here, we adopt the definition of OECD (2002) of household consumption as the consumption of goods and services by households including the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service.

How can patterns of consumption be changed to reconcile economic resilience with environmental protection and social development? In his book *Prosperity without Growth*, Jackson (2009, p. 158) sees this as "...the biggest challenge ever faced by human society." Fundamentally, he argues for an ecologically sensitive alternative to current macro-economic approaches that places economic activity within ecological limits and that reduces structural reliance on growth. Jackson also proposes to "shift the social logic of consumerism" by providing real, credible options for sustainable living. These alternatives should go beyond changing basic systems of provision, providing opportunities for people to "participate fully in the life of society, without recourse to unsustainable material accumulation and unproductive status competition" (Jackson 2009, p. 158).

These suggestions point to two crucial aspects in the debate on sustainable consumption: the importance of behavioural change and the role of government in providing essential infrastructure for people to engage in alternative, more sustainable lifestyles. We argue in this paper that changes in behaviour are contingent upon a combination of internal and external factors, which in turn shape and reflect the national context within which individuals (inter)act. External factors include consumption-related infrastructure (including technologies which have been a major focus of much sustainable production work to date) and available alternatives for individuals, while internal (individual level) factors include a person's financial resources, time, knowledge and skills (Thøgersen 2005b), as well as attitudes and values. Thus, initiatives for sustainable consumption need to focus on the task of connecting people and infrastructure, which requires multi-nodal governance networks rather than top-down government action. Following Jackson (2009), we argue for the creation of recursive governance spaces that bring together a diverse range of political actors and that produce new and innovative policy solutions to the problem of sustainable consumption. However, we argue that government is best placed to *co-ordinate* a collective approach to change, through an enabling policy framework (Mayo and Knight 2006). As Juliet Schor (1999, p. 15) argues: "There is a vast consumer policy agenda which has been mainly off the table. It's time to put it back on." In addition, it has been shown that government "plays a vital role in shaping the cultural context within which individual choice is negotiated through its influence on technology, infrastructure, market design, institutional structures, the media, and the moral framing of social goods" (Jackson and Michaelis 2003, p. 60). Policy initiatives for sustainable consumption, therefore, must

reconcile the desire for greater dialogue between diverse policy actors with the need for government to play a central role in changing consumption patterns.

In Ireland, consumption in general and household consumption in particular rose dramatically over the past two decades as the economy expanded (EPA 2006). This has contributed to a number of environmental problems including rapid rises in CO₂ emissions leaving Kyoto targets difficult to meet and an overreliance on landfill for burgeoning levels of waste (EPA 2008). However, there has been little comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of current consumption patterns, which contribute to these problems (Ó Gallachóir et al. 2007) and even less attention to the policy context in which consumption practices operate. This paper presents an analysis of these issues.

Initially, the paper provides an overview of key SC policy instruments that have been adopted internationally. The second part of the paper assesses the range of different SC policy instruments that have been adopted in Ireland to date. Focusing on the specific institutional characteristics, the challenges and opportunities involved in implementing SC policy in Ireland are then considered. Part three presents key examples of international good practice in the area of SC policy and considers whether these could be adopted in Ireland. This paper concludes with reflections on potential avenues for future research on SC.

Approaches to Sustainable Consumption Policy

During the early 1990s EU responses to growing environmental problems included consumption-focused legislation in some selected areas, most notably green procurement and mandatory energy labelling (Murphy 2001; Rubik et al. 2009). Nevertheless, legislative change at EU level has been slow to develop. The Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan (EC 2008) identify voluntary and required actions to influence consumer behaviour and improve the environmental performance of products, with a view to decoupling economic growth from resource use. The plan is part of the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy, which in turn ties in with the United Nations' Marrakesh Process on Sustainable Consumption and Production and the global 10-Year Sustainable Consumption and Production Framework.¹ The lack of mandatory quantifiable targets and deadlines, however, clearly reduces the potential effectiveness of this plan (Nash 2009).

EU Member States have responded very differently to the introduction of consumption-related environmental directives (Rubik et al. 2009), not least in terms of policy instruments for transforming consumption behaviour. Most EU countries have combined legislative, economic and communicative instruments to address the challenges of SC. *Legislative measures* in particular have enjoyed considerable popularity and include policies for greening the market, legal penalties and the employment of physical barriers to non-conserving behaviour such as restricting the availability of certain consumer products (De Young 1993). Administrative measures such as a ban on environmentally damaging actions and wide-ranging information campaigns also feature widely (Linden and Carlsson-Kanyama 2003).

Limitations of legislative instruments are well documented (Blowers and Hinchliffe 2003). They include large administrative burdens, issues with monitoring and enforcement and a plethora of unintended outcomes. Also, questions have been raised about the

¹ <http://www.epa.gov/oswer/international/factsheets/pdfs/200810-sustainable-consumption-and-production.pdf> (accessed 10th June 2010).

effectiveness of top-down legislative interventions in bringing about a real shift towards environmental and social justice goals. For example, the EU-wide ban on incandescent light bulbs introduced in 2009 brought to the fore some of the environmental and health issues associated with the production and disposal of energy-saving CFLs.

Economic instruments have become increasingly familiar features of the EU policy landscape often perceived as flexible and efficient tools for environmental reform. Fiscal measures such as taxing and pricing are intended to appeal to the self-interests of consumers and producers by providing monetary (dis)incentives for pro-environmental behaviour (Buckingham 2008; De Young 1993; Linden and Carlsson-Kanyama 2003). However, the use of economic instruments for promoting sustainable lifestyles is not without criticism. They can generate high, potentially inequitable and sometimes unpredictable costs. As a result, they can be socially regressive instruments, unreliable sources of revenue for the public sector and unpopular measures both with the private sector and consumers alike. Existing research has shown that financial incentives can bring about short-term behaviour changes (see Guagnano et al. 1995). However, it has been argued that lasting change requires intrinsic motivation, that is, motivation which comes from inside an individual rather than from any external force. Also, economic incentives have been shown to sometimes reduce intrinsic motivation in certain cases (Thøgersen 2005b). For example, Frey and Oberholzer-Gee (1997) found that the feelings of civic duty ceased to have an impact on the willingness to accept a nuclear waste repository in Switzerland as soon as monetary incentives were offered. Further research into the limitations of these measures is needed both in Ireland and internationally.

Communicative instruments appeal to an individual's sense of responsibility. It is predicted that access to accurate information about the environment will increase awareness, change attitudes and lead to pro-environmental behaviour. This information-deficit approach is reflected in the Marrakesh Accords, which ascribe a key role to education, communication and marketing tools (UN DESA and UNEP 2008). However, a significant drawback of many communicative instruments has been a tendency to simply provide information without attending to individual and structural factors that mediate the reception of such information and the ability to act on it. As has been widely stated in literature on SC, a "value-action gap" exists between how people think they should behave and their actual behaviour (Davies et al. 2010; Doran 2007; Gardner and Stern 1996; Mason 1999; Owens 2000). This gap is produced by a number of barriers which can range from financial and institutional constraints (e.g., a lack of income or facilities) to personal factors (e.g., a lack of interest in environmental issues). Therefore, appropriate and accurate information provision is considered important, but by itself insufficient to elicit behaviour change (Burgess et al. 2003; Hawthorne and Alabaster 1999; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Petts 1997). Stern (1999) concedes that efforts focussed solely on the provision of information to encourage pro-environmental consumer behaviour can sometimes be misplaced but argues that the synergistic effects of combining incentives and information can be valuable. Access to information may trigger negative reactions among groups in society that cannot readily avail of sustainable alternatives due to their economic circumstances or their geographical location. For example, recent efforts to reduce car dependency in rural parts of Ireland have been severely hampered by the lack of sustainable transport alternatives (Rau and Hennessy 2009).

Heated debates among social scientists about the advantages and drawbacks of different instrument types in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that there is no simple causal relationship between choice of instruments and achieving policy goals. Implementation research has hitherto failed to identify specific socio-political and institutional conditions under which

certain instruments are “always” more effective than others (Knill 2008). Indeed, the influence of context on the impact of policy instruments makes it difficult to compare their effectiveness across individual cases (Andersen 2000; Howlett 2004; Linder and Peters 1989; Pape 2009). The fact that policy initiatives tend to combine different instruments that interact in (un)predictable ways complicates further the evaluation of outcomes. For example, McDonald and Nix (2005) show that a context-specific combination of legislative, communicative and fiscal instruments in three policy areas—planning, infrastructure and transport—has led to unsustainable patterns of consumption of land and distance in Ireland.

Nevertheless, *instrument mixes* that combine information, incentives, social influences and institutional supports have been shown to be effective, in particular in cases where policy making remains inclusive and responds to social and political circumstances (Gardner and Stern 1996; Stern 1999). This is highly relevant because it highlights the role of power relations in the context of policy making. To understand how and why policies are adopted and implemented, it is important to study the wider political context, that is, the dominant political culture, prevailing policy styles and power relations between interest groups both at national and supranational level. With this in mind, sustainable consumption policy making and implementation in Ireland is examined below.

Ireland: SC Policy Development and Implementation in Context

Ireland maintained a relatively undamaged environment until late in the twentieth century due to its lack of heavy industry. However, changes in economic activity, population and settlement patterns caused a deterioration of environmental quality since the 1980s. Patterns of over-consumption in the areas of energy, transport, waste and water have been the main sources of environmental pressure associated with rapid economic growth during the 1990s and early 2000s (the so-called Celtic Tiger period). Ireland had the highest percentage increase of greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector of any EU country during the period 1990–2003 (Flynn 2007). Energy trends are also characterized by significant demand growth (3.7% per annum since 1990), high import dependency (91%) and low renewable energy penetration (2.7%). The residential sector alone accounts for 24% of final energy use generated by water and space heating and cooling, lighting and the use of electrical appliances (SEAI 2008). While some progress has been made in decoupling energy and material intensity from economic growth and in reducing emissions from industry, absolute pressures on the environment continue to increase (Barry 2009; Leonard 2008).

Policy and legislation in Ireland directed towards more sustainable development have been driven predominantly by international initiatives in the environmental field. The positive influence of EU legislation on environmental policy-making in Ireland has been repeatedly stated: “EC Directives shifted attention away from pollution control to establishing precise environmental standards, a feature of regulation in Ireland which had been conspicuous only in its absence” (Taylor 2001, p. 22). This coincides with a highly centralized political system without any effective federal or regional government structures (Ó Broin and Waters 2007). Until the establishment of the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1992, there were two main actors responsible for dealing with environmental issues: (1) the Department of the Environment (since 2003: the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government), which set priorities and formulated policies and (2) local authorities across the country, entrusted with implementation and

enforcement. The local level is made up of 29 County Councils and five City Councils operating under the supervision of the Department of the Environment. Local government in Ireland is generally described as weak (Ó Broin and Waters 2007).

During the 1990s, sustainable development emerged as a prominent policy goal in Ireland, resulting in the adoption of a National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) in 1997. The aim outlined in the NSDS was “to ensure that the economy and society in Ireland can develop to their full potential within a well protected environment, without compromising the quality of that environment and with responsibility towards present and future generations and the wider international community.”² In the absence of a revised Strategy (originally due in 2008 but now predicted in late 2010³), the principal goals and policies defined in the 1997 NSDS continue to inform SD and environmental protection strategies in Ireland. Even though the NSDS states as one “priority for action” the goal to promote sustainable consumption and lifestyles (Government of Ireland 1997, p. 28), no specific government action has evolved from this goal. To target consumer behaviour and improve opportunities for green purchasing, the 1997 NSDS stated that the Office of Consumer Affairs would be asked to prepare a Code of Practice on green marketing to which producers and retailers could voluntarily subscribe (NSDS 1997). However, no explicit actions have been taken on this proposal to date. An updated version of the NSDS from 2002 was considered a retreat from the 1997 NSDS as it made no mention of Sustainable Consumption and Production as a specific policy area (Doran 2007).

Not surprisingly, sustainable consumption has received little attention, given the lack of a coherent policy framework. Efforts to meet EU calls for a SC action plan for Ireland have been impeded by the fragmentation of responsibility across different government departments and the lack of explicit policy goals and objectives (Doran 2007; Pender and Dunne 2007). For example, responsibility for product labelling frequently involves a plethora of government departments, state agencies and non-governmental organizations. This low priority of sustainable consumption in Ireland contrasts with considerable progress made by some other EU Member States such as Finland or the UK which have developed comprehensive national SCP programmes (Berg 2010; UNEP 2008).

Despite these limitations, specific areas of consumption have been targeted by the introduction of economic and communicative instruments mostly aimed at individuals and households. Economic instruments include waste charges, changes in vehicle registration tax (VRT) in 2008 to reflect car emissions and the successful roll-out of the plastic bag levy in 2002. Furthermore, subsidies have been introduced, such as an incentive scheme for the purchase of electric cars⁴ and a range of home energy savings schemes administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. Communicative instruments include information campaigns such as the 2006 *Power of One* campaign to save energy (further details of these are provided below).

The setting up of Comhar (Sustainable Development Council), an advisory body that briefs the Irish government on matters of sustainable development, has been heralded as an important milestone in the development of Ireland's sustainable development policy landscape. While Comhar provides a useful advisory function for policy development, the extent of its impact to date has been questioned (Flynn 2007). However, this may change with its involvement in the forthcoming revision of the National Sustainable Development Strategy in 2010.

² <http://www.environ.ie/en/Environment/SustainableDevelopment/> (accessed 10th June 2010).

³ <http://www.environ.ie/en/Environment/SustainableDevelopment/> (accessed 8th November 2010).

⁴ <http://www.eamonryan.ie/2010/04/12/electric-cars-a-reality-for-ireland/> (accessed 8th June 2010).

The onset of the economic recession in 2008 brought about new challenges and responses, some of which touch directly on “green” production and consumption. Not only has the current economic crisis reduced consumption levels in key areas, such as transport, it has also changed the political landscape. Government proposals for “green jobs” and “smarter travel” and emerging trends towards low-cost or no-cost policy solutions reflect these new economic and environmental realities. For example, the preparation of *Smarter Travel* bids by local authorities in 2009/10 was intended to encourage the roll-out of sustainable transport and mobility initiatives that require limited financial input. The current recession has thrown up challenges that existing policy tools and strategies cannot address sufficiently.

Overall, the dominant policy interpretation of sustainable development, and hence sustainable consumption, by the Irish Government has been a concern to protect the environment whilst not impeding economic growth. This has been characterized as an ecologically modern interpretation of sustainability that prioritizes economic and technological solutions (Davies 2009; Rau 2008). As the following sub-sections demonstrate, this has led to a proliferation of economic instruments and communicative mechanisms in key areas of consumption policy such as energy and transport. However, we argue that this economic-technological focus cannot adequately address challenges of SC that relate to social and cultural factors. Importantly, many of these initiatives have been reactive rather than pro-active, responding to increasing environmental pressures caused by the economic boom of the 1990s and early 2000s. Reflecting on the developments made in the areas of sustainable consumption, it is fair to say that significant challenges as well as opportunities for creating a more sustainable consumption landscape exist within Ireland.

Specific Policy Responses I: The Use of Economic Instruments

Certain environmental policy instruments introduced in Ireland during the 1990s and 2000s have attracted considerable attention by policy makers and sustainability researchers. For example, a European survey entitled *Sustainable Consumption and Production in the European Union* estimates that the 2002 plastic bag levy has reduced consumption of plastic bags in Ireland by 92% and that receipts from this levy during 2003 totalled over 12.7 million Euros (UNEP 2004). The success of the plastic bag levy has been interpreted by some scholars in terms of the “value-action gap.” Many people understood the waste disposal issues associated with plastic bags before the levy was introduced, but behaviour did not change until an economic incentive was introduced through regulation (Doran 2007). However, the plastic bag levy was preceded by many years of resistance and then negotiation between key stakeholders and a widespread publicity campaign prior to the introduction of the levy. Exemptions to the plastic bag levy were made to appease opponents (e.g., clear plastic bags for fruit and vegetables are still available and not subject to a levy) and the impact of the replacement bags in terms of the waste stream and recycling has not been conducted.

The considerable success of the plastic bag levy has not been replicated in other areas. The introduction of pay-by-use (PBU) waste charging systems in Ireland exemplifies this. While PBU has certainly reduced the amount of waste collected, reductions have been considerably less than in other countries. Moreover, PBU schemes were met with considerable resistance, triggering protests and local “bin wars” (Davies 2007; Davies and O’Callaghan-Platt 2008). These tensions have been attributed to limited state intervention in the municipal waste sector whereby both public and private waste collectors

did not receive any guidance on what PBU systems and charging structures to adopt. Initially, many local governments simply imposed a flat rate fee irrespective of the amount of waste produced, thereby disregarding the polluter pays principle. While public protests and challenges under EU law led to some minor modifications to existing PBU systems, many localities still retain a flat service charge component.

The formation of the Fianna Fáil-Greens-Independents coalition government in 2007 and the appointment of two Green Party ministers to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources initiated significant policy developments in key consumption areas, including energy, transport, waste and water. While many of these policies rely on market-based economic mechanisms, there have been some top-down, interventionist measures too. The introduction of a new system of VRT and emissions-based motor taxes for private cars in 2008 attracted considerable negative publicity and resistance from the motoring lobby. Nonetheless, a report published in November 2009 by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) shows that these changes have radically transformed buying patterns. Private cars in the most efficient emission bands (A, B and C) made up 73% of new purchases, compared with just 43% for the first 6 months of 2008. The SEAI report finds, however, that this has not entailed a move towards smaller engine sizes in general. Instead, there has been a marked shift towards diesel-fuelled cars, with diesel cars doubling their share of sales between the first and second halves of 2008. Average CO₂ emissions of new cars purchased fell by 12% (SEAI 2009). A Sustainable Development Council of Ireland commentary suggests that these effects are “real, but exaggerated” by the recession, which increased demand for cheaper, typically lower-emitting cars (Comhar 2009). Benefits for the environment and the consumer resulting from these purchases may also be offset in the future by increases in car use (SEAI 2009).

Financial subsidies and grants make up a second important pillar of economic instruments, especially in the area of energy efficiency. The *House of Tomorrow Programme*, funded through the National Development Plan and managed by the SEAI, provided funding for residential and commercial developments which demonstrate good practice in energy efficiency. Other incentive-based schemes include the *Home Energy Saving Scheme* for domestic insulation, heating controls and other efficiency measures and the SEAI's *Warmer Homes Scheme* which aims to reduce fuel poverty by improving energy efficiency for low income homes. It has been estimated that to improve the energy efficiency rating of all houses to meet 2007 building regulation standards would cost €10,000 per household, resulting in an overall bill of approximately €9 billion.⁵ It is unlikely that sufficient funds will be available to meet such demands in the foreseeable future.

To summarize, the Green Party's participation in government since 2007 has promoted the introduction of eco-taxes in Ireland. More recently, the economic recession and the need for additional revenue have opened up another “window of opportunity” for the introduction of green taxes. At this point, tensions between the Green Party's own political agenda and its adoption of an eco-modernist stance, coupled with fiscal policy instruments, merit further exploration. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ http://www.seai.ie/Grants/Warmer_Homes_Scheme/ (accessed 10th June 2010).

Specific Policy Responses II: Communicative Instruments—Information, Education and Labelling

As noted above, awareness campaigns are usually based on an “information deficit model” (Mason 1999; Owens 2000), which assumes that positive environmental action is contingent on accurate information. An environmental awareness campaign in 1999 entitled *It's Easy to Make a Difference* promoted the idea that individuals can change their views and habits and that this will transform society. Davies (2002, p. 22) observed that this environmental campaign adopted a “simplistic view of the reason for the value-action gap” (see also Pelletier et al. 1996; Vining and Ebreo 1990). As already noted above, campaigns that focus solely on correcting individuals' information deficits ignore the social nature of consumption and overlook structural and cultural influences on people's choices (Cohen and Murphy 2001; Schultz 2002; Southerton et al. 2004; Wilhite and Lutzenhiser 1999).

Despite concerns about the effectiveness of such awareness campaigns, similar advertising-style, mass-mediated programmes were used in the areas of waste (*Race Against Waste*), biodiversity loss (*Notice Nature*), climate change (*Change*), and energy efficiency (*The Power of One*). Information on the exact costs of such campaigns remains difficult to obtain. However, it is known that many of these campaigns are run by private sector consultancies with multi-million euro budgets. Importantly, the impact of these campaigns remains unclear because evaluation reports are not available in the public domain.

In contrast, the merits of environmental education programmes in schools are well documented (Davies 1999; Scott and Oulton 2000). The *Green Schools Programme* is a prime example. It is run by An Taisce⁶ in co-operation with local authorities and now covers more than 80% of all schools in Ireland.⁷ The programme promotes and acknowledges pro-environmental actions at school level and aims to integrate environmental education into students' personal and home lives. To date, the *Green Schools Programme* has been heralded as a success in raising students' awareness and influencing positive environment behaviour. Early research, reported on by Mathar (2006), points to significant differences in behaviour between Green Schools students and non-Green School students: “Green School students display higher scores in all the behaviours assessed. This is most noticeable when it comes to participation in local environmental projects” (An Taisce 2001, p. 72). However, more research is needed to establish the long-term benefits of such programmes across the life-course. For example, it cannot necessarily be assumed that attitudes and behaviours developed at a young age through such programmes will be sustained throughout a lifetime (Davies 1999).

Eco-labelling represents a strategy for giving consumers tools to act on their environmental awareness (Thøgersen 2005a) by providing information on products, packaging or related literature, or advertising material. These measures include self-declared product-related claims and labels (e.g., “recycled,” “biodegradable”) as well as third-party/certified environmental labels (e.g., IOFGA organics certification in Ireland; EU Flower for sustainable tourism products). However, research by Pender and Dunne (2007) found that attention to labels and trust in claims made on labels was low amongst the Irish population. This lack of trust in labelling claims amongst the Irish population was given credence by the research of Pender and Dunne (2007) that found 29% of a survey sample of

⁶ An Taisce (National Trust for Ireland) is the oldest Irish environmental NGO. It can be compared with the National Trust (UK) and focuses mainly on aspects of natural and built heritage.

⁷ http://www.greenschoolsireland.org/index.aspx?Site_ID=1&Item_ID=185 (accessed 30th September 2010).

products failed one or more criteria in the UK's Green Claims Code (Pender and Dunne 2007). Pender and Dunne (2007) surveyed 179 self-declared factual and qualitative environmental claims using the 12 criteria contained in the UK's Green Claims Code and rated as "Pass," "Borderline," or "Fail." A total of 52% of the 179 claims were assessed as acceptable, 19% as borderline and 29% as failing one or more criteria. Equally, it has already been established that the effectiveness of eco-labels depends on stringent controls that ensure transparency and trust (Boström and Klintman 2008). A European Commission study found that there were no instruments of control specific to environmental claims in Ireland and no sanctions for making misleading claims (Leubuscher et al. 1998). This reduces the effectiveness of eco-labelling, which depends on consumer trust and credibility.

Opportunities and Challenges for SC Implementation in Ireland

Opportunities: Policy Learning from Abroad?

While Ireland currently faces a number of institutional, political, and economic challenges, opportunities exist at both national and international level for a more proactive approach to sustainable consumption. Recent changes in national policy and institutional structures described above, such as a shift towards "smarter" transport solutions and the establishment of Comhar, present real opportunities for Ireland to reach selected SD goals. Additional policy changes based on international good practice could provide further opportunities for policy learning that support sustainability transitions. Research conducted by the OECD (2008) and UNEP (2008) has helped to collect and promote information on good practice approaches in the area of SC. Indeed, many creative and innovative policy instruments in the area of SC have been developed across Europe in the past few years. Some examples of good practice in the area of SC policy taken from other European countries will be discussed below to demonstrate the potential benefits of adoption for Ireland (see Table 1).

Here we adopt the term "good practice" to draw attention to the problematic concept of "best practice." We argue that it is simply impossible to give a complete overview of all policies that exist in all countries or to compare them in absolute terms. An answer to the question which policy is "best" depends on measurement, comparability, implementation and context, so much so that it is extremely difficult to draw any final conclusions. Therefore, the examples presented here can simply provide a brief overview of the policies that are considered good practice in an international context. What seems to be apparent from international good practice and in the one case of particular success in Ireland, the plastic bag levy, is that mixed instrument use tends to provide better possibilities for the attainment of policy goals. That is where multiple tools, perhaps including economic and communicative streams, are employed together. Table 1 indicates some selected good practice examples that could be developed in an Irish context.

One particular example in terms of eco-labelling which combines information and government certification is the Nordic Swan—a cross-national labelling scheme with a very high uptake across the Nordic countries. This could serve as a model for Ireland, considering the cross-border context of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, as was discussed above, Irish people are distrustful and often not informed about labelling and certification schemes. In order to strengthen consumer trust and confidence in labelling, Doran (2007) recommends improving the regulatory framework for self-declared product information and the strengthening of national consumer production law to create an appropriate policy framework for responsible environmental information.

Table 1 Good practice examples for Ireland: mixed instruments

Mixed instruments

Nordic Countries	<p>The Nordic Swan</p> <p>One of the best-known examples of eco-labelling is the Nordic Swan (introduced in 1989). This label is administered by the Nordic council of Ministers and has an extremely high uptake (1200 products in 60 categories across the Nordic countries). It is also government certified and has extensive brand awareness with consumers.</p> <p>Ireland: This cross-border labelling scheme could serve as a model regarding the Irish all-island context as well as promoting a trustworthy government certification.</p>
Sweden	<p>Sustainable Transport</p> <p>Sweden has combined a number of instruments to help promote sustainable transport: a mix of carbon-differentiated vehicle tax, an environmental tax on air travel, tax exemption for diesel cars with particle filters and alternative fuel engines, as well as a congestion charge in Stockholm.</p> <p>Ireland: The recent smarter travel programme (2008/2009) could be extended to a more comprehensive framework comparable to the Swedish example.</p>
Denmark, Hungary & The Netherlands	<p>Public Information Campaigns combined with water prices</p> <p>These countries charge for water supplied to houses and then add additional levies for consumption over given thresholds as well as special restrictions. They combine this with public information campaigns to help decrease water wastage further.</p> <p>Ireland: Water charges are planned for households as soon as water meters are installed in homes. Ireland could learn from information campaigns from these countries to meet the already rising resistance against these charges.</p>

Source: Own compilation, examples adapted from OECD (2008)

New legislation should provide the framework for initiatives to standardize the declaration of key environmental factors about products.

Challenges: Institutions, Culture and Politics

The institutional context in which (environmental) policymaking takes place in Ireland displays certain weaknesses. As mentioned above, local governments are structurally weak compared to their European counterparts: “Ireland’s 39 city, borough and county councils must rank among the poorest specimens of local governance within western Europe” (Flynn 2007, p. 127; see also Ó Broin and Waters 2007). Local governments have limited fiscal or legal autonomy, as almost half their funding is directly disbursed by national government. As local actors are usually in charge of implementing environmental policies, this lack of autonomy has led to serious implementation deficits.

Further problems for local authorities arise from the contradictory nature of their regulatory function: they are at the same time charged with monitoring and regulating the environment and expected to compete with one another to attract investment (Flynn 2007). Finally, the competence of local authorities to construct local development plans and to enforce them in the face of political pressure has repeatedly been questioned, in particular because there is no regular system of checks or approval by a higher government level (Niestroy 2005).

National policy styles can also impact on policy formation, implementation and desired policy outcomes. The Irish policy style that has dominated both environmental and

sustainability arenas can be described as reactive and incremental, prioritizing end-of-pipe solutions over proactive steps to avoid environmental damage in the first place. Weak legislation and a regulatory style intolerant of stringent enforcement has been a recurring theme in environmental regulation since the late 1970s (Flynn 2007; Niestroy 2005; Taylor 2001). This contrasts with a highly adversarial relationship between State and environmental interest groups, while often practising consensual, pragmatic relations with industry interests in a neo-corporatist manner (Leonard 2008). This political style favours granting privileged political access to organized interests who regularly contribute to an agenda formed in a tightly closed policy community which implies that control over political access is used to minimize political disturbance and establish (a favourable) continuity in policy (Taylor 2001). Consequently, environmental and sustainability policy in Ireland has largely developed on an ad-hoc and reactive basis: “With an over-riding imperative to avoid conflict, reform, where it took place, was largely incremental and undertaken only after extensive consultation with organized interest groups” (Taylor 2001, p. 12).

While consultation and citizen involvement have become more common in some policy areas in Ireland, many consumption-related decisions remain firmly wedded to the continuity model described above. Transport and mobility policies serve as prime example of a closed policy arena. This consensual policy style has also been linked to serious gaps in the implementation of national and EU regulation (Flynn 2007; Leonard 2008; Niestroy 2005; Taylor 2001). Regarding the implementation of national environmental legislation, a regulatory style intolerant to stringent enforcement has implied the “discretionary nature of much of the legislation” (Taylor 2001, p. 17).

A particular political challenge that influences the implementation of SC policies on the island of Ireland is the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, co-operation in the area of environmental policy has been strengthened but is still lacking in transparency and coordination. The establishment of the North–South Ministerial Council (NSMC) has initiated cross-border co-operation in environmental policy areas (Barry 2009). The NSMC has also argued for greater co-operation on “strategies and activities which would contribute to a coherent all-island approach to the achievement of sustainable development” (NSMC 2000; in Barry 2009, p. 48). Similarly, the environmental goals of the British Irish Council focus on all-island approaches to SD.

All-island approaches to environmental governance have much merit insofar as ecological (and economic) considerations take precedent over traditional “ideological” issues and also because they articulate the shift from environmental protection to sustainable development. However, ongoing work on an all-island sustainable development policy remains largely invisible due to the particular structure of various cross-border institutions. For example, the NSMC is exempt from freedom of information legislation and the minutes of its meetings are very vague, which makes it virtually impossible to know how these cross-border initiatives are evolving (Barry 2009).

Discussion

In the Irish context, research in the critical field of sustainable consumption is only in its infancy. This article has outlined multiple pathways to transform current consumption patterns. The discussion on good practices above has demonstrated that, ultimately, lasting change in consumption patterns can only be initiated through a combination of context-sensitive policy strategies and regulatory instruments that focus on both sustainable

production and consumption (Gardner and Stern 1996; Stern 1999; Brand 2008). Changing consumption patterns requires a mix of measures that is most suitable for a specific national context and a particular task and that recognizes the continuously evolving socio-technical characteristics of broader systems of consumption.

Importantly, much more attention must be given to the particularities of the political-institutional context that influences a specific area of consumption. Creative solutions are needed in the Irish context to develop tailor-made policies to promote sustainable consumption. Resources are frequently consumed almost as a by-product of fulfilling the required function such as keeping warm or clean (Shove 2003; Spaargaren 2003). Practice-oriented interventions offer a promising approach to behavioural change in the area of consumption by drawing attention to the underlying reasons for these everyday practices.

Many institutional challenges and tensions in the area of sustainable consumption in Ireland have been identified in this paper. It has been shown that questions of responsibility remain as pressing and prominent as ever. The problem of appropriate scales of governance for sustainable consumption deserves reflection here. Should individual consumers, households, local governments, national governments, international governments, civil society and the private sector come together to address sustainable consumption? If so, what types of participatory processes are most conducive to successful multi-party policy making and implementation in the area of sustainable consumption?

In summary, while there is “no single method by which national SC policy programmes can or should be instituted,” (UNEP 2008, p. 3) it is widely agreed that the successful implementation of SC policy goals depends on at least four key factors: (1) high-level national commitment and leadership; (2) a multi-stakeholder approach; (3) the definition of clear objectives, actions, targets and indicators; and (4) the establishment of a rigorous monitoring programme (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000; UNEP 2008). Furthermore, SCP programmes should be integrated with existing national planning and (sustainable) development strategies and develop sector- or issue-specific action plans (UNEP 2008). However, the question remains how can individual, country-specific SCP instruments and programmes be evaluated?

Evaluation of National Good Practice Models for SCP Programmes

Aside from taking particularly successful cases of SC instruments (or instrument mixes), is it possible to make some general statements about national approaches to SC? The distinction between “weak” versus “strong” sustainability and its operationalisation in terms of three principles of strategic planning—*comprehensiveness*, *commitment* and *clarity*—provides a useful conceptual and methodological framework for systematic cross-national comparison (Berg 2010; Cherp et al. 2004; Fuchs and Lorek 2005). While “strong” applications of sustainability strategies promote structural changes with commitment and coordination, targeting, resourcing and monitoring, weak applications lack several of these qualities, resulting in fragmented policy actions (Berg 2010).

At present the Irish SC policy context is characterized by fragmentation, limited resource commitment and weakly developed planning, which in turns leads to a lack of clarity in terms of overall SC goals and objectives. However, the principles of strategic planning say little about process, content and outcomes of SC policy. Additional principles of *efficiency*, *cooperation* and *sufficiency* then offer further analytical potential to the comparative assessment of SC policy programmes (Princen 2003). Assessment of Berg (2010) of SCP programmes in Finland, Sweden, and the UK, for example, reveals that the efficiency principle (which focuses on technical and economic aims, e.g., using less oil to move a car

a given distance) dominates whereas principles of cooperation (the level of participation in policy formation) and especially sufficiency (promoting principles such as restraint and precaution) are developed to a much lesser degree.

The principle of sufficiency relates to the current “de-growth” debate, which questions the dominant paradigm of economic growth in industrialized countries. The fact that economic growth requires increasing consumption is seen as one of the fundamental contradictions of sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption implies consuming *less* to mitigate the worst effects of current overconsumption. Therefore, simply consuming differently or promoting “green consumerism” might not be sufficient. This debate has triggered research on how to address the delicate balance between a stable economy (which it is argued is ultimately linked to social stability) and the limits to growth, which can be regarded as one of the biggest challenges of our time (Daly 1996; Jackson 2009).

Applying these two sets of organizing principles for assessment to the Irish context, it can be concluded that Ireland has focused mainly on the principle of *efficiency* through its focus on economic instruments, energy efficiency and ecological modernisation. While an increasing focus on *cooperation* has emerged in recent times through the creation of Comhar, the SD Council, the principle of *sufficiency* remains under-developed: the concept is not discussed in the 1997 NSDS or in its revised version in 2002. Regarding the principle of cooperation, it is interesting to note that while some policy areas have been dominated largely by state-led, top-down policy measures that rely heavily on economic mechanisms and large-scale infrastructure development (e.g., transport, energy), others have been characterized by “soft” approaches such as information campaigns (e.g., waste, food). This perhaps reflects the diversity of policy actors (e.g., government, trade unions, NGOs) and their respective roles and (lack of) influence in specific policy areas. For example, the relatively open food policy community involves many interested (and traditionally influential) parties, such as farmers and less influential but nonetheless extremely active NGOs and educational practitioners who wish to influence policy. This contrasts with areas such as energy and transport, which remain top-heavy and involve only a small number of key players (e.g., Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and energy providers ESB, EirGrid and Bord Gáis). However, recent initiatives such as the drawing up of the *Smarter Travel—A Sustainable Transport Future* policy in 2008/9 included a significant public consultation process, which points towards a possible shift in transport policy-making towards greater participation from the bottom up.

The principles of *clarity*, *commitment*, and *comprehensiveness* required for “strong” sustainable strategies could be strengthened by designating one responsible institution for Sustainable Development and Consumption in Ireland and by developing a comprehensive policy framework for SCP. However, a policy framework in itself is not sufficient to ensure effective implementation. Following Berg (2010, p. 12), “programme documents do not tell the whole truth about SCP policy in a given country... rather than aiming at a programme that appears beautiful on paper, securing a high level of government commitment to the SCP agenda would go to the core of programme making.”

There are significant challenges to the implementation of sustainable consumption regulation within Ireland, particularly with respect to institutional arrangements; however, much can be learned from policy innovations elsewhere in the EU. This is not to suggest that successful instruments can simply be transposed from one country to the next. It is clear that sustainable consumption policies must be context-specific. Individuals and households are always influenced by contextual factors, and the development of effective policy to address sustainable consumption requires a more nuanced understanding of these contexts. Consequently, there is a need to establish foundational baseline data for Ireland in

key areas of consumption that impact directly on the environment, including transport, energy, water and food in ways that resonate with people's lifestyles and everyday activities.⁸

Economic Downturn: An Opportunity for SC Policies in Ireland?

It is possible that the current economic downturn may present an opportunity to place the issue of sustainable consumption firmly on the Irish policy agenda. The development of a "smart-green economy" is being heralded as a potential panacea to the current recession that would produce a win-win scenario for both the economy and the environment. During 2009 both Comhar⁹ and the Green Party/Comhaontas Glas¹⁰ published proposals for a "Green New Deal" which, amongst other things, emphasized the creation of "green-collar" jobs, investment in "green" R&D in areas such as energy and transport, and a movement away from fossil-fuel-based energy production through extensive investment in renewable energy. To date, there has been a strong focus on ecological modernisation of existing economic and technological systems, although some emphasis is also placed on reviving and creating sustainable communities in urban and rural areas.

The issue of sustainable consumption, however, plays only a minor role in the context of these proposals. Similarly, there is little attention paid to issues such as personal savings, reducing consumption and materialism, or household budgeting and economic literacy. Overall, the prioritization of production in these Green New Deal proposals seems to suggest that (sustainable) consumption remains a secondary policy issue, particularly in times of economic crisis and rising unemployment.

Conclusion

The limited effectiveness of many of the sustainable consumption policies and instruments discussed in this paper can be partly attributed to their top-down, government-led nature that allows for little active participation by consumers, householders and other interested parties. This finding supports existing contributions to the social-scientific study of sustainable consumption that consider interventions formulated from the consumer's perspective to be most effective (Stern 1999) and that call for a comprehensive reframing of green consumer policies through reflective deliberation among a range of actors, including consumers (Klintman 2009). It is argued here that participatory and interactive approaches to policy have advantages over top-down awareness campaigns based on an information deficit model, simplistic fiscal measures or command and control regulatory frameworks because they directly confront all policy actors with sustainability challenges. These policies need to be complemented with transdisciplinary research which involves participants from governmental and non-governmental organizations, business and industry, designers and environmentalists as well as householders in the development of innovative methodologies, action plans and programmes for more sustainable consumption.

⁸ The ConsEnSus project is beginning to make research inroads in this direction by exploring context-specific factors which impact on consumption patterns in Ireland, both north and south of the border (see www.consensus.ie).

⁹ http://www.comharsdc.ie/files/2009_TowardsGNDIreland_rpt.pdf (accessed 8th June 2010).

¹⁰ http://www.greenparty.ie/en/policies/green_new_deal/green_new_deal (accessed 8th June 2010).

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