

## School of Geography & Archaeology

### Consumption, Environment and Sustainability: The CONSENSUS Project

#### Impact Description

The project has engaged over 150,000 members of the public along with 150 government, private sector and civil society stakeholders (see Figure 1). Extensive results dissemination, project publications, creative online resources and social media activities (detailed in Figure 2) have ensured that the research findings have attained an international profile and audience beyond academia. The innovative dissemination and engagement strategies adopted within the CONSENSUS project has been recognised at the international level; Drs Rau, Goggins and Fahy's recent paper **reflecting on the impact of the CONSENSUS project** (Rau, H. Goggins, G and Fahy F (2018) 'From invisibility to impact: Recognising the scientific and societal relevance of interdisciplinary sustainability research'. *Research Policy*, 47 (1):266-276) was nominated for Best Sustainable Development Research Article of the Year 2017, by the ISDR Society. Throughout the past seven years, as the Project Manager of the CONSENSUS project, Dr Fahy has been **engaged with high-level policy advisors, retailers, product designers, and companies as well as policy officers, scientists and non-governmental organisations in the co-creation of knowledge**. In his address at the Consensus International Conference in May 2012, Micheal O Cinneide, Director of Research for the EPA, described the impact of the CONSENSUS research project as 'exemplary'. When funded in 2009, CONSENSUS was one of the largest socio-economic projects ever funded in the state (€1m). **Impressed with the impact and reach of the project, the EPA funded a further two-year extension to the CONSENSUS project** (approx. €450,000 from 2014-15).

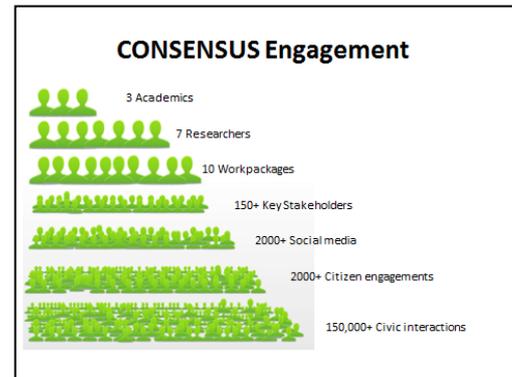


Figure 1: CONSENSUS Diagram of Engagement

#### Effects of Impact

##### Impact on the Sustainability and SC Research Landscape

In the Irish context, prior to the commencement of the CONSENSUS project, research in the critical field of sustainable consumption was only in its infancy. Regarding local and national activities in the area of sustainability/SC research, the project developed the first cross-border **dataset on consumption and lifestyles** for the island of Ireland. CONSENSUS has built significant capacity not only within the research community of Ireland, but also within public, private and civil society spheres. The research project developed intellectual capacity on SC through **the training and mentoring of 7 PhD students and 3 post-doctoral researchers, not only those employed directly on the research project but researchers on spin-off projects utilising concepts, methodologies and data from CONSENSUS as their foundation**. For example, in 2014, Science Foundation Ireland funded an innovative collaborative project on energy retrofitting that brings together social science and engineering expertise and that builds on and extends insights from CONSENSUS.<sup>i</sup> The CONSENSUS *Lifestyle Survey* instrument has been employed by a number of different international research teams (e.g. University of Oregon, University of Idaho and University of Otago). **A number of industry partners, such as Helena McElmeel Architects and Cluid Housing Association, have also deployed parts of the Lifestyle Survey**. For example, elements of the questionnaire were employed in surveys conducted with resident's pre- and post-retrofit work on their homes as part of a sustainable energy project in 2012/2013 and 2015. Furthermore, Dr Fahy and her colleagues

developed dedicated lectures and modules around the theme of sustainable consumption, and **> 1500 individual undergraduate students have enrolled in these research-informed courses since 2010.**

#### Shaping National Policy

The CONSENSUS outputs have been cited in policy documents such as the National Economic and Social Research Council (NESR) reports to government entitled 'Climate Change Policy Review' and 'Towards Ireland's Low Carbon Future' (2013), **which fed directly into the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill (Government of Ireland 2015).** In addition, four CONSENSUS publications are cited in the NESR document 'Social and Behavioural Aspects of Climate Change' published in December 2012. Moreover, Dr Fahy was an invited panellist on the NESR Roundtable on the Challenge of Environmental Policy Integration. It is interesting to note that the CONSENSUS survey data appears to have gained the most traction within policy circles, partly because of targeted dissemination but also because of the more conventional, quantitative format of the output.

#### Shaping Funding Priorities

As well as informing policy, these working relationships have enabled Dr Fahy and her team to **impact future research agendas and identify new research priorities.** Indeed, over the past decade in which Dr Fahy has been researching in the field of environmental geography, one of her greatest achievements has been bringing the environmental behavioural change agenda to the attention of national policy makers and funders. For example, Dr Jonathan Derham, Programme Manager of the Climate Resource and Research Programme for the EPA, emailed the Consensus Team with feedback the EPA Board of Directors on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2013, to state that the Board are 'highly motivated and impressed with the value of the outputs/learnings' from the CONSENSUS project, commenting that 'the Behavioural Change agenda is now core to our new EPA strategy and an essential dimension of environmental governance ambitions. Your work will play a significant role in informing further work and appropriate responses'. **Since 2014, Behavioural Change has appeared as a strand for research funding and it is now central to the EPAs agenda, the 2014-2020 EPA Research Strategy identifies it as a priority strand stating:** *"Developing a better understanding of how individual and collective behaviour can either help or hinder progress towards a low-carbon, resilient, resource-efficient economy and society."*

In conclusion, CONSENSUS incorporated a broad range of evidence from a variety of sources and developed innovative dissemination strategies to try to maximise impact, not just for use as evidence in policy processes but for consumption by wider audiences and some of that dissemination and impact has been captured and quantified (e.g. Figure 2). While acknowledging that a more holistic picture of the impact of this research may only become apparent after an extended period of time, this document has outlined some examples of the specific methods used and areas in which CONSENSUS has impacted. In particular, following Nutley et al.'s (2007) types of non-academic impacts we **captured many aspects of the instrumental use (i.e. impact of research on policy and practice decisions)** of our research (e.g. through mapping the discussions, references and citations of our research through policy documents such as Government of Ireland (2015) *National Climate Policy*, and its subsequent implementation). Regarding **capacity-building (i.e. education, training and development of collaborative abilities)** this document outlined how CONSENSUS built significant capacity not only within the research community of Ireland and amongst the team members, but also within public, private and civil society spheres through multi-stakeholder workshops, conferences and presentations (e.g. number of research opportunities created, and number of undergraduate students now enrolled in SC courses). However, while we acknowledge that the project has created significant opportunities and spaces for reflection, **mapping the conceptual use of our research** (i.e. changing traditional ways of thinking about SC and raising awareness among non-academic audiences) remains an ongoing endeavour. Overall, it can be concluded that the collaborative, participatory processes inherent in CONSENSUS are far more expansive and deliberative than any current decision-making procedures concerned with household practices across Ireland.

## Figure 2: Academic dissemination & societal and policy impacts of CONSENSUS

A detailed list of CONSENSUS outputs is available at [www.consensus.ie](http://www.consensus.ie) and the website is used as part of an on-going research communication strategy. In addition to the dissemination of traditional academic outputs such as:

- **Publications:** 42 peer-reviewed publications and one edited volume produced to date by the CONSENSUS team.
- **International presentations:** 139 oral papers and 8 posters have been presented internationally to date.
- **Two CONSENSUS international conferences:** May 2012, May 2015 hosted by Dr Fahy in NUIG. Recorded lectures from the conference have been uploaded to the EPA YouTube channel and viewed over 1000 times.

Societal and policy impacts were achieved by:

- **Developing governing tools:** a catalogue of international best practice SC models and a review of Ireland's progress in this field have been produced
- **Policy engagement:** CONSENSUS team members have submitted recommendations for national transport, energy and water policies. Team members also participated in a review of climate change for NESC, with CONSENSUS findings referenced in the final report to government.
- **Lifestyle Survey Factsheets:** disseminated to over 250 stakeholders; including advisory board members, local and national media and local authorities
- **Media communications:** numerous press releases and radio interviews relating to sustainable transport, mobilities and the overall CONSENSUS project. Articles have appeared in national and international newspapers (e.g. Irish Times, the Examiner, The Guardian's Sustainable Business section, Sustainable Brands website.)
- **Transition Frameworks:** three transition framework documents dedicated to the themes of energy, water and food have been disseminated to local authorities across the Island of Ireland and are also available online
- **WaterWise Exhibit:** showcased in Dublin, New York & Canada, receiving > **100,000 views from gallery visitors.**
- **Online outputs:** CONSENSUS findings have also been communicated through a dedicated website and monthly newsletter, online social media, SCRN, and the EPA SAFER portal. Team membership of international communication networks such as SPREAD, RESPONDER, SCORAI and the Global Network on Sustainable Lifestyles has further extended the dissemination of project results internationally.
- **Podcasts:** Dr. Henrike Rau and Dr. Frances Fahy – Challenging Consumption available free to download from: <https://itunes.apple.com/ie/podcast/ryan-institute-nui-galway/id949655061>
- **Video Short Animations:** 3 innovative motion graphics have been produced based on the CONSENSUS research project methods and findings. Combined, these videos have been **viewed over 8,000 times to date.**

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://jamiagoggins.wix.com/nzeb-retrofit#!socio-technical-innovations/c1p8c> (last accessed 10 October 2015).