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Further Reading:

Lavelle, M.J. and Fahy, F. (2021) Creating Context for Corridors of Consumption: A case study from Ireland *Sustainability, Science and Policy* Vol. 17 (1) 62-76

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Read More About: Environment, Development and Sustainability within the Whitaker Institute for Innovation and Societal Change

CONSENSUS Project
(www.consensus.ie)

Funded by STRIVE (Science, Technology, Research and Innovation) and administered by the Irish Environmental Protection Agency, CONSENSUS has gained international recognition for its use of cutting-edge behavioural science and collaborative visioning exercises to generate innovations for sustainable consumption in the areas of water, energy, food and transport.

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Creating ‘Corridors of Consumption’

Across the island of Ireland, domestic consumption levels have increased dramatically in the past three decades, making sustainable consumption a key challenge for policy makers. To date, public discourse has focused primarily on minimum levels of consumption but there has been a complete dearth of discussion around the concept of maximum levels of consumption. Our research proffers that the concept of ‘consumption corridors’ provides a timely lens to initiate discussion and critically consider the potential of ascertaining maximum levels of consumption across Ireland. Consumption corridors demarcate the space for sustainable consumption by defining minimum and maximum consumption standards that permit individuals to satisfy their needs and to live a life they value without impairing the possibility of a good life for other people.

Results

Our research argues that there is no single universally just and ecologically sustainable way of setting limits to consumption. Numerous factors need to be considered, including scale, policy influences, cultural understandings, as well as varying expectations of standards of living. This research unpacks some of these factors and aims to advance methodological applications of the consumption corridors concept. Drawing on analyses of an extensive database of 1,500 households across two policy regions on the island of Ireland (i.e., Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), the research study examined what people viewed as *necessities* and *luxury* household items in their daily lives. Items explored included cars, televisions, laptops, and power showers to name a few. Results demonstrated that the majority of items (in particular, recent digital innovations and technologies such as laptops, televisions, and mobile phones) were considered to be necessity items rather than luxury items by respondents in this study. We found significant differences across gender and generational lines (in terms of patterns of online media use) for children and adults and what they perceived as satisfiers (luxury items) and needs (necessities). Overall, we found the younger respondents to be more likely to view digital technologies and home appliances (that offer convenience and comfort) (e.g., power shower, laptop, mobile phone, dishwasher) as necessity items, with the exception of the car and the television. Although this study did not explore the rationale behind why items were viewed as necessity or luxury items, the survey did examine participants’ willingness to sacrifice some personal comforts in the home in order to save energy. The majority of respondents (70%, n = 1,038) stated that they would be willing to give up some personal household comforts to reduce their energy use.

Policy Implications

The results provide a useful starting point to examine potential trends when exploring initial establishment of minimum and maximum levels of consumption. However, for those undertaking future work on operationalizing consumption corridors we would advocate strongly for other more collaborative approaches to establish minimum and maximum consumption levels. Designing and implementing consumption corridors are complex and challenging tasks. This research produced valuable evidence highlighting a need for tailored sustainability policies across policy regions and cultural groupings, as well as different life stages. Understanding reported needs and characteristics of individuals and communities has the potential to assist in creating consumption corridors. Finally policy messages with a focus on quality of life may have cultural salience for many people and hence be more likely to promote favourable conditions for advancing the corridors concept.