Environmental RTDI Programme 2000–2006

Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland

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Synthesis Report

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Prepared for the Environmental Protection Agency

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SOCIO-ECONOMICS

The Socio-Economics Section of the Environmental RTDI Programme addresses the need for research in Ireland to inform policymakers and other stakeholders on a range of questions in this area. The reports in this series are intended as contributions to the necessary debate on socio-economics and the environment.

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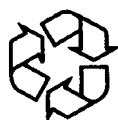
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1   Introduction

The research programme on *Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland* included the completion and analysis of a quantitative national survey on environmental attitudes and behaviour, as well as two qualitative research projects.

The national survey of environmental attitudes used a module on environmental attitudes, values and behaviour designed by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). This was expanded for fielding within the first Irish Social and Political Attitudes Survey (ISPAS), funded by a grant from the Higher Education Authority under PRTLI-1 and PRTLI-2. Drawing on an ISSP module enabled the research to have a comparative cross-national perspective. The module also repeated many of the questions asked in an earlier 1993 module on environmental attitudes in Ireland, enabling trends and changes over a decade to be examined. Three reports were produced presenting an analysis of these data. In the first report, *Trends in Irish Environmental Attitudes between 1993 and 2002* (Motherway *et al.*, 2003), the extent to which Irish people's environmental attitudes and behaviours changed over the period 1993–2002 was explored. In the second report, *Cultural Sources of Support on which Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours Draw* (Kelly *et al.*, 2003), three theoretical explanations as to why differences exist in Irish people's

environmental attitudes and behaviours were examined in some detail. The aim of the third report entitled *Environmental Attitudes and behaviours: Ireland in Comparative European Perspective* (Kelly *et al.*, 2004) was to examine how the environmental values, attitudes and behaviours of Irish people differed from those of their European neighbours. These reports are available for download at http://www.ucd.ie/environ/home.htm and www.epa.ie. The report in hand presents the executive summaries of each of these in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, respectively.

The results and analysis of the two qualitative research projects, of which summaries are also presented in this report, are published as books by the Institute of Public Administration, Dublin. The first of the qualitative projects, *Environmental Debates and the Public in Ireland* (Kelly, 2007), used a focus group methodology to examine how a wide range of different groups thought and talked about environmental issues, while the second, *Environmentalism in Ireland – Movement and Activists* (Tovey, 2007), used qualitative interviews with environmental activists to examine the organisational styles they had developed as well as why they became activists. Summary findings of these two projects are presented in Chapters 5 and 6 below.

2   Trends in Irish Environmental Attitudes between 1993 and 2002

2.1   Introduction

Trends in Irish Environmental Attitudes between 1993 and 2002 was the first main data report from the research programme on *Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland*. The aims of the report were to present the results from the 2001/2002 fielding of a national survey on environmental attitudes developed by the ISSP and to compare those results with the data from the 1993 fielding of much the same set of questions. The analysis was based on a representative sample survey of 1257 adults interviewed between December 2001 and February 2002.

Despite the considerable turbulence and change in environmentalism between 1993 and 2002, particularly in terms of environmental politics, what was possibly most striking about the analysis of the environmental surveys was that change in response patterns was often quite slight.

Political discourses about the environment had evolved significantly in the 10-year period, particularly through the advent of the politics of sustainable development as embodied in the ecological modernisation paradigm. Sustainable development had become the dominant language of political discourse about the environment, and was also a key influence on policy formation and institutional change. Sustainable development encapsulates the paradigm of ecological modernisation, in which environmental and economic goals are seen as aligned, and indeed environmental protection is seen as essential to continued economic growth. A question for this analysis was whether this change in political discourse was matched by changes in types of attitudes and concern expressed by respondents to the national survey cited above.

2.2   Attitudes to the Environment, Science and Nature

Certainly, there were discernible attitudinal shifts towards two components of the ecological modernisation discourse: faith in scientific decision making and rejection of an environmental protection *versus* economic growth dichotomy. Support for both of these themes was growing, as revealed in several related questions. However, in some cases those who did not see an environment/economy opposition might in fact simply have been expressing a low regard for environmental prioritisation.

2.3   Personal Efficacy and Motivation

In 2002, more people accepted that it was not too difficult for them to 'do something about the environment', and a majority (albeit slightly smaller than in 1993) claimed to do what was right for the environment 'even when it costs more money or takes more time'. There was also an increase in the number of people claiming willingness to pay for environmental protection, although it was notable that more people were willing to pay higher prices than were willing to pay higher taxes. This may be because of an aversion to tax generally and a preference to control payment for the environment through consumer choices. It may also reveal a tendency to respond more positively to questions about behaviour that is more remote or abstract, which is the case with unspecified higher prices as opposed to the more concrete question of higher tax. However, it was notable that between 1993 and 2002 there was more growth in positive responses to the willingness to pay higher tax question than to paying higher prices.

2.4   Environmental and Scientific Knowledge

In both 1993 and 2002, responses to scientific knowledge questions revealed a generally low level of such knowledge. In addition, virtually no change in knowledge levels was observed over time. However, there was some indication from responses that people understood the important causal links between their own actions and the environmental impacts, which is obviously more important than an understanding of the scientific details. There was also evidence that some of the items were not taken as simple factual questions, but questions of personal values. Specifically, among those expressing formal religious beliefs, negative responses to the question about humans having evolved from animals were much higher.

2.5   Specific Environmental Concern

Among the environmental issues of concern to respondents, the impact of nuclear power plants remained the highest, followed by pollution of rivers and lakes and then industrial pollution. These three were the issues of highest overall concern in both 1993 and 2002. However, the most change was seen in items relating to global environmental impacts; concern about air pollution from cars 'for the environment' and the rise in the world's temperature (climate change) exhibited the most positive shifts over time.

There was a strong shift away from expressions of extreme concern between 1993 and 2002, but no change in the overall levels of concern, when moderate and extreme concern were examined together. Environmental concern, it seems, was becoming embedded in day-to-day life and normal politics, and was less in the domain of radical or extreme political views.

Analysis suggests that those with more knowledge of the issues tended to express greater environmental concern and commitment.

2.6   Responsibility and Action

Respondents' views on responsibility and regulation, especially regarding the role of business, were strongly at odds with the ecological modernisation discourse of self-regulation and a pro-business stance. Respondents saw 'people in general' as doing most to protect the environment, followed by government and then lastly by business and industry. This pattern was also seen in the very low level of support for business to 'decide for themselves' about environmental protection, and very high support for a regulatory approach. Laws were also supported for 'ordinary people', although not to quite the same extent. For both groups, support for voluntary approaches had fallen over time.

Similar patterns of perceived trustworthiness were seen in responses about who to trust as sources of information on the environment. Universities fared best, business was seen as least trustworthy, followed by newspapers and then government departments.

2.7   Environmental Behaviour

One area where changing context had the most impact on the survey results was that of recycling behaviour. There was a dramatic increase in reported recycling, particularly away from those reporting that it was not an option for them, as would be expected from the increased availability of facilities over the decade. However, a similar trend was not seen in relation to cutting back on driving 'for environmental reasons', despite the raised profile of car usage and its impacts in those years. In terms of political behaviour, formal activism of any kind remained rare.

2.8   Socio–Demographic Patterns

All of these response patterns for both attitudinal and behavioural questions can be examined in terms of the influence of socio–demographic variables, such as age, gender, income and social class. Overall, there was some explanatory power in the set of socio–demographic variables. Both concern and commitment levels generally rose with education levels. Patterns by age were more complex, with the highest expressed concern and commitment occurring in the mid-range categories, and with the youngest age group (18–25) exhibiting among the lowest levels of interest in the issues. Social class was significantly related to many responses, as was respondents' occupational category. In particular, professionals tended to score significantly higher than average in environmental concern and commitment measures and generally higher social classes expressed more environmental commitment. However, a *caveat* here is that some measures such as willingness to pay or recycling habits depended on structural factors such as income or access to facilities. The importance of identity-related socio–demographic variables, such as occupation type, class and education, suggests that there was a significant cultural or self-identity-related dimension to environmental attitudes.

2.9   Conclusions

There was some evidence to suggest that environmentalism was becoming a more mainstream, modern and normal paradigm of concern in Ireland. Certainly, in the 2002 responses there was less extreme environmental concern than in 1993, and less challenge to dominant economic or scientific paradigms. However, people were certainly concerned about the environment, and were strongly supportive of government-led responses, through regulation and even through higher prices or taxes where necessary. There was much less support for the perceived polarity between economic growth and environmental protection as political imperatives. The danger remained, however, that if concern became more normal and less extreme some of the urgency would be lost.

Those who expressed willingness to act environmentally tended to be richer and more educated. However, expressed concern did not entirely follow the same pattern, suggesting that environmentalism was not only the domain of more empowered and richer sections of society, rather that certain environmental responses, controlled by, say, easy access to recycling facilities or high levels of personal mobility or disposable income, were not equally available to all.

Detailed scientific knowledge did not seem to be a significant barrier to environmental support or behaviour. While knowledge of the scientific details of environmental issues was often weak, people seemed to understand the implications of their actions and their own personal place in the causality. There was, however, possibly a tendency to express general, abstract, environmental concern or support that did not necessarily translate into real personal motivation.

The data analysed suggested that very many people had a strong interest in and commitment to environmental protection. However, answers to questions on knowledge, priorities and specific concerns suggested that people had many different understandings of the meaning of 'the environment'. Furthermore, socio–demographic analysis indicated that these responses were influenced by factors such as education level and occupation type. Thus, it is clear that there were cultural and social dimensions to how people saw the environment and their place in it.

3 Cultural Sources of Support on which Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours Draw

3.1 Introduction

Cultural Sources of Support on which Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours Draw was the second report to emanate from the research programme on *Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland* (Kelly *et al.*, 2003). This report focused on exploring the cultural sources of support for pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. The data were based on a national, representative sample survey fielded at the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002. The questionnaire used was that designed for international comparative purposes by the ISSP with some additional questions included for the population in the Republic of Ireland.

In order to bring about change, in this case to increase pro-environmental attitudes and practices, it was important to identify those core cultural values which underpinned and supported such practices. Some of the core values identified in this report included a set which emphasised the fragility of nature in the face of economic development and hence the need to protect it, as well as two socio–political values, one a sense of being empowered to act to protect the environment and in so doing to make a difference, the second an egalitarian socio–political perspective. The work of environmental policy makers wishing to further secure the environmental commitments of those already mobilised, as well as to increase a sense of environmental responsibility among others, is more likely to be successful when these cultural values are acknowledged and worked with in the promotion of sustainable development.

Three broad sets of cultural values were explored in order to investigate their relationship with pro-environmental attitudes and practices. These included respondents' support for the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) in which subscribers see nature as fragile and in need of care and protection especially given the potential ravages of economic growth; a second is the extent of commitment to a post-materialist perspective; while a third, drawing on the Cultural Values Paradigm, identifies two further value sources – egalitarianism and a sense of empowerment. The extent to which socio–demographic variables might help to explain differences in environmental attitudes and

behaviours was also explored. The particular environmental perceptions and attitudes explored included perceptions regarding environmental dangers, willingness to pay to protect the environment, and concerns regarding waste disposal. Also examined were three sets of pro-environmental practices: sorting waste, cutting back on car driving, and the prevalence of active mobilisation on behalf of the environment by such practices as membership or support of environmental organisations. It then proceeded to examine the extent to which the three sets of broader cultural values noted above were found to mobilise support for those perceptions and practices which contribute to protecting the environment.

3.2 Differing Environmental Attitudes

Respondents perceived a variety of threats to the environment. The evidence suggested that Irish respondents were deeply concerned about such threats. In particular, they were convinced about the dangers posed to the environment by nuclear power stations, water pollution, air pollution caused both by cars and industry, the 'greenhouse effect', and the use of pesticides and chemicals in farming. In the case of each of these, less than 10% of respondents believed that they were 'not very dangerous' or 'not dangerous at all' for the environment.

How willing were they to pay for protecting the environment? There was a greater willingness to pay higher prices (53%) than to pay higher taxes (34%). On the question of environmental efficacy, there was an almost even divide between those who felt that their pro-environmental actions could make a difference and those who did not. Combined with the relatively low level of environmental efficacy was a sense that some major and powerful institutions could not be trusted to provide accurate information about pollution. Thus, only a quarter of respondents stated that their trust in the government to provide them with such correct information was strong, and less than 10% of respondents reported a strong sense of trust in business and industry.

With regard to waste disposal, large majorities agreed with the idea of paying 'more in order to recycle waste',

and believed that the original manufacturer of the product should be responsible for recycling it. While recycling was thus the preferred option, there was, nonetheless, some support at a general level for both incineration and landfills. This was despite some high-profile campaigns by local communities against the siting of both. The percentage of respondents who agreed that 'using incinerators is the best way to dispose of waste' (40%) was slightly greater than the percentage who disagreed with this statement. The development of new landfills met with very slightly more approval than incinerators, 43% agreeing that 'new landfill sites should be developed to dispose of waste'. There would thus appear to have been no definite preferences or indicators of widely acceptable solutions to the waste disposal problem.

3.3   Differing Environmental Behaviours

The survey evidence suggested that recycling facilities were now perceived as being more widely available, with less than 10% of respondents reporting that no such facilities were available where they live. Where they were available, almost three-quarters of the respondents claimed that they at least sometimes sorted through glass, tins, plastic and newspapers. However, despite the fact that half of the respondents believed that air pollution caused by cars was dangerous for the environment, few were willing to cut back on their car use for environmental reasons. The majority of those who used a car reported that they had never cut back on using it for environmental reasons, with about a third reporting that they had sometimes done so.

Respondents were also asked about their activities to promote the environment as a social and political issue. It was quite clear from the data that few Irish people were actively involved in the more direct forms of environmental engagement. Only a tiny percentage of respondents (4%) reported that they are members of an environmental group and a similarly small percentage of respondents (5%) claimed to have protested about an environmental issue. There appeared, however, to be a greater willingness among at least a fifth of Irish people to provide support to those who are involved in these more direct forms of action. A quarter of respondents had signed a petition, while one in five had given money to an environmental group. Of those who reported either giving money to an environmental group or signing a petition, just over 40% claimed that they did both. So, while there appeared to be a reluctance to take an active part, notable minorities of people were willing to provide support, at least at arm's length.

3.4   Socio–Demographic Explanations

Of the various socio–demographic variables considered (gender, age, education, residence, religious attendance, social class, income and employment in the public sector), education proved to be the most powerful predictor of pro-environmental attitudes, with high incomes and social class also predictive in this direction. However, in Ireland as elsewhere, socio–demographic variables, even when bundled together, explain relatively little (generally less than 10%) of the variance in environmental attitudes and behaviours.

3.5   Cultural Sources of Differing Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours

The study explored whether broader sets of cultural values might be identified which could be shown to contribute to increased levels of environmental concerns and practices. As noted above, three theoretical models were examined to investigate the extent to which they help in understanding the cultural values underpinning environmental attitudes and behaviours.

The first, the NEP, examines a set of broad cultural values regarding perceptions of nature, the environment and socio–economic change. It proposes that there has been increasing concern in developed western societies regarding the impact of economic development on what is seen as a fragile environment and a nature that needs care rather than reckless exploitation and domination. The basis for this perspective may be entirely instrumental and anthropocentric – we need to protect or carefully use natural resources in order to facilitate future development and for the sake of future generations – or its basis may be biocentric, emphasising the need to protect the environment for its own sake. The NEP measure used in this survey does not differentiate between these two reasons. However, the qualitative research reported in *Environmental Debates and the Public in Ireland*, based on discussions with 22 focus groups, explored this question in greater detail.

In the survey research being reported here, in Ireland, as in other countries, the great majority was favourably disposed towards an NEP view. Those most strongly supportive were the young and those with a higher level of education. Strong NEP supporters were more likely than others to express concern about environmental risks and dangers and to be willing to pay for protecting the environment. They had a sense of environmental efficacy

– that their actions on behalf of the environment could have a significant effect, they trusted the information on pollution provided by environmental groups, and they were more likely than others to give money and sign petitions to promote environmental issues. They had a strong preference for recycling – and were more likely to recycle and cut back on driving than other groups. They had a strong dislike of landfill and incineration. Certainly the NEP would appear to be a major cultural value system around which pro-environmental sentiment and practices are mobilising.

The post-materialist perspective proposes that post-war affluence in much of the developed world combined with a relative absence of war has had a profound effect on a wide range of public attitudes, including a shift away from materialist concerns towards more post-materialist values. However, this set of values was not found, in general, to be statistically significant in explaining differences in environmental perceptions, attitudes and behaviour in Ireland.

This was not the case with regard to the Cultural Values Paradigm. The values that were explored using this perspective are broad socio–political cultural values. Two such values were found to be related to pro-environmental sentiments and practices in Ireland: an egalitarian commitment and a sense of efficacy or empowerment. Although the amount of variance explained was relatively small, a consistent pattern emerged, and was in the direction that Cultural Theory would lead us to expect. Thus, a strong sense of egalitarianism and an approval of collective political action to redistribute income more equitably were related to heightened concerns regarding a whole range of environmental threats. However, for egalitarians, trust in government departments to provide accurate information about pollution and thus about these threats was low. Furthermore, when there was a strong commitment to equality, combined with a tendency to be critical of authority, as well as a sense of socio–political efficacy, giving what cultural theorists call a strong 'egalitarian cultural bias', there tended to be a high level of trust in the information provided by environmental groups. Noting a similar pattern in other countries, some cultural theorists have argued that environmentalism can be interpreted as an important cultural and symbolic resource which egalitarians use to criticise those powerful institutions

which they see as supporters of an inequitable and unjust society.

Regarding empowerment, a questioning attitude to authority and a strong sense of personal and political efficacy were also found to contribute to pro-environmental mobilisation, including an increased willingness to pay for protecting the environment, to practice recycling, to cut back on driving, and to support environmental activism by giving money to environmental groups and signing petitions. These themes were further explored in the research programme's fifth report, *Environmentalism in Ireland: Movement and Activists*, which reports on qualitative interviews with environmental activists.

3.6   Conclusion

While concern regarding environmental dangers was quite strong among the Irish population, pro-environmental practices were weaker. This was also apparent from the comparative analysis of the Irish survey data relative to the attitudes and practices in other European countries, the results of which were presented in the third report, *Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours: Ireland in Comparative European Perspective.* The second report explored some of the cultural reasons for this, identifying three sets of broadly based cultural values which contributed to mobilising pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. One was a set of values called the NEP, in which there is concern for the fragility of nature and its need for protection, particularly from possible over-exploitation and destruction due to rapid economic and social change. The second and third sets of cultural values, namely egalitarianism and a sense of empowerment, were identified through an analysis of the Cultural Values Paradigm. Egalitarianism expresses a rejection of society's unequal structures and the need for collective political efforts to change these. The third is a set of values around empowerment including a sense of efficacy in bringing about change and criticism of authoritarian hierarchical structures. Both egalitarianism and a sense of empowerment contributed to the mobilisation of attitudes and practices to protect the environment. These are thus some of the core cultural values with which environmental policy makers may most profitably work if they are to successfully bring about those attitudinal and behavioural changes supportive of sustainable development.

4 Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours: Ireland in Comparative European Perspective

4.1 Introduction

Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours: Ireland in Comparative European Perspective was the third report to emanate from the research programme on *Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland*. In this report, the aim was to examine how the environmental values, attitudes and behaviours of Irish people differed from those of their European neighbours. In all of these reports, the data set drawn upon was the survey research generated through the ISSP. Comparative analysis of answers to a range of questions regarding the environment was undertaken, including answers to three attitudinal questions: attitudes to environmental dangers, whether there was a willingness to pay increased environmental costs, and the extent to which a sense of environmental efficacy existed. Also comparatively explored were three pro-environmental behaviours, including sorting waste, limiting car driving, and mobilising politically to protect the environment. In order to investigate whether commitment to particular sets of cultural values helped in explaining differences in environmental attitudes and practices across Europe, two broader value perspectives were explored: modernist/anti-modernist and materialist/post-materialist values.

Data from 17 European countries were considered. Having analysed these data in considerable detail it was found that attitudes and behaviour in relation to the environment differed significantly across these countries. However, a tendency towards strong regional European patterns could also be observed. A decision was thus taken to group the data by these regions. It was found that the populations that tended to show most commitment to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour were those in the Scandinavian countries, including, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, along with the Netherlands, as well as the populations of a 'Germanic' group of counties, which included Germany, Austria and Switzerland. These countries were followed in terms of levels of commitment by two central European, post-socialist and economically developed countries, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. At the other end of the environmentally committed and mobilised continuum lay two countries from the east

European periphery, Bulgaria and Latvia. Between these two extremes in terms of environmental attitudes and behaviours lay the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain, as well as Spain and Portugal. While these general regional tendencies helped to organise, analyse and report on the data, differences between countries on particular issues were also noted.

4.2 Attitudes to the Environment

The extent to which a range of environmental problems (including air, water and farming pollution, global warming, genetic modification in crops, and nuclear power) were seen as 'extremely dangerous' through to 'not dangerous at all' was explored. Here it was found that those countries that tended to be most environmentally active also tended to least frequently feel that environmental problems were extremely dangerous. Thus, the public in Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands were concerned about these dangers, but stated that they were extremely so less frequently than respondents in all other countries. On the contrary, the populations of Spain and Portugal much more frequently expressed extreme concerns. Ireland, Great Britain and Northern Ireland were close to the European average in their level of concern. This pattern of extreme concern being less typical of more environmentally mobilised countries may be explained by the fact that these latter countries were also those characterised by robust environmental policies and state regulations. This possibly contributed to a sense among the public that, although these problems were of concern, a greater attempt was being made to redress them and thus extreme concern was not warranted.

Regarding a willingness to pay increased costs to protect the environment, most European countries were less than enthusiastic, except for the Netherlands, Switzerland, and to a lesser degree, Slovenia. Ireland and Great Britain were more similar in their lukewarm response to the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, as well as Austria, The otherwise pro-environmental Germany was less enthusiastic, as was Spain. At the far end of the unenthusiastic scale lay Northern Ireland, Portugal, Bulgaria and Latvia.

Regarding a sense of environmental efficacy or a belief that their pro-environmental actions would make a difference, the average response of populations in all the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and the 'Germanic' countries was that they felt that they could indeed make a difference. The average response in Ireland and Great Britain, although lower than in the above countries, also indicated a positive sense of agency, as did the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Spain. Northern Ireland was less positive, again along with Portugal, Bulgaria and Latvia.

4.3 Pro-Environmental Behaviours

As well as examining environmental attitudes, the research explored respondents' reports of undertaking the pro-environmental practices of recycling and car driving. Respondents were asked 'How often do you make a special effort to sort glass or tins or plastic or newspapers and so on for recycling?' The 'Germanic' countries were found to be particularly conscientious, followed by the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. The Czech Republic and Slovenia, as well as Spain and Great Britain followed. Ireland and Portugal had relatively low scores, a quarter stating that they always recycled, while a fifth, despite having recycling facilities available to them, stated that they never did so. Those not recycling increased to a third of the Northern Ireland respondents. Bulgaria and Latvia showed least strong recycling behaviour. Very similar patterns could be noted regarding cutting back on car driving for environmental reasons. Two-thirds of those in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as in Spain and Portugal reported that they had never cut back on driving, the proportions being even higher in Bulgaria and Latvia. The percentages were much lower in other countries, Switzerland being particularly low at 15%.

A further set of environmental behaviours which were investigated included the extent to which respondents in each of the 17 countries had been mobilised to attempt to influence or change environmental policies or practices over the previous 5 years by membership of environmental groups, by signing a petition about an environmental issue, giving money to support an environmental group or taking part in a protest or demonstration regarding an environmental issue. Here relatively large differences between European countries were found. People in Switzerland (18%) and in the Netherlands (16%) stood out with regard to high levels of membership of environmental groups, followed by respondents in other Scandinavian and 'Germanic'

countries and Great Britain. Ireland, both the Republic and the North, held a relatively low but intermediate position (3%), as did the Czech Republic. Respondents in Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria and Latvia reported membership least frequently. The pattern was similar in terms of giving money to environmental groups with the Netherlands (45%) and Switzerland (38%) heading the list, followed by other 'Germanic' and Scandinavian countries, and Great Britain (24%). Ireland (18%) and Northern Ireland (16%) followed. Again, the least mobilised in this respect were the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Spain, with Portugal, Bulgaria and Latvia considerably further behind. With regard to petition signing, again the most mobilised countries tended to be the 'Germanic' countries, Scandinavian countries (but not Norway), and the Netherlands. This tended to be a relatively frequent activity in Great Britain with almost a third having signed an environmental petition in the previous 5 years. A quarter of the respondents from the Republic of Ireland had done so and a sixth of Northern Irish respondents.

4.4 Cultural Values

In order to explore differences in values that might be related to increased environmental concerns and practices across the 17 countries, the research explored two perspectives. One was a modernist/anti-modernist perspective. It examined the extent to which a set of attitudes critical of science and economic growth, along with a sense that modern life harms the environment, existed among respondents. It was found that the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands tended most frequently to the modernist side of the scale (i.e. to be positive regarding science, economic growth and modern life and feel that they may not necessarily harm the environment), along with Germany and the Czech Republic. Ireland and Great Britain were found to hold mid position, with Northern Ireland showing more evidence of anti-modernist tendencies. This was also the case for Switzerland, Spain and Bulgaria.

The second perspective explored was that of materialism/post-materialism. Here the argument is that post-World War II affluence and the absence of war have had a profound effect on public attitudes. In particular, the argument runs, there has been increased support for post-materialist attitudes, including greater support for freedom of speech and citizen participation in decision making, with a concomitant decrease in public support for materialist values, including maintaining social and political order and promoting economic stability.

Regarding the growth of environmentalism, it is argued that post-materialists 'place more emphasis on protecting the environment and are far more likely to be active members of environmental organisations than are materialists' (Inglehart, 1990: 56). However, previous survey research had indicated that in most countries a majority tended to hold mixed values, with only minorities holding pure materialist or post-materialist values. This was also the case in the research reported here. Looking at the percentages of respondents who held post-materialist values, the highest percentage was in Germany (23%), followed by Switzerland (16%) and Austria (14%). At a similar level to the latter two countries were the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. Again, the Republic of Ireland (10%) and Great Britain (9%) held intermediate positions, along with Spain, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. Northern Ireland evidenced only a very small proportion of post-materialists (4%), as did Portugal and Latvia.

Inversely, in terms of holding materialist values, defined in terms of maintaining order in the nation and economic stability, Northern Ireland (34%), Bulgaria (41%) and Latvia (31%), along with the Southern European countries of Spain (38%) and the Czech Republic (33%) topped the list. Somewhat less materialist, with about a quarter being so, were Ireland, Great Britain, Norway, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Austria. Materialists occurred least frequently in three of the four Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and two of the three 'Germanic' countries, Germany and Switzerland.

4.5 Cultural Values and Pro-Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours

To explore the relationship between these two sets of values and attitudes to environmental dangers, willingness to pay extra costs and a sense of environmental efficacy, while also controlling for a number of demographic variables, a regression analysis was undertaken. Within this model it was found that, for many countries, there was a statistically significant relationship between holding anti-modernist views and both a heightened concern regarding environmental dangers and a willingness to take on the costs of avoiding or ameliorating these dangers. This relationship was stronger than that between holding post-materialist values and these attitudes. This anxiety about modern life also frequently informed respondents' environmental behaviour, and they were more willing than their modernist counterparts to sort household waste for

recycling and to cut back on driving. However, this relationship between anti-modernist attitudes and pro-environmental behaviour was not statistically significant in the Republic of Ireland.

Regarding politically mobilising on behalf of the environment, it might be expected that those who prioritised freedom of speech and citizen participation in decision making (i.e. held post-materialist values) would also be those who were more frequently mobilised. It was found that the holding of post-materialist values was indeed significantly related both to a sense of environmental efficacy, and particularly to protesting, petition signing, giving money to environmental groups and membership of these groups in many continental European countries. However, the pattern was not so clear in Ireland where post-materialism was not significantly related to a sense of environmental efficacy (nor was it in Northern Ireland or in Great Britain), nor to any of the political mobilisation questions. Here the only significant relationships were between anti-modernism and protesting and petition signing. This regression analysis also included an examination of the role of a number of demographic factors, and highlighted the consistent European pattern of an association between higher education and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour, as well as an association between higher education and a willingness to mobilise politically on behalf of the environment.

4.6 Conclusion

If we see European environmental attitudes and behaviour as split between the strong pro-environmentalist states of Scandinavia, the 'Germanic countries' and the Netherlands on the one hand and the Southern European and ex-socialist eastern periphery on the other, the Republic of Ireland held an intermediate position. Indeed on almost all the indices used – pro-environmental attitudes, political mobilisation, post-materialism and anti-modernisation – this was the case. However, there was a disjunction among the public in Ireland between these relatively favourable attitudes, levels of environmental mobilisation and cultural values on the one hand and actual pro-environmental behaviour on the other. With regard to recycling and car usage the population in the Republic of Ireland was not delivering on the promise that these mid-range pro-environmental attitudes and supportive cultural values might lead one to expect given the data from other countries. The survey research reported on here was not designed to explore why this was the case. It is possible that Irish people's

unwillingness to leave their cars at home had to do with a lack of acceptable alternative public transport. Moreover, their willingness to recycle at least sometimes might have been enhanced by the more adequate provision of user-friendly recycling facilities. It may also have been the case that the rapid socio–cultural changes in Ireland over the previous decade had led to changes in attitudes and values, but that there was a lag in following these through to actual behaviour. Whatever the reason, it appeared that the cultural resources were there to support more pro-environmental behaviour. What was needed was the imagination to tap into them.

5 Environmental Debates and the Public in Ireland

5.1 Introduction

The qualitative research project entitled *Environmental Debates and the Public in Ireland* was designed to explore the kinds of environmental discourses generated by different social groups, and the social, organisational and cultural contexts that influence these discourses. To this end discussions were held with 22 focus groups, selected to include a wide range of different perspectives on the environment. Five sets of groups were selected: state environmental regulators and environmental scientists (three groups), business groups (two groups), farmers (two groups), mobilised and active environmental groups (four groups), and 11 groups drawn from the general public. The focus group discussions were completed in 2003, with a total number of 168 participants.

Discourses were defined as ways of thinking and talking about, or representing, the world from a particular perspective. A review of both international and Irish literature led to the identification of five kinds of discourses in terms of which environmental attitudes and values might potentially be articulated – moral, radical political, romantic, scientific, and regulatory. Two-hour discussions were held with each of the 22 focus groups to explore how they talked about the environment with a group of their peers. In the first hour, the discussion was facilitated in a very open-ended manner, to ensure that a range of discourses could also be articulated. In the second hour, a set of discourse statements designed to explore further the five discourses noted above was introduced to the participants. The focus groups were successful in eliciting wide-ranging discussions on the environment and environmental issues, enabling the researchers to explore how different groups elaborated, supported or contested the cultural themes identified as most salient.

The broader aim of this description and analysis of discourses was to move towards a more informed civic culture or polity in which different perspectives are acknowledged and the existence of no one 'right' definition of nature recognised. This will increase opportunities for more informed democratic discussion in which different voices are heard and responded to, and more transparent policy decision making facilitated. The significance of the research lies in the democratic centrality of the questions it raised regarding the relationship between self, society and nature, particularly in light of contemporary threats to the environment, the level of debate and rapidity of change in this area, and the importance of present policy decisions to the future trajectory of Irish society.

For the sake of brevity, this summary will focus on the findings regarding two of the five original discourses, scientific and regulatory discourses, as well as three further discourse themes which cross-cut all five: empowerment and the local, participatory democracy, and loss of trust in political elites and yet the desire among the public for a strong environmental regulatory regime.

5.2 Scientific Discourse Themes

In contemporary society science holds a privileged place in decision making about environmental issues, and it is often assumed, perhaps particularly by environmental regulators, that scientists are the most appropriate people to solve environmental problems. As a discourse, science is strongly anthropocentric, emphasising efficient resource use and prioritising humans over other species. Drawing on Enlightenment thinking that idealises human beings and their cognitive processes, it has been used to legitimate the domination and exploitation of non-human nature, especially during and following industrialisation. In its most idealised form, it assumes that 'scientific facts' established in the laboratory are generalisable to other contexts and places and that these facts can be verified in an unbiased and disinterested way apart from political, economic or organisational interference. These assumptions have legitimated its predominant position in identifying environmental problems and offering solutions to them in the complex technological world of advanced industrial societies.

It was precisely these assumptions that were questioned by some of the focus groups, especially by environmental activists and also by many groups among the general public, a pattern not only characteristic of the Irish focus group discussions on science, but also of research undertaken elsewhere. The idealisation of science as generalisable from the laboratory to other contexts was questioned by the activists, the farmers, and some groups among the general public, drawing on their own local,

sensory and common-sense knowledge to refute scientific claims. In doing this they also drew on deeply felt cultural themes which questioned the claims of 'outsiders', 'they', 'Dublin', to superior knowledge and their right to dominate and make decisions for their local area. Furthermore, they drew on a deeply held sense that this domination was maintained in the interest of an alliance of business and political elites, which used scientific knowledge in its own interest. Trust in this alliance was low, and science coming from this source was likewise seen as tainted. The independence of scientists was questioned, and there was a perception that science was being used as a smokescreen by the powerful to hide their particularistic economic and political interests.

Although they criticised the science that came from this elite, the activists, farmers and general public did not rule out the possibility of establishing 'the scientific facts'. Indeed, some in the activist groups were themselves scientists, and the inclusion of alternative scientists was frequently part of the activists' game plan in refuting government or industry-based science. What was of particular importance to these groups was that when decisions about environmental issues in local areas were being made, contextual factors should be taken into account. Decisions taken only on the basis of scientific knowledge coming from the dominant centre were 'bad decisions', too rigid and too inflexible, uninformed by particularities of place and time, and by local knowledge of the past performance of particular industries or government agencies and local experiences of them. The focus groups of environmental scientists, managers and engineers were aware of these claims and not entirely insensitive to them. While stating that environmental groups on occasions misrepresented the facts of a case or changed the issue being complained about in their own interest, they recognised the preferred practice of local consultation if environmental decisions were to hold and gain acceptance and compliance in the local area. The consultant engineers felt that the large infrastructural companies that hired them should show a greater interest in early consultation with local groups and a willingness to pay for this process.

Many environmental decisions are ultimately decisions about local areas. However, the particularities of the local are frequently anathema to the centralising tendencies of the state and to the standardising and translocal practices of contemporary production. Science has come to be associated with this power centre of 'money', and has thus

become tainted with the themes of greed and vested interests. For the locally based focus groups, these vested interests were contrasted with the 'I' of one's own senses and experiences, of 'seeing things as they really are', and the 'we' of the local community with knowledge of the local area. What was sought was a situation in which scientific knowledge was balanced with appropriate local inputs of knowledge, context and values. This ideal suggested a potentially strong role for science once current patterns of misuse as they saw it were addressed. For the present, however, discussions regarding science among the activists and some of the general public groups tended to become discourses based on the issues of overly centralised power, a lack of trust and a democratic deficit.

5.3 Regulatory Discourse Themes: the State and the Environment

The continuing widespread political and popular support for, and indeed prioritisation of, the project of economic growth, 'progress' and affluence were evident in the regulatory discourse themes raised. Given that an attempt to limit economic growth in the interests of the environment was seen as undesirable by the great majority of groups, the eco-modernist or sustainable development goal of continued economic growth, while also ensuring environmental protection through good environmental management and appropriate regulation, gave state environmental regulators a focus and an agenda. However, regulators complained that under-resourcing at both national and local levels of their department and of local government, as well as a lack of co-ordination of environmental policy across departments, were weakening this effort. They also spoke of the public's unwillingness to take ownership of public spaces. The general public themselves, at least as indicated by the focus group discussions with them, reflected perhaps a greater concern to care for the environment than regulators perceived. However, the public frequently recognised that this stated concern was not always translated into practice, often due to lack of facilities or support (for example adequate and accessible waste recycling facilities). Regulators also felt that the general public had an antipathy to 'the voice of authority', to environmental taxes and policies, seeing them as 'another scam by the government'. The focus group research would appear to support this analysis, and to take it further in terms of indicating that contributing to this lack of trust was a perception that corrupt cliques of powerful economic and political interests were making

decisions about the lives of local people without consultation.

As might be expected, business groups were also strongly pro-growth. Environmental managers from large industrial firms felt that some industries, under EPA licences, had achieved a level of maturity in their environmental protection strategies. They noted the limiting factors of profitability, competitiveness and different production and trading conditions as constraints in pushing out the environmental frontiers further. The consultant engineers working on major infrastructural projects were particularly pro-growth, but also realised that their work projects were the focus of much environmental criticism. They felt limited in the extent to which they could propose environmental protections, given that the construction firms for which they worked were their paymasters.

There were also some differences between the two groups of farmers regarding their regulatory discourse and its tenor. Small farmers living in the west of Ireland strongly favoured the ideology of economic growth. This, however, was not necessarily to save the economy of small farms, which they felt were already economically compromised because of their over-dependence on subsidies and which were, in any case, of no interest to the next generation. They wanted continued growth that would save their local communities from depopulation and prevent them from turning into, as they saw it, a wilderness. Their current economic weakness, however, appeared to have led to a considerable level of disempowerment and despondency. This contrasted sharply with the large dairy farmers who, while severely critical of environmental regulations, which they felt were imposed by bureaucrats from outside who knew little about the actual daily process of farming in local conditions, felt enabled to challenge these on the basis of their own alternative knowledge and to act autonomously in their own interest. This interest included, in their view, protecting the environment of their farms, of which they themselves had the most detailed knowledge and to which they had commitment and emotional attachment, underpinned by their daily work, long-term experience and economic and livelihood interests.

The regulators, activists and the general public all complained about the lack of rigorous implementation of environmental policies and a lack of facilities which would enable the public to comply more easily. Being enabled to be actively environmentally friendly brought the added rewards (as with the plastic bag levy) of increased environmental awareness and, perhaps even more importantly, empowerment, the capacity to do something about it and to feel that it was possible to act constructively.

5.4   Empowerment and the Local

Investigating environmental empowerment requires an exploration of the factors that contribute to a sense that one's pro-environmental actions make a difference and that they are important both for one's own sense of identity and well-being as well as that of others.

Among the focus groups, the most empowered were those who were most strongly committed to a moral ethic of environmental care, most emotionally or aesthetically attached to nature, and actively involved with others in promoting environmental issues at a local level. It was also the same participants who felt that, despite the dominance of the global economic system, it was possible for individuals and groups to contribute to social and economic change. These participants were among the most critical of the lack of local consultation and democracy.

It is of interest to note some similarities in the findings of the survey research completed within the broader research programme on *Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland* (see summaries of findings above). Here those who strongly agreed with a number of attitudinal variables that together constituted the NEP (seeing nature as fragile, limited and in need of the care and attention of humans to protect it) were found to be more likely to act in an environmentally friendly manner, to be willing to pay more to protect the environment, to have signed an environmental petition, to have protested and to have given money to support an environmental group. It was also found that a questioning attitude to authority and a strong sense of personal and political efficacy contributed to pro-environmental mobilisation. For example, these values were related to an increased willingness to pay for protecting the environment, to a heightened tendency to recycle and cut back on driving, as well as to increased support for environmental activism.

What further information did the focus group research offer regarding the social and cultural context in which these questioning attitudes to authority and a sense of empowerment develop? One contextual fact was the importance of the local area and activism within it. A second was level of education.

The importance attached by many focus group members to one's local area of residence was a theme that arose across a number of discourses. It was one of a number of dichotomous and interrelated cultural themes which included:

- Local area *vs* metropolitan centres of power

- Care for nature *vs* greedy individualism destroying nature

- Home, private world *vs* global economy, public world

- Care for children and others *vs* carelessness and lack of respect for others

- 'Little people', unless mobilised *vs* economic and political elites

- Mobilised environmental activism at the local level *vs* authoritarian and arrogant centralised decision making

- Local knowledge *vs* scientists and experts legitimating the power of economic and political elites

- Local sensory and common-sense knowledge *vs* 'superior' scientific claims from the centre.

The local area was the environment of the home, and the protection of the environment in the interests of the home and children was a frequent moral theme. It was local environmental issues that the general public groups spontaneously discussed – domestic and local waste management, the proposed local siting of incinerators, impinging roads or invading smells – rather than, for example, climate change. The local area was also for many the site of leisure-time activities, and here the frequency with which general public groups mentioned membership of the GAA and other sports clubs is worth noting. When discussing identification with particular natural phenomena, it was often those in the local area, for example trees, which were important and which contributed to a sense of place; while again, if local experts were available, these were preferred to those from outside, particularly those identified with economic and political elites, situated elsewhere, and attempting to impose undesirable changes on the locality without consultation.

Identification with one's home area was least frequently mentioned by environmental scientists and engineers whose focus was at the more general and occupationally

defined levels of science and regulatory endeavours, and the interests and demands of economic growth at the level of the nation state. Thus, in conflict situations between the interests of the state and their legitimating experts on the one hand, and the local community on the other, each may be talking past the other. The latter will tend to emphasise local knowledge and perspectives, underpinned by a moral sense of the right to be heard and an identification with the local area, while accredited 'experts' from the centre emphasise the general, the abstract and the national interest.

Apart from an identification with the local, a second social factor associated with pro-environmental sentiments, empowerment, a willingness to challenge authority and environmental activism was level of education. Again, the quantitative survey research confirmed this pattern. However, although level of education was an important factor related to both environmental concern and commitment, an ethic of environmental care was articulated by all groups. It was the strength of this articulation that varied. Some individual participants within almost all focus groups articulated a strong ethic of care even against the grain of the discussion among others in the group (for example, in the young working class mothers' group), thus indicating its broad diffusion within all sectors of Irish society. However, its mobilisation into activism may be related not only to having the resources of time and money, but to the confidence consequent to receiving third-level education and the related willingness to question authority.

5.5 Participatory Democracy

Decisions with environmental consequences for the local community taken by outside interests, by business and political elites, by bureaucrats and 'suits' without adequate local consultation were major themes among the activists, farmers and many of the general public groups. This led to criticism not only of what was seen as an arrogant form of decision making, but of the scientific and technocratic discourse themes on which it was frequently based. It also led to a significant weakening of trust and a questioning of the legitimacy of these decisions and of the groups making them. As economic growth pushes further environmental change, similar instances of what are seen as arrogant decision making are likely to continue and indeed increase, offering significant 'access points' at which local groups confront these undesirable decisions, question their legitimating discourses, and mobilise against them. A discourse of the local right to be consulted and to stop what are perceived

to be environmentally harmful developments already exists as a significant mobilising tool, as do identification with, and desire to protect, one's local area.

Because of a perceived lack of local consultation, the level of trust in business, industry and government departments was palpably low among general public, activist and farmer groups. This was also found to be the case in the survey research. Here only 7% of the respondents stated that they had a great deal of trust or quite a lot of trust in the information they received about the causes of pollution from business and industry, with 25% making similar judgements regarding government departments. In contrast, 61% said they trusted the information they received from environmental groups, and 70% said they trusted the information received from university research centres.

While local authorities might be expected to be seen as the representative voice of local areas and as offering a public space for articulating local concerns, their weakness in terms of legislative, administrative and financial remits undermines this expectation. Government-appointed quangos were often seen by local groups as representing the interests of the already dominant centre. Increasing the democratic remit of local authorities has been stated government policy for the last decade, and partnership arrangements between local governments and organised interest groups regarding local development plans have been put in place. It remains to be seen if these increase the local population's sense of ownership over local areas or simply become another arm of existing powers, a way for the centre to further encroach into local areas, while not engaging in effective participatory and deliberative decision-making practices.

A focus on greater democracy at the local level should not hide the equally, if not more, important role of central state institutions, and of partnership at this level. It is the role of the state to formulate the overall direction of environmental policy and in particular its relationship to economic interests and the direction of the economy as a whole, to establish departmental and cross-departmental structures that facilitate the formulation and implementation of environmental policies, to ensure that local authorities are adequately resourced to fulfil their environmental obligations, as well as to establish the legal and organisational framework which facilitates participatory, deliberative and inclusive decision making.

The importance of democratic practices in increasing the relative success of eco-modernist or sustainable development environmental management processes has been attested to in comparative studies of European polities. However, there is also widespread recognition that eco-modernist policies have tended to emphasise the managerial and regulatory aspects in relation to limiting environmental damage rather than its potential democratic aspects.

Participatory democracy is not of course a panacea. In the face however of decreasing trust in the state, an acknowledgement that science *per se* cannot provide a value-free and uncontested 'one right answer', and that citizens demand a voice, the focus on developing DIPS (deliberative and inclusionary practices) needs to be taken seriously on board. Furthermore, the recommendations arising from such practices need to be accepted by powerful stakeholders as making a legitimate contribution to environmental decision making.

Considerably more research needs to be done to explore best practice in this area, as well as the capacity of different forms of deliberative practices to re-establish trust, to empower and to deliver on greater environmental care and protection. Research into the discourses on which empowerment draws, and how these discourses operate at the local and national levels, offers insights into the socio–cultural dynamics that underpin or undermine these democratic processes. It may also offer insights into how best to mobilise or attempt to reconcile or simply to find a *modus vivendi* around different discourses in the interests of the environment, and of local and national communities.

5.6 Contradictions between Loss of Trust and Commitment to Regulation

Despite a lack of trust in regulatory, scientific and business elites, the desire for regulation was strong among the focus groups, and indeed a major criticism of the groups was the lack of adequate implementation of existing environmental laws. Again, the survey research confirmed a high level of support for environmental regulation. Such regulation was needed to counter what many in the focus groups saw as 'our'/'Irish people's' irresponsibility and selfishness, delighted to make hay while the Celtic sun shines, and somewhat unwilling to be individually responsible or to take hold of our own destiny regarding environmental issues.

A number of political, social and cultural factors may contribute to maintaining these patterns. Despite stated distrust, in particular regarding unwelcome decisions that impact at a local level, participants still adhered to a collective discourse of commitment to the Irish state, which they saw as responsible for 'managing' the relationship between economic growth and environmental destruction. The civic bond between state and citizens may in fact have been reaffirmed through continued economic growth. However, questions regarding how this wealth is spent are more frequently being raised, with concerns regarding ineffectual health policies heading the list of public policy issues for many of the focus groups. The civic bond in Ireland is also characterised by a belief in democracy and a certain level of egalitarianism. In this context another of the findings of the survey research should be mentioned: heightened environmental concerns were found to be related to a strong sense of egalitarianism and an approval of collective political action to redistribute income more equitably. This is not just a feature of Irish society but has been noted elsewhere, and the argument is made that environmentalism can be a political weapon used to criticise what is seen as an inequitable and unjust society, as well as an environmentally destructive one.

The focus group research indicated that romantic nationalism based on an idealisation of the rural has all but disappeared except among the retired focus group, as has the centrality of the Catholic Church. The articulation of a strong religious or God-centred discourse on the environment was notable for its absence among all groups except the returned missionaries.

As nationalist and Catholic sentiment and beliefs continue to weaken, so may a sense of collective identity and responsibility. If neither nation nor God provides a secure ground or sense of direction, undoubtedly more responsibility will fall on the family and on education. There was perhaps some sense of this already within the focus groups who spoke of these institutions as the sites where the teaching of 'care' and individual, social and environmental responsibility were located. In what may increasingly become an economically rich but morally barren and highly individualised society, the importance of encouraging a recognition of the centrality of the natural world and human interdependence with it, and an integration of this perspective into one's personal sense of space and place, may be key to taking responsibility for the kind of society created both nationally and globally. The state, working to support both families and education

in these tasks, as well as working in partnership with local groups, would do well to reaffirm the link between the private and the public and, through horizontal rather than vertical and hierarchical relationships, re-establish trust. Thus, the consumer might be encouraged to become a citizen with the ability to make choices responsibly in the context of the broader public and environmental interest and to identify with 'our world', a world in which both human and non-human beings are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent.

5.7 Challenges for Policy Makers

For policy makers, each of these three cross-cutting themes – empowerment and involvement at the local level, the demand for consultation rather than imposed decisions regarding the local area, and the contradiction between lack of trust on the one hand and a desire for regulation on the other – has relevance.

People are exercised by local, immediate issues, and evaluate their environmental concerns and priorities in socially and politically embedded terms. For the most part, they do not isolate environmental issues from other broader social issues, and indeed strong, explicit 'environmental' concern is thin on the ground. They do, however, tend to have quite sophisticated and knowledgeable views on issues that concern them, without always using the 'environmental' labels that regulators and scientists may use for them. This sets an agenda for integrated thinking on the part of policy makers and regulators, something that is already at the heart of the sustainability project. Local priorities are just that, local, and they cut across traditional departmental and sectoral structures. They are best addressed in the same manner.

People include the social and political in their thinking on the environment. The views expressed in this data set point strongly to a need to accept the political nature of environmental issues, rather than trying to treat them as apolitical. In this regard, the degree of perceived disempowerment is striking. Many expert-led issues are seen as nothing more than attempts to dominate and manipulate under the cover of counterfeit environmental concern. Before any real progress can be made on changing environmental practices, trust must be regained.

The means of building up such trust is the subject of the second strong theme emerging from the data, that of participation in planning and decision-making processes.

This is a very controversial issue at the moment, and in many ways public involvement in planning is in crisis. However, the remedy is not less democracy, but more. Criticisms of participation processes are invariably criticisms of such processes done badly. There are virtually no published case studies of participatory processes in Ireland in relation to the environment, where genuine creative deliberation is fostered, and the link to policy outcomes is strong and transparent.

Two things are clear from the range of discussions across all the focus groups set out here: first, people have much to contribute to debates about how to address environmental imperatives, and second, they will not confer legitimacy on any system or decision that refuses to allow them to make their contributions and that makes decisions opaquely or on narrow grounds. Such legitimacy is essential if environmental politics is to bring people and their behaviour along as part of the project. It will always be counterproductive to address issues that require public support and behavioural responses in ways that the general public do not see as valid or acceptable. Furthermore, the weakening by government of the possibility of local consultation will also weaken precisely that which policy makers are attempting to foster – commitment to pro-environmental action. In other words, if regulators wish to enhance ecological sensitivity, they need to take care not to destroy or undermine one of the most important grounds of this sensitivity – identification with the local.

Views expressed by the focus groups on the role of regulation and how to change people's behaviour are insightful, if apparently contradictory. At the same time as expressing strong distrust of experts and regulators in trying to manipulate their lives, many expressed support for stronger legal regulation on environmental issues. This is evident both in the quantitative survey and qualitative focus group data. However, the public would need to be confident that the same rules are applied to everyone, and suspicions that others are getting away with ignoring the law (including, in particular, those with power and money) need be allayed. There is also a spirit of volunteerism to be tapped into, even if this may be weaker than in the past.

The role of environmental policy as enabler of social and environmental action rather than policy as control takes seriously on board citizens' demands for fair and robust environmental regulation and implementation as well as for participation in decision making. Participation does not lessen the role of either central or local state institutions, which are the representative institutions responsible for creating both the policy and the legal and organisational frameworks that facilitate participation and the implementation of policy outcomes. In this process, the range of environmental discourses that citizens will bring to the table needs to be acknowledged and worked with, however contentious. This research has identified and discussed a number of these discourses as articulated by different groups. They included an ethic of environmental and social care, an identification with the local and a strong sense of place, a minority radical perspective severely critical of the socio–economic and environmental characteristics of the society in which we live, scientific perspectives deconstructed in terms of the political and social interests they are seen to represent, as well as a sustainable development discourse (although infrequently labelled as such) arguing for both economic growth and environmental protection through regulation. It is a fundamental task for Irish society to find just and equitable ways of dealing with such plurality, in the interests of citizens, society and the environment.

6   Environmentalism in Ireland: Movement and Activists

6.1   Introduction

Understanding environmental activism requires a focus on both the macro-level structure of the environmental movement, and the agency exercised by individual activists. In the research for the second of the qualitative projects, *Environmentalism in Ireland: Movement and Activists*, we tried to place a number of activists within the broader context of the forms of collective organisation, group practices and strategies that characterise the environmental movement in Ireland. Thus, our research design involved the use of a methodology that would give us access to individual activists and at the same time generate information on the collective context in which their activism took place.

The first step was to carry out a scoping of environmental groups and organisations through which we sought to identify the range of different environmental concerns and organisational forms and practices that make up the movement in Ireland. From the more than 100 identified we selected a subset to contact, ensuring that we would include both national- and local-level types of organisation, and cover as broad a variety of environmental interests as possible. The second step was to ask our contact point to make available one or more of the organisation's members for interview. From the 21 organisations that proved to have a real existence and that were willing to be involved, we realised interviews with 33 environmental activists; 23 of these were men and 10 women, and their ages ranged from early 20s to early 70s with the majority being between 35 and 55 years old.

These have been called 'collective activists' in the report, to distinguish them from five further interviewees, contacted through a 'snowballing' technique at the end of the project, whom we have called 'personal activists'. These are people who practice their environmental activism outside of any group or organisation, and they were included in the research in order to compare and contrast the nature of their engagement with environmental issues with those of the 'collectives', and to highlight what seemed to be distinctive about the latter.

It is clear that neither group can be claimed to be a 'representative' sample of Irish environmental activists. To obtain a representative sample of social movement activists is itself methodologically almost impossible, given the fluidity of social movement boundaries and the unwillingness of certain groups to be formally identifiable, and accessing a representative sample of the 'personal' actors would require resources (e.g. a national survey) which we did not possess. In any case, our interest was primarily in obtaining detailed accounts of the life processes experienced by both types of activist, and to explore these in ways that would allow us to construct a general account of how environmental activists are 'made' and how they 'make themselves' in different settings and situations.

6.2   The Environmental Movement in Ireland

In presenting the research findings, the report first addresses the 'social movement context' in which the individual actors operate. We look first at environmental mobilisations in Ireland from a collective, structural point of view, while the findings on the individual activists are presented second. Organising the material in this way has been useful in clarifying some distinctive features of 'membership' of an environmental group or organisation in the current Irish context, which in turn facilitates our understanding of the collective bonds that hold the individual activists together.

Much of the standard literature on social movements has represented these as made up of formal, hierarchical and institutionalised organisations, with formal understandings of what membership entails and a clear division between leaders and followers. In terms of these criteria, the Irish environmental movement has often been represented as 'exceptional' in its lack of mature, developed organisations and the small numbers of organisational members. Against that view, we argue that the Irish environmental movement appears to be constructed more around informal and egalitarian than formal and hierarchical modes of organisation. Moreover, this does not represent an 'exceptional' or undeveloped social movement, but rather a movement of a distinctive type which is different from those most often considered in the environmental movements literature. It bears strong resemblances to accounts of the environmental movement in some Southern European countries, but it is also very similar to what researchers have found when

they study some of the most recent mobilisations in Northern Europe, such as the alternative globalisation movement. As in that case, the environmental movement in Ireland seems best described as a complex network of small and interlinked 'affinity groups', where 'membership' takes on a distinctive meaning: it has less to do with fulfilling formal criteria for registration, paying subscriptions, and obedience to the rules of the organisation, and much more to do with individual engagement, participation and initiative. While some vestiges of formal organisation are present (for example, a division of labour between members of a steering committee), and are more strongly marked in some groups than others, the dominant tendency is towards fluidity in organisational boundaries and the construction of friendship relations between participants as a means of holding the groups together.

A second significant characteristic of the Irish environmental movement is its diversity. The organisations and groups in our research are very diverse in their goals and objectives, their practices, and their understandings of what is a significant 'environmental' issue. The scoping stage of the research threw up a range of different visions of 'environmentalism', from biodiversity and wildlife concerns to the development of alternative technologies (including organic food production, new house-building methods, and new ways of generating energy or disposing of waste), and from heritage conservation to sustainable development, spatial planning, countryside access, litter removal and the provision of environmental amenities. Compared to studies of the environmental movement in Great Britain, the concerns of the Irish movement cover a wider range, evidenced in particular by the interest among the Irish participants in alternative technology.

To find ways of patterning this diversity, we made a number of distinctions:

- between groups that largely operate as 'watchdogs' for the environment, reacting to new challenges as they become apparent, and groups that pursue a specific 'project' such as wildlife conservation, the ending of nuclear energy production at Sellafield, or reclaiming city streets for civic enjoyment

- between groups that are oriented to a national public, and those that address themselves primarily to local publics whether geographically or occupationally defined

- between groups in terms of their relations to their 'members', with on one side those who adopt more or less clear divisions between a core of decision makers and their supporters and volunteers, and on the other those (the majority) who regard all of the participants as more or less equal and self-managed volunteers.

While these different ways of categorising the range of groups and organisations involved help to illuminate the diverse contexts in which individual activists construct their activism, ultimately they seem less significant than the discovery of the extent to which informality in organisation permeates the Irish environmental movement. It is not only local groups who are likely to organise on a relatively informal basis; this is also found extensively among groups who see themselves as operating at a national level, in their 'central' organisations in some cases, in their 'branches' in many cases, and often in relations between 'head office' and 'branches'. Moreover, this seems best understood as a relatively deliberate, chosen organisational style. Irish environmental groups see themselves as grappling not just with environmental problems but with failures of Irish democracy, and opt for an organisational style that enables the greatest extent of democratic participation which is consistent with their group's need to 'get things done'.

6.3 Involvement in Environmental Activism

From this point, the analysis switches from environmentalism in Ireland as a social movement to questions about how individuals become engaged in environmental movements as active participants. The international literature on social movements has only recently begun to turn its attention to individual movement participants in any detailed way, and its understandings of individual agency within a social movement context are still relatively weak and underdeveloped. Activist individuals tend to be portrayed as either 'collective action entrepreneurs' or as 'serviceable agents' of the collectivity. 'Entrepreneurs', or movement leaders, have been largely understood as rational actors, who 'frame' the movement in ways that will develop a strong collective identity among members and supporters. Followers are transformed into 'serviceable agents' to the extent that they internalise the framings of the identity and social world that movement leaders offer to them. From our data, we argue that these conceptualisations of movement

participants either overemphasise their instrumental rationality or underemphasise their capacity for reflection and choice about the meanings and practices that movement organisations supply to them. Moreover, they reproduce a picture of an environmental organisation as hierarchically organised around a division between 'leaders' and 'followers', which we have already suggested to be misleading for most of the Irish organisations studied. Instead we offer an interpretation of the individual activist as a competent actor, acting within an existing social and cultural context, to whom their own engagement appears a reasonable course of action given their personal formation as an individual, their frameworks of meaning and their social situations.

To develop this interpretation, we use a biographical, life-career approach to understanding how the environmental activists we interviewed have been 'made'. Using ideas of 'habitus' (Bourdieu), life histories of engagement, availability for engagement, and the 'macro' and 'micro' contexts that provide opportunities for recruitment, we sought to understand what it is that enables some people to form, in an increasingly individualised world, an enduring habit of collective participation in environmental improvement.

One element in explaining this phenomenon is, we suggest, the childhood experience of growing up in a family in which civic engagement, of a broad range of types, is a family norm. If we want to encourage individuals to take on responsibility for their natural environment, it may be more important to find ways of encouraging civic engagement in general than to focus simply on improving environmental attitudes. But we also found that a significant part of being 'available' for collective activism in adult life is a life history of disjunctions and contradictions, in the educational or occupational spheres or in national and cultural identifications, which help to divert activists away from conventional career paths and conventional group loyalties.

6.4 The Impact of Collective Environmental Activism

This led us to ask how individuals' understandings of self, society and nature may be changed by the experience of collective engagement, and what they have acquired as a result of that experience. The impact of the group appears most evident, not in the formation and internalisation in the individual participants of a collective group-based identity, but rather in the practices that individual activists

develop to affirm and to negotiate with outsiders their own individual identity as 'a person who is participating in environmental activism'. Collective participation is an occasion for learning and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, rather than one of being socialised into a new, collective identity. But over time it does also appear to create within participants a set of collectively shared emotional responses to how they perceive themselves to be treated by decision makers and authority holders within the Irish political system – responses that are dominated by anger, frustration, and a strong sense of injustice at what is seen as the often profoundly anti-democratic behaviour of the Irish state.

6.5 'Personal' Activism, Collective Activism, Trust and Citizenship

The people we interviewed as 'personal' activists have not experienced these emotionally transformative effects of activism within a collective context. This sample of 'greened' citizens, while very small, provided some interesting insights. They provide, in a negative way, support for our main interpretations of how collective activists are formed, and the effects on them of collective participation, and they suggest some positive lines of interpretation which can help to resolve the apparent paradox that citizens with a strong sense of environmental responsibility in their personal lives nevertheless see no connections between their own lifestyle commitments and environmental social movement politics. The personal activists generally lacked a tradition of civic engagement in their childhood families, and in their adult lives had generally followed a consistent and conventional life career. While this differentiates them from most of the collective activists, the key difference seems to lie in their perspective on their own social world. They understand this world as one that is highly individualised; further, they embrace individualism as the basis for their own morality, emphasising the values of responsibility and self-education in exercising choice in action. To participate in a collective line of action, from their perspective, is an irresponsible or even immoral action, because it is seen as abandoning the moral imperative on the individual to make personal judgements and exercise personal choice. Thus, we suggested that while the collective activists are engaged in, or practising, environmental politics, the personal activists use their environmental practices as a means of 'moral cultivation' of the self, or of their identity as individual agents.

The personal activists can be seen as reproducing the ideas of the more standard literature on social movements

in the way that they themselves understand what it is to participate collectively in environmental action. They assume that environmental groups are led by manipulative 'entrepreneurs', and that the role held out to ordinary members is that of a 'serviceable agent' of the collectivity, with the implication that a serviceable agent must be willing to submerge his or her own sense of individuality and capacity to make choices within a collective identity imposed by the group. As we suggested above, this appears to misunderstand collective action in the Irish case. The 'informalised' character of most of the groups and organisations discussed in this report indicates that for many collective activists too, a form of collective organisation that demands the relinquishing of moral individualism would be repugnant. The collective activists try therefore to develop a type of collective networking that prioritises individual responsibility and initiative and is open to experimentation in social organisational forms.

It remains the case, however, that personal activists have not experienced a history of attempts to have their views heard and taken seriously by power holders in Irish society in the way that collective activists have. They have not built up a shared set of emotional responses to the exercise of power in Irish society, and have not come to acquire a 'resistance habitus' as a result. Their attitudes towards state actors continue to display a fairly high degree of trust and belief in the rationality of state actions on environmental matters. In this aspect they contrast strongly with most of the collective activists, who find the state's disregard for their expertise and willingness to collaborate in environmental protection to be highly irrational, and who have become through experience very distrustful of the public pronouncements and regulatory procedures endorsed by the state. Thus, our two sets of interviewees exhibit in miniature two quite different understandings of citizenship and the role of civil society in Ireland: we could call that of the collectives a 'civic republican' understanding of citizenship, and that of the personals a 'liberal' one. The forces and agencies promoting environmental responsibility in Ireland today are concentrated primarily on expanding the latter; but we argue that the contributions of the former, both in serving the Irish environment and in helping to create a collectively engaged Irish citizenry, are also too important to overlook. Ways need to be found to encourage and welcome their efforts to participate in environmental governance in Ireland.

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