

Co-Creating Change

Participatory Approaches for a Resilient Ireland

Event Summary and Key Insights

Organised by



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Introduction

Ireland is facing a host of complex, interconnected socioecological challenges. These so-called “wicked problems”, including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and political polarisation, are multi-faceted and require solutions that go beyond traditional top-down approaches. Across the country, co-creation, community-led bottom-up initiatives, and participatory approaches are being embraced more frequently, as practitioners and local actors increasingly see their potential to deliver more adaptive, equitable, and effective responses to these pressing issues.

Co-Creating Change: Participatory Approaches for a Resilient Ireland was an event organised by ERINN Innovation in partnership with EU Projects EmpowerUs, SCORE, and WaterLANDS to act as a timely and action-oriented showcase and discussion space, to bring together practitioners, policymakers, community leaders, researchers, and innovators to explore how participatory approaches can unlock new possibilities for transformative change across Ireland, both in shaping policy and in driving on-the-ground practices.

Through case studies, expert panels and interactive discussions, the event spotlighted how co-creation and participatory processes can be meaningfully implemented as a powerful method for addressing Ireland’s most pressing environmental issues, tackling the climate and biodiversity crises and ensuring a just transition.

Overviews of each speaker and initiative are featured in the [Panellist Booklet](#). Read on to explore insights from the three panels and open discussions.

Using Living Labs and Regional Networks to Co-Create Solutions

The first panel discussed the complexities and various implementations of co-creation in addressing significant challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss, with a particular focus on how to move beyond mere "ticking the box" exercises. The panel was facilitated by Michael Papapetrou (Executive Director, ERINN Innovation) and featured contributions from Salem Gharbia (Atlantic Technological University Sligo, [SCORE Project](#)), Alex Miller (Queen's University Belfast, [EmpowerUs Project](#)), Sarah Prosser ([Bioregioning South East Ireland](#)), and Micheál Ó Cinnéide ([Irish Ocean Literacy Network](#)). Each panellist shared experiences from their respective initiatives, exploring what truly works in these processes.



The SCORE Project's Approach (Salem Gharbia): Salem Gharbia introduced the [SCORE project](#) ([Smart Control of the Climate Resilience in Europe Coastal Cities](#)), which developed an iterative Living Lab framework across 10 European cities to enhance climate resilience. This framework utilised nature-based solutions, citizen science, smart technologies, and a living lab approach as a co-creation environment. SCORE notably developed a "digital twin solution" that allowed communities to co-create functionalities, design nature-based solutions, and co-monitor their impacts. Gamification, such as Minecraft, and citizen science tools like "Coast Snap" were employed to involve citizens in scenario development and real-time data collection. Salem strongly emphasised the critical importance of spending time upfront to co-identify and define the problem to avoid "stakeholder fatigue" and ensure shared understanding and clear objectives. SCORE also developed various resources, including [online courses](#) and multiple [policy briefs](#), one of which was presented at COP27. The lessons learned from the co-creation and living lab processes were captured in the publication [Navigating Living Labs: Lessons Learned from SCORE's 10 Coastal City Living Labs](#).

The EmpowerUs Project's Approach (Alex Miller): Alex Miller presented [EmpowerUs](#), a Horizon Europe project focused on advancing sustainability and local economic development in coastal communities through an environmental social science perspective. The project established "Transition Coastal Labs" across six countries, each with a €50,000 fund for pilot projects that achieve tangible local effects. In the Irish case in Connemara, the pilot focused on capacity building for social enterprises and community-led organisations, including bespoke

training and learning visits. Alex underscored the value of community-led initiatives in generating income, giving the example of a community owned lighthouse utilised for tourism in Donegal. Income generated from such initiatives (e.g., through tourism or renewable energy cooperatives) can be reinvested locally, thus reducing dependence on grants.

Bioregioning South East Ireland (Sarah Prosser): Sarah Prosser described her role as a "Weaver" in [Bioregioning South East Ireland](#), connecting social and ecological change by supporting existing community initiatives within large, naturally defined areas. Her work involves providing human, multi-stakeholder, and financial support through innovative mechanisms like catalyst grants, "do it" grants, and even bioregional basic incomes for change-makers. She provided an inspiring example of *Our Farm at Bushy Park*, a cooperative model where farmers work together to feed local families, focusing on social, financial, environmental, and inspirational returns. She stressed that weaving is about giving people permission, skills, and making them feel valued, fostering a sense of mattering within a solidarity network.

"We're not bringing in new ideas, we're going out and trying to find what's bubbling out there and saying how could we support you? What would make a difference to be able to actually take this to the next level?" - Sarah Prosser

Irish Ocean Literacy Network (Micheál Ó Cinnéide): Micheál Ó Cinnéide discussed efforts to promote Ocean Literacy and create a network of ocean-aware communities in Ireland, acting as knowledge brokers between local groups and state agencies. He drew a stark contrast between the more developed policy and support structures in the freshwater sector and the challenges of policy in the marine sector, particularly concerning Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Micheál criticised traditional public consultations as being pretty low on [Arstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation](#), arguing for the need for ongoing structures, funded weavers or facilitators, and access to public data and regulators to genuinely integrate community input. He used the example of Kilkieran By (bá Cill Chiaráin) an Irish Bay, where multiple designations occurred with virtually no co-creation or local community input.

Managing Conflict: Following initial panel discussions, the forum was opened up to the audience, where an audience member highlighted the challenge of addressing conflict in co-creation processes. Alex Miller responded by acknowledging that conflict is inevitable and central to social interaction, especially when discussing environmental resources. He acknowledged that co-creation is not a "silver bullet" and that achieving 100% consensus is unlikely, especially when facing regulatory hurdles or differing views on landscape impact, such as with wind farms. He suggested that meaningful co-creation processes should allow for diverse perspectives to be heard, leading to potential project changes and ensuring sufficient community buy-in.

"Conflict and politics are central to any kind of social interaction. Particularly when it is questions around the use of the environment, the use of resources and who benefits from these changes." - Alex Miller

Further, Sarah Prosser reiterated the idea of using tools like AI to find "uncommon ground" and focus on collective aspirations to move beyond conflict. Finally, Salem Gharbia emphasised that thoroughly defining the problem upfront within a structured framework, like living labs, is crucial for managing conflicting opinions and integrating them into scenario design and iterative feedback. He shared a personal experience of facing intense conflict while defending flood assessment models to farmers.

"You have to make sure that the process of designing is including those conflicted opinions as part of designing the scenarios" - Salem Gharbia

Balancing Needs: A question was posed by the audience, asking: "Ocean: why is it 'or' and not 'and'?" which was interpreted as "why can't you have a wind farm and fishing and aquaculture?" This was addressed by Micheál Ó Cinnéide, who stated that seas absolutely have to be multifunctional. He stated that our seas are already, by definition, multifunctional, supporting various uses such as leisure, fishing, and aquaculture. Increasingly, these seas will also be shared with offshore energy and other new developments, including cables. However, the primary challenge is that the structures needed to gain community support for these diverse industries or sectors are not well-developed. To achieve successful multifunctional use, Micheál outlined three crucial requirements:

- Policy Support and Structures: There is a need for policy support for local or regional, bioregional structures.
- Engaged and Empowered State Agencies and Regulators: It requires state agencies that are willing to get involved, roll up their sleeves, attend meetings, and, crucially, have the powers to intervene. Regulators must also be present at these discussions, alongside local communities and the various industries involved.
- Accessible Public Data: There must be public data from monitoring, which is made available and explained to all users.

He further emphasised that facilitators are essential for all this work. Micheál highlighted that while such models exist for individual projects or organisations, they do not currently exist at the level of bays or communities, leading to ongoing struggles.

"What we need for both fresh water, catchment fora and also in the marine... are structures that are ongoing that involve community participation and state agencies participation where there are people who are funded to do the weaving that work" – Micheál Ó Cinnéide

Overall, the first panel explored the multifaceted nature of co-creation, from its potential to its challenges, emphasising the importance of clear problem definition, inclusive processes, innovative tools, and sustained engagement to empower communities and achieve tangible, sustainable outcomes.

Implementing Restoration Solutions, Together

The second panel of the day focused on the practicalities and challenges of implementing participatory approaches to nature restoration, facilitated by Laoise Dillon (Project Manager, ERINN Innovation) and featuring insights from Gary Goggins (National Parks and Wildlife Service, [Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE](#)), Sonia Mena (Wetlands International, [WaterLANDS](#)), Bernie Duffy ([FarmPEAT](#)), and Ray Ó Foghlú ([Hometree](#)). Each speaker summarised these initiatives and the elements of co-creation that they have integrated into their work. The following insights were gleaned from the interactive discussion.



Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE (Gary Goggins): Gary highlighted that over 80% of protected blanket bog land is privately owned and actively farmed. The Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE project places farmers at the centre, working as an intermediary between farmers and government agencies. The project aims to deliver on legally binding EU obligations to restore Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), and recognises that while co-creation is good in theory, in ways the "goal posts are somehow fixed" regarding the destination, when projects are driven by policy targets or funding requirements. A key success was the mainstreaming of a results-based payment model (where payments are linked to the ecological quality of land) into the CAP Strategic Plan, now covering 20,000 farmers. This approach values environmental services and creates a common understanding of good habitat quality, enabling farmers to know what actions to take to improve their land.

"You've got to look at where's the finance, where's the policy, where's the funding for it. Who is making the decisions and how can we make their job easier for them and deliver on what they want in a way that works for the farmers, that works in the local areas." - Gary Goggins

Also discussed was the push and pull that can emerge between policy-driven versus grass-roots approaches. Gary expressed a preference for the idea of initiatives being "embedded within the community" rather than "top-down" or "bottom-up". This approach considers the area's culture, social aspects, farming practices, history, traditions, and relationships, building on these to achieve project goals. He also stressed the importance of investing in the community to build skills and keep money local, rather than outsourcing to external contractors.

WaterLANDS: Sonia Mena shared insights from a diversity of wetland sites across Europe where collaborative restoration is being undertaken alongside local partners and stakeholders, with the aim to develop best practices for landscape-scale wetland restoration. The project incorporates a "twinning approach" where similar restoration sites are match-made and visit each other to exchange experiences and knowledge. Sonia emphasised co-creation as a core element of holistic wetland restoration, alongside governance, sustainable finance, and ecological restoration. Key challenges the project has encountered include negative perceptions of wetlands as unproductive or "wastelands" and common misunderstanding of certain necessary restoration activities, such as removing trees from peatlands. In response to the discussion around top-down and bottom-up projects, Sonia advocated for a "sandwich approach" that combines both top-down government/funding needs with bottom-up community engagement.

"So, [both] top-down and bottom-up, they call it a sandwich approach. I think you need both because for government and funding but also trying to incorporate the bottom-up approach at the core of what we do." - Sonia Mena

FarmPEAT: Bernie Duffy, a farmer involved with FarmPEAT, described how the project used a scorecard system to reward farmers for managing their lands for climate, biodiversity, and water quality. They built momentum by starting slowly, offering training workshops, and demonstrating what could be achieved. The success of results-based approaches such as these has led to large-scale mainstreaming through the national [ACRES](#) programme, showcasing how innovative local projects can influence national policy. FarmPEAT finished in December 2024, read the [final project report](#). FarmPEAT finished in December 2024, read the [final project report](#).

Both Sonia Mena and Bernie Duffy highlighted that true co-creation and behaviour change take significant time. Projects need to begin with strategies in place to embed this kind of approach and ensure broad, inclusive engagement from day one. Sonia noted that building partnerships for engagement in wetland restoration can require a 20-year timeframe. She also pointed out the need to meaningfully involve marginalised groups, not just the "usual suspects," which adds to the time and resources required.

Hometree: Ray Ó Foghlú introduced the Hometree project, which is restoring nature in the west of Ireland with a focus on native temperate woodlands. Ray observed that communities are more likely to support a change if they feel central to it and have agency, contrasting this with past forestry policies where landowners felt disconnected. He highlighted that all actions within Hometree are voluntary and that the organisation prioritises finding partners who are willing to engage. The project has found that once the first few people get involved, they often lead by example, inspiring more people to participate the following year. Ray mentioned a

highpoint for him was discovering that a farmer who had previously engaged with Hometree went on to advocate for nature restoration independently of the initiative.

Ray spoke about the importance of meeting people where they are, whether it's at a project meeting or leaning over a farm gate. He also emphasised the importance of "being a good neighbour" and becoming an active part of the community, rather than only engaging when something is needed.

"Don't let the day you need something from somebody be the day [you contact them]. You call in... because you're in the area, you're interested in them, and you want them to be interested in you." - Ray Ó Foghlú

Role of Arts in Engagement: Sonia, Ray and Bernie all spoke about how their projects integrate the arts. WaterLANDS has embedded long-term artists-in-residence at each of its project sites. The aim of the residencies is to generate learnings, bring new perspectives to wetland restoration and to help the project and others involved to see wetland restoration in a different light. Ray highlighted that Hometree's Dinnseanchas project has brought six artists together to work alongside communities and explore the future of Ireland's uplands in creative ways. FarmPEAT used creative outreach like the "Love Your Wellies" competition and community days to reach younger generations and help to foster their connection with nature. Bernie highlighted that creative outreach was a fantastic way for the project to engage with hard-to-reach groups, like school children, and those who weren't familiar with bogs.

Certainty for Farmers: Bernie Duffy and Gary Goggins both stressed that farmers value certainty in programmes and policies, which is often lacking due to short project life cycles and fluctuating funding. There is a need for longer-term financial commitments (e.g., 20-30 years) for nature restoration to be truly effective and to avoid projects "falling off a cliff" when funding ends.

"I suppose from a farming perspective, one thing we like is certainty because we actually work in an area which is very, very uncertain." - Bernie Duffy

Discussion: Final reflections from the panel discussion noted that fragmented land ownership is a significant challenge in Ireland, where land is owned by numerous individuals (sometimes dozens for commonage), making large-scale restoration difficult and expensive. Additionally, there's a need for policymakers to move beyond solely ecological data in prioritisation and incorporate socio-economic and cultural factors, as farmers often have genuine concerns that need to be addressed.

An initial topic of discussion from the audience focused on payments to farmers and whether they were continuing. It was confirmed that payments to farmers for environmental management, including actions like raising the water table, are currently happening and have been scaled up. Gary Goggins confirmed that a results-based payment approach, like FarmPEAT and Wild Atlantic Nature, has been mainstreamed into the CAP Strategic Plan through the national programme called ACRES CP. This mechanism puts a value on environmental services and creates a common understanding of what good habitat quality

looks like, with clear criteria for improving scores and receiving higher payments. The money flowing to these groups is tied to delivering on national environmental objectives under various directives and action plans.

When a question was posed on whether programmes from the likes of Teagasc can pick up momentum from projects like FarmPEAT, Bernie Duffy stated his belief that it will require the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Teagasc to push these kinds of initiatives to the next level and deliver them at scale. This indicates an expectation that national agricultural advisory bodies will be crucial in expanding successful pilot initiatives.

Following the event, Gary addressed an audience question that went unanswered on the day. In response to a question regarding how LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature grew its budget from €20 million to €60 million, Gary noted: "The majority of the additional funding has come from public finance, across different government departments including DHLGH/NPWS, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), and the Department of An Taoiseach Shared Island Programme. We have also received funding from two projects under the EU Horizon programme and supported a recently funded EIP (European Integrated Project). We have also received funding from philanthropy and private finance."

Bridging the Gap Between Society and Policy

The final panel examined the role of participatory approaches in shaping policy and driving systemic change, facilitated by David Murphy (Chief Executive Officer, ERINN Innovation) and featuring perspectives from Desmond O'Mahony (Behavioural Insights Team Lead, [Environmental Protection Agency](#)), Jacqueline Healy ([Department of Climate, Energy, and the Environment - DCEE](#)), Ali Sheridan (Chair of the [Just Transition Commission](#)), and Christine Domegan ([Peatlands and People Foundation](#), Climate House Ireland). The panellists discussed how co-creation can be integrated into policy frameworks and transition strategies, underscoring its importance for ensuring legitimacy, inclusivity, and long-term effectiveness.



Desmond O'Mahony (Environmental Protection Agency): As a scientific officer leading the Behavioural Insights Team, Des O'Mahony's work focuses on social science and psychology, collecting national-level data on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to climate and population through the "[Climate Change in the Irish Mind](#)" programme. His research indicates a high degree of public understanding and trust in science regarding climate change but also highlights resistance to policy changes that directly impact personal finances, such as heating and transport costs. He also introduced concepts like "nudging" (small, behaviourally informed changes) and "sludge reduction" (simplifying administrative processes to reduce friction and equalise access to services), which are crucial for effective policy implementation.

Jacqueline Healy (Department of Climate, Energy, and the Environment - DECC): Jacqueline Healy leads work on textiles within the Circular Economy division. She emphasised the significant environmental impact of textiles and their potential for transitioning to a circular economy. To address the lack of a policy framework in this new area, her department established a Textiles Advisory Group in 2022, comprising industry, regulators, and community sectors, utilising a "double diamond process model" for co-creation. She noted the pressure of EU deadlines (e.g., a separate collection system for textiles by January 2025) and the challenges of balancing diverse stakeholder needs and EU legal obligations with policy development.

"Textiles have a huge impact on the environment, but they also have huge potential to transition us into a circular economy." - Jacqueline Healy

Ali Sheridan (Chair of the Just Transition Commission): Ali Sheridan introduced the newly established Just Transition Commission of Ireland, an advisory body to the government on integrating just transition into climate policy. She highlighted Ireland's shift into an urgent implementation phase of climate action and the ongoing process of defining and operationalising just transition norms. A key concern is the loss of community trust due to inconsistent support, funding gaps, and a lack of clarity in policy direction, which is difficult to regain. She stressed the need for proactive planning, workforce planning, and a broader definition of "good jobs" in a future climate economy that includes nature work and care work, moving beyond simple job numbers. Sheridan views top-down and bottom-up approaches as a feedback loop, essential for achieving climate goals.

"We have to define fairness. Because I agree there's roles for all actors, state and non-state actors. It's a necessity for all actors to get involved in this, but when it comes to fair share, resource ability, it's really important that we have more conversations around that and we move away from the 'this is on individuals to do'." - Ali Sheridan

Christine Domegan (Peatlands and People Foundation, Climate House Ireland):

Christine Domegan introduced Climate House Ireland, which is an ambition to build a world-class centre in the Midlands of Ireland dedicated to tackling climate and environmental challenges, co-creating solutions and inspiring action. Climate House is envisioned as both a physical and mental space where people can experience and learn about sustainable futures, engage in difficult conversations to solve complex problems, and build capacity to respond to the green transition. Climate House Ireland is planned to include an immersive Encounter Experience, where visitors will journey through living landscapes and interact with nature-based storytelling, a Futures Hub where businesses, corporates and changemakers can engage in programming to build capacity within their organisation and develop new skills for a sustainable society of tomorrow, and an outdoor Regenerative Park where visitors will explore restored ecosystems like wetlands and woodlands, and engage with citizen science activities and art trails. Domegan also proposed establishing "permanent bioregional just transition hubs" to provide long-term, contextually embedded learning and capacity building, acting as trusted interfaces between communities and policymakers.

"You need to get representatives of all of the stakeholders in the room where they hear from each other and capture all the voices. But you don't allow one voice to drown out another voice." - Christine Domegan

A great deal of interest was generated from Christine's talk on Climate House Ireland. The Climate House team provided the following overview of the initiative to address questions present in the Q&A session:

- **What is Climate House Ireland?** Climate House Ireland is an ambition and a project to build a new year-round centre in the midlands of Ireland, dedicated to tackling climate change, restoring biodiversity, and designing more sustainable futures. It will combine nature, innovation and community and engagement in one inspiring place, offering visitors and businesses immersive experiences, opportunities to collaborate and build capacity, and a chance to explore restored landscapes.
- **Where will Climate House Ireland be located?** The world-class, 4,000sqm facilities will be situated in the Midlands of Ireland, a landscape shaped by generations of interactions between people and nature. The exact site has not yet been confirmed.
- **Is Climate House Ireland built yet?** No. The project is currently in development. While the concept, design and vision are well advanced, the team is now engaging with supporters, partners, and communities to bring it to life.
- **What will visitors experience at Climate House Ireland?** Visitors will be able to explore three interconnected elements:
 - **Encounter Experience:** An immersive journey through living landscapes and storytelling spaces including a rainforest atrium and different interactive "Storytelling Spheres".
 - **Futures Hub:** A collaborative space for changemakers to collaborate, businesses and corporates to build capacity for the green transition, and experts to share solutions and drive action.
 - **Regenerative Park:** Restored ecosystems like wetlands, woodland, and meadows, with boardwalks, gardens, art trails, and citizen science opportunities.
- **Why the midlands of Ireland?** The midlands offer a landscape that has long been defined by the interaction of people and nature. It is a region undergoing transformation, making it the ideal context for a project dedicated to regeneration, innovation, and global impact - a new home for hopeful and collective climate action in Ireland's heartlands.
- **Who is behind Climate House Ireland?** The concept has been developed by the Peatlands and People Foundation, supported by the EU LIFE Integrated Project. The Foundation is committed to advancing the project for local benefit and with expert local leadership. Together, the team is committed to creating a place that inspires hope, creativity, and meaningful action.
- **How can I get involved?** The Climate House team is eager to connect with potential collaborators and site partners who share in the vision. Your ideas, resources, and partnerships will help shape Climate House Ireland into a vibrant hub of solutions and inspiration.
- **Will there be opportunities for the public to contribute ideas?** Yes. Community input is central to the project. From public consultations to creative workshops, the team wants Climate House Ireland to reflect the hopes and ambitions of people across Ireland and

beyond. Initial consultations were conducted with community groups, companies, researchers, and local authorities. The team will be launching more events and engagements in the area over the coming year, so keep an eye out for how you can get involved.

- **How will it be funded?** The estimated €30 million capital spend will be funded by a mix of grants, strategic loans, corporate sponsorship, and philanthropy.
- **When will it open?** As the site is not yet confirmed and development is ongoing, we do not have an opening date. Updates will be shared as the project progresses – keep an eye on climatehouse.ie.

Discussion: The panel was then opened up to a wider discussion and Q&A session including the audience. An initial discussion focused on the urgency of climate action versus the "slow emergency." While the need for climate action is urgent, it's often not perceived as such by the public due to more immediate concerns like bills and jobs, making it a marketing challenge to reframe the narrative. Further, panellists repeatedly emphasised that trust is hard-won and easily lost, especially with short-term projects and inconsistent support. Effective co-creation requires deep, structured engagement and often involves non-traditional methods to include marginalised voices and address inherent power imbalances.

"The loss of trust in the community as well, where you've asked the community to go on this shared journey around a rallying call. They put in their time and effort and then you don't have clarity on where that journey's going to go. And once you've lost it, it is very hard to win back." - Ali Sheridan

A critical challenge is moving from short-term "projects" to "sustained initiatives". While new financing models like carbon/nature credits are being explored, a clear, long-term funding roadmap is currently lacking, creating uncertainty for those involved. David Murphy highlighted ERINN Innovation's strategy of backing "sustained initiatives" like Climate House Ireland and supporting the creation of new value chains for restoration, to provide stability beyond individual project funding.

Finally, the panel grappled with how to accelerate policy implementation, balance top-down mandates with bottom-up community needs and manage the complex interdependencies between various sectors (e.g., agriculture, energy, textiles). The importance of understanding social norms and designing interventions based on people's actual needs and motivations, rather than just what policymakers want, was highlighted through social marketing examples.

Open Discussion

Following all three panels, an open discussion and Q&A took place. Hosted by David Murphy and Michael Papapetrou, the session focused on several interconnected challenges and opportunities related to co-creation, climate action, and community engagement. Below you'll find the key takeaways and insights:

1. Capacity Building and Workforce Development

- **Need for Permanent Structures:** There is a call for a "network of permanent embedded trust-based units" or similar structures to facilitate long-term capacity building and project involvement.
- **Specialised Training:** There is a recognised need for more professional courses, such as micro-credentials in peatland restoration for farmers and living lab management, to equip people with practical knowledge for restoration activities. However, there is a current lack of such courses and a gap in filling this need.
- **Future Skills Planning:** The discussion veered towards the future of the workforce for the next and future generations. Points were made that we should be creating "the type of career that the current and next generations will want" but that "we need to do a better job at understanding what we're trying to achieve, and the capacity and skills needed for that" because "the definition of a good career in 2050 will look a lot different" to what is considered a 'good career' today. It was also noted that current inequalities that exist must be addressed.

"We need to do a better job at understanding what we're trying to achieve, and the capacity and skills needed for that." - Ali Sheridan

- **Facilitation Skills:** Training facilitators in "systems change" is crucial to help communities move beyond addressing symptoms to understanding systemic causes and influencing policy. There is a huge potential for "creativity at local level to find their own solutions".

2. Funding and Long-Term Sustainability

- **Project Lifecycle Challenges:** Projects often end abruptly, leading to a loss of momentum, knowledge, and community trust. This "cliff edge" effect necessitates designing scaling mechanisms into projects from their inception.

"Projects need to be designed based on actual needs and designed into wider projects after the pilot stage. The next step is to design projects that will

have a cascading aspect. Then we will know where we're going and that the funding is supported by politics and changing legislation." – Salem Gharbia

- **Certainty for Farmers:** Farmers, operating in uncertain environments, desire long-term certainty for restoration programs to ensure their efforts are not undone when funding stops: "Farmers are being encouraged to join schemes, but they are less than half of what they were before."
- **Innovative Financing Models:** Exploring long-term financing through mechanisms like carbon, nature, or biodiversity credits is ongoing, though these models are sometimes described as "nascent" and sometimes generating "hot air".
- **Radical Funding Approaches:** Suggestions include creating local funding pools that can quickly approve small grants (e.g., €60,000 for a farmer to convert land) and mechanisms for private individuals to invest in nature restoration, potentially through tax-deductible contributions, rather than solely relying on large institutional investors.
- **Systemic Investment:** The idea of investing in a "portfolio of projects" at a bio regional scale, rather than individual projects, was put forward as a way to achieve systemic change and attract larger funds like pension funds or insurance companies.

3. Role of Business and the Private Sector

- **Business as Part of the Community:** The role of businesses must be considered as one that is integral to the community: "Businesses are part of the community; they should be part of the conversation". There were discussions around the role of businesses in terms of making "sincere intentions to move and change and develop".
- **Large Corporates as Accelerators:** Large corporations are seen as having resources and the ability to move faster than governments, making them important stakeholders in climate solutions. Many have science-based targets and are investing in reducing emissions across their value chains.
- **Support for SMEs:** Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) require specific support to transition to a nature-inclusive economy, as they often lack the time and resources of larger corporates.
- **Tension with Consumerism:** A significant challenge lies in the tension between efforts to fund restoration and the dominant economic activity of continuously producing and selling new consumer goods, which often undermines environmental goals.

4. Trust, Engagement, and Power Imbalances

- **Fragility of Trust:** Trust is acknowledged as foundational for co-creation but is "hard to build and easy to lose". Inconsistent support, unfulfilled promises (e.g., declining agri-environmental payments), or perceived unresponsiveness to local issues erode community trust.

- **Inclusive Participation:** Effective participatory approaches require active strategies to ensure all voices, including marginalised groups and those with quieter opinions, are heard, rather than just the "loudest and strongest" ones.
- **Engagement Methodologies:** Recommended approaches include stakeholder mapping (including power-influence analysis and identifying excluded groups), combining traditional and modern communication (e.g., paper surveys, social media), and fostering collective intelligence activities. Creative formats that make people feel comfortable (like leaning over a freestanding gate at a fair) can also enhance engagement.
- **"Sludge Reduction":** Identifying and removing "unnecessary friction" or administrative burdens ("sludge") in government processes (e.g., accessing funding, benefits) is crucial, as these disproportionately affect vulnerable populations and undermine trust.

5. Speeding Up Climate Action and Overcoming Inertia

- **Slow Emergency Perception:** Climate change is perceived as a "slow emergency" in Ireland, leading to it being deprioritised against immediate concerns like bills, roads, and jobs. There's a need for better marketing to frame climate action as an urgent, desirable "climate lifestyle".

"Climate change is not seen as urgent; it's seen as a slow emergency. It is pushed down the line in Ireland because we feel we have time to gather ourselves. It's not an urgent issue compared to bills, finding a job, housing etc. Climate doesn't seem to hit the bar as being as urgent. We need to sell climate lifestyle the way companies and ad companies advertise their car lifestyle etc." – Audience Member

- **Government Agility:** Government departments are often described as not "nimble or agile," struggling with numerous policies and legislative changes, which slows down implementation.
- **Learning from Crises:** The COVID-19 response showed that Ireland can be nimble and collaborative when facing a clear, immediate risk. However, climate action requires a fundamental transformation.
- **Setting Conditions for Change:** Even without direct agility, government can set conditions for rapid change.
- **Legislative Force:** Explicit legal mandates, like Norway's ban on textile waste, can force rapid behavioural shifts and infrastructure development.

6. Just Transition, Environmental Justice, and Future Vision

- **Evolving Definitions:** The concept of "just transition" has multiple, evolving definitions, and Ireland's current policy definition is seen as not ambitious enough, focusing too narrowly on employment and mitigating negative impacts.
- **National Dialogue:** There's a strong call for a national dialogue to define a shared vision for Irish society in 2050, beyond mere emission targets, outlining how communities and jobs will evolve. This counter-vision is essential to combat misinformation and ensure public buy-in.

"If we don't look at the fundamental issues (behavioural science, how to nudge the individual), we then lose sight of what's happening at the society level." - Gary Goggins

- **Addressing Inequalities:** A true just transition should address existing societal inequalities, stabilise climate, and regenerate nature, rather than simply fitting into incumbent models.

"We have to tread carefully when we're talking about who is doing what when it comes to climate action and when it comes to fairness and fair share. It's important to have conversations around this. You can only be part of a just transition if you are given mechanisms to take part. People have other considerations like bills and childcare, not just climate." - Ali Sheridan

- **Ireland's Responsibility:** As a wealthy nation, Ireland has a responsibility for leadership in environmental justice and showing progress in climate action, leveraging its size and "nimbleness".
- **Trade-offs and Vulnerability:** Discussions highlighted that climate action will involve trade-offs and create "winners and losers" (e.g., coastal erosion, flooding), necessitating more data and interrogation of who in Ireland is truly vulnerable to both climate breakdown and policy impacts.

Looking Ahead: Conclusion and Next Steps

Co-Creating Change: Participatory Approaches for a Resilient Ireland highlighted the vital role of participatory approaches in building a more resilient and sustainable Ireland. By seeing examples of this work in action and through discussing how best to foster collaboration between communities, policymakers, and practitioners, the workshop highlighted that co-creation is not only a practical tool for addressing complex socioecological challenges but also a pathway to more inclusive decision-making, innovative solutions, and a just transition. The discussions and examples shared underscored the urgent need to embed these approaches more deeply into Ireland's environmental strategies, ensuring that collective action drives transformative change for both people and nature.

As event organisers, ERINN Innovation plans to continue these necessary conversations at further events, including the upcoming Climate Carnival on 29–30 September at Ballintubbert Gardens and House in Laois. From creative spaces to networking opportunities, it promises to be a thoughtful, creative space for those driving impact, from policy through to practice. As the official innovation partner, ERINN Innovation is proud to help shape an event that celebrates not just what's possible, but what's necessary for a more sustainable future. [Learn more about the Climate Carnival.](#)

A sincere thank you from ERINN Innovation to all the panellists and attendees who made the event a success. We are looking forward to continuing this work towards a more inclusive, resilient Ireland.

Further reading

EmpowerUs Consortium (2025) *Handbook of Inclusive Methodologies: How methods and methodologies contribute to equitable coastal transition through empowerment and inclusivity.* [Link.](#)

Environmental Protection Agency (2022) *Climate Change's Four Irelands.* [Link.](#)

McKinley, E., Burdon, D., Shellock, R.J. (2023) *The evolution of ocean literacy: A new framework for the United Nations Ocean Decade and beyond.* [Link.](#)

ERINN Innovation (2025) *Navigating Living Labs: Lessons Learned from SCORE's 10 Coastal City Living Labs.* [Link.](#)

National Economic and Social Development Council (2009) *Ireland at Another Turning Point.* [Link.](#)

National Textile Advisory Group (2024) *Recommendations to the Minister of State with responsibility for the Circular Economy.* [Link.](#)

Thank you for joining us!

Co-Creating Change

Participatory Approaches for a
Resilient Ireland



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