

Best Social Engagement Presentation Award in Honour of Michael Ewing, Environ 2026

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Project: *BioCultúr: Toward a Biocultural Bioeconomy - Culture, Heritage and Language in Bioeconomy Policy and Public Understanding in Ireland*

The bioeconomy is increasingly central to how Ireland and Europe imagine a more sustainable future. It refers to the part of the economy that uses renewable biological resources from agriculture, forestry and the marine to produce food, feed, materials and energy, while reducing waste in support of a sustainable and climate-neutral society. However, while the bioeconomy is an important policy framework for environmental transition, public understanding of the term remains uneven.

My doctoral research asks a simple but important question: if sustainability policy is to shape public behaviour, does it make sense to people in the cultural worlds they already inhabit?

Much bioeconomy policy is framed through the language of innovation, biomass, competitiveness, research and economic growth. These are important dimensions of transition, but they can also make the bioeconomy feel abstract, technical and distant from everyday life. My research argues that environmental transition is not only a scientific, economic or technological challenge. It is also a cultural one. Culture, heritage, and language shape how people interpret environmental change, relate to place, and understand their role in sustainability transitions.

Ireland offers a particularly valuable case for this research. It has a living linguistic heritage and strong traditions of rural life, farming, storytelling, music, community, folklore and place-based environmental meaning. Yet preliminary analysis suggests that these dimensions remain marginal within dominant bioeconomy policy framings. This raises an important issue: if culture, heritage and language are weakly represented even in a context where they are so socially and historically significant, their absence may not be incidental. It may reflect a wider structural limitation in how the bioeconomy is currently framed.

The study uses a mixed-methods design built around three connected strands. The first is a policy analysis of Irish, European, and selected international bioeconomy documents,

examining how the bioeconomy is represented and which forms of knowledge are made visible or marginalised. The second is a national public survey exploring awareness, understanding and possible cultural connections to the bioeconomy. The third strand involves stakeholder and policymaker interviews that will examine how institutional actors understand the roles of culture, heritage, language, education, and public engagement in bioeconomy development.

Preliminary findings from the policy analysis show a clear imbalance. Across selected policy documents, dominant terms and priorities cluster around innovation, research, productivity, biomass and sectoral development. In contrast, culture, heritage, language and identity appear rarely, and when they do appear, they are often symbolic rather than operational.

The public survey findings suggest a related but distinct challenge. At the time of analysis, the survey had received 654 responses. Awareness of the term “bioeconomy” was mixed, and confidence of understanding was generally low. However, respondents showed strong support for using Irish culture, heritage, and language in explaining environmental and bioeconomy policy to the public. Recurring themes included farming, Gaeilge, storytelling, music, local traditions, community life and relationships with land and place.

These findings suggest that the issue is not simply public indifference or a lack of information. Rather, there may be a mismatch between the technical language of policy and the cultural language through which people already make meaning about the environment. In other words, the challenge is not only to communicate the bioeconomy more clearly, but to frame it in ways that are more meaningful, relatable and publicly legitimate.

This research develops the idea of a biocultural bioeconomy. This does not reject science, innovation or economic development. Instead, it argues that these must be situated within culture, place and public meaning. A technocratic framing tends to present the bioeconomy as resource-based, innovation-led, expert-driven and economically valued. A biocultural framing asks how the bioeconomy can also be place-based, participatory, publicly meaningful and attentive to ecological, social and cultural value.

For environmental protection, this matters because sustainable practices are more likely to take root when people can see themselves within them. Policy alone does not change habits. Public meaning, trust, identity and connection also matter. By placing culture, heritage and language at the centre of bioeconomy education and public engagement, BioCultúr aims to support a

more inclusive, culturally resonant and publicly intelligible approach to sustainability transition in Ireland.

Ultimately, this research argues that environmental protection depends not only on changing systems, but on changing meanings.

If you want to reach out and discuss any aspect of the research:

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