

**Pre-Conference**

**“Research on Sustainable Consumption – Present and Future Perspectives for Young Academics”**

**November 6<sup>th</sup> 2011, Hamburg – European Green Capital 2011, Germany**

**Introduction**

Young researchers in the inter- and transdisciplinary field of research on sustainable consumption as well as in the field of sustainability sciences in general were invited to attend the pre-conference “Research on Sustainable Consumption – Present and Future Perspectives for Young Academics” on Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2011, from 9am to 5pm.

The pre-conference provided a forum to discuss the present and future conditions and aims of research on sustainable consumption as well as sustainability research in general. It intended to give space for reflections upon the role young researchers currently play and could play in this inter- and transdisciplinary field of research. Furthermore, a setting was provided to discuss and develop concepts and approaches to research on sustainability and exchange experiences, as well as network with both young and more experienced researchers from different countries.

The program started with a “Get-together-and-network” to invite participants to get in touch and exchange in an informal and playful setting.

After that, an introductory session entitled “The Sustainability of Sustainability Sciences - Future Challenges for Young Academics” focused on the special field of research on sustainable consumption as well as sustainability research in general. Renowned researchers concerned with inter- and transdisciplinary sustainability research opened the session with short introductory notes tackling issues like present and future frameworks and theoretical paradigms for inter- and transdisciplinary research on sustainable consumption, trends in current research on sustainable consumption and the role of the ‘next generation’ of researchers. The introductory notes were followed by a moderated discussion between the speakers and the audience. During an “Open space” in the afternoon, different topics – mainly brought in by the participants themselves – concerning the present and future situation of sustainability research were discussed at parallel roundtables.



*Finding colleagues in the same field of research during the „Get-together“*

*“The most enjoyable and impressive conference that I have ever participated all over the world!”*

In the following the results of the morning and the afternoon sessions will be reported and displayed, complemented by some comments from the participants themselves.

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## *Results of the Panel Discussion*

Introductory notes were delivered by Kate Soper, Bas van Vliet and Ursula Offenberger. Ursula stepped in as a representative of the pre-conference organizing committee for the invited speaker Simonetta Carbonaro who was not able to participate due to illness. The panel discussants responded to three broader themes that had been chosen by the pre-conference organizing committee prior to the conference:

- What are present and possible future frameworks and theoretical paradigms for inter- and transdisciplinary research on sustainable consumption that cross different disciplines and feed into sustainable development?
- What kind of change is the current research on sustainable consumption aiming at: an 'aesthetic surgery' of established consumption production systems or a more profound 'social-ecological' transformation? What kind of trends (e.g. efficiency or sufficiency) are supported?
- What is expected of the 'next generation' of researchers? How can young academics prepare for the future challenges of inter- and transdisciplinary research on sustainability and how can they receive support from senior researchers, institutional frameworks and learning opportunities?



*The three speakers (from left): Bas van Vliet, Ursula Offenberger, Kate Soper*

Following the introductory notes, the speakers engaged in a moderated discussion with the audience. From the several contributions to the lively discussion, three broader clusters of issues can be summarized.

*"Very well organized. Great speakers. Good opportunity to share experiences and to learn more."*

### **1. *Emerging issues and themes in research on sustainability and consumption***

A major strand of discussion centred on peoples' responds to the visions, language and normativity of the sustainable consumption agenda. Participants criticized common approaches for being missionary in their pursuit of sustainable consumption (sustainable consumption as the 'new Catholicism') and for widely ignoring the societal unease with the rhetoric of de-growth and steady-state. It was suggested to apply a mixture of approaches in a more concerted way more thoroughly (e.g. the provision of feasible information on sustainability performance of goods and services and of sustainable product provision systems, the better use of imaginary and images to engage people in sustainability issues). Despite the exhaustive research base on this question, there is still need for a better understanding of what people and consumers value and how this links to the sustainability agenda.

In a rather comparative perspective, the question was raised what can be learned from sustainable consumption initiatives in different regions and cultures and from other fields of study (e.g. health promotion) for the advancement of a transition to sustainability. It was argued in this context that more refined methodologies are needed in order to identify potentials, possibilities and time-scales of transferring and mainstreaming knowledge from one context to another. Finally, it was critically discussed what kind of transition sustainability research should seek to contribute to (e.g. radical vs. pragmatic change) and what approaches of researchers to share their findings show greatest promise for making a societal impact.

## **2. Interdisciplinary and community links of sustainability research and researchers**

A second strand of discussion revolved around the controversy in how far sustainability researchers should engage with community and social movements. While community activists and social movements were generally considered as key players and change agents for a transition towards sustainable consumption, some speakers from the auditorium were rather skeptical about mingling up scientific and political purposes, whereas others argued that sustainability sciences was unavoidably normative in its very axioms.

*"I liked the idea of the pre-conference as an important forum to get to know the other young researchers before the main conference started - this was really useful!"*

## **3. The sustainability of sustainability science itself**

A rather self-reflective third strand of discussion focused on the limits and constraints that academia and the sustainability sciences themselves impose on their employees' possibilities to live a sustainable life. There was a broad consensus that academia is a highly visible and reputable societal actor and should act as a sustainability role model for other sectors and actors. Panel discussants and the speakers from the auditorium acknowledged a number of initiatives seeking to promote green and sustainable institutions of higher education.



*Discussion with the audience*

However, it was argued that academia does not yet walk the talk and thus fails to live up to its full responsibility, as alternative time regimes, working hours or incentive systems that move away from quantitative (and thus growth-oriented) quality indicators remain a blind spot in practice.

The organizing committee intends to compose a viewpoint paper based on the panel discussion in the follow-up of the conference.

## **Results of the Open Sustainability Research Space**

In the afternoon of the pre-conference, all participants were invited to discuss a multitude of topics regarding sustainable consumption. Following the open space idea, all participants could propose one or several topics to be discussed either prior and/or on the day of the pre-conference. Several participants already submitted various topics during the registration process of the pre-conference. Following a brief description of the method implemented, a summary of the results of all discussions (noted down on posters during the discussion rounds) will be presented.



*Discussion during open space*

*The discussion rounds*

After the panel discussion in the morning all topics for the open space discussion, which had been submitted prior to the conference, were presented to the auditorium. Five thematic clusters of topics had been



*Recording the discussion results*

composed by the organizational committee in advance and were proposed as the first five out of eight possible round-tables, each with up to three topics. Further topics could be submitted during the lunch break. Several participants used this opportunity, for example, to continue the discussions of the morning. Everyone, who submitted a topic, was asked to be the chair of the discussion round, i.e. to moderate the talk and ensure that the most important results were noted down on a pre-structured poster. Each topic could be discussed within a 40 minute timeframe, after which the topic was changed and

participants were free to leave the round-table or to stay for the next round of discussion. Overall 13 different topics were discussed at seven different round-tables. Although some discussion-groups stayed together almost all three rounds, trying to discuss different facets of an overarching topic, most participants changed the round-table after 40 minutes and carried their ideas and the results from previous topics to the next discussion.

*"I think it was a very good initiative, because we could get to know each other much better during the open space discussions, as during the big conference the breaks are short to speak about serious topics in a detailed way."*

In the following a record of the result poster is displayed.

<b>Room 1, discussion round 1</b>	
<b>Topic 1: Consequential over Attributional: Often only one method of Life-Cycle Assessment yields sensible results (Florian Habermacher)</b>	
<b>Participants</b>	
Christian Klöckner	christian.klockner[at]svt.ntnu.no
<b>Florian Habermacher</b>	<b>florian.habermacher[at]unisg.ch</b>
Zsofia Mozner Vetone	zsofia.mozner[at]uni-corvinus.hu
<b>Your three most important conclusions</b>	<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Life is complicated, society complex. That complexity is not adequately captured with attributional modeling.</li> <li>- The assessment of the (marshal) impact of our decisions – individual or collective – requires consequential modeling.</li> <li>- Future LCA should be dynamic and coupled with social science models.</li> <li>- Communicating uncertainty is preferable to neglecting effects and having bias in the result.</li> </ul>	What could be a quantitative method of integrating LCA and social science? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Policy</li> <li>- Market / Economics</li> <li>- Behavioral Psychology</li> </ul>

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Room 2, discussion round 1	
<b>Topic 1: The solidarity with and understanding of consumption in other (non western) countries (Maarten Crivits)</b>	
Participants	
Elisabeth Lauper	lauper[at]ikaoe.unibe.ch
Kate Soper	k.soper[at]londonmet.ac.uk
Lenka Fendrycková	vojacko1[at]natur.cuni.cz
<b>Maarten Crivits</b>	<b>maarten.crivits[at]ugent.be</b>
Maja Fischer	fischer[at]ikaoe.unibe.ch
Maria Hahnekamp	maria.hahnekamp[at]ethnologie.uni-halle.de
Your three most important conclusions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Form of cosmopolitan thinking</li> <li>- Leapfrogging overdevelopment</li> <li>- Dominant economic model as consequence of 'imitation'</li> </ul>	<p><b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do we need rational communication (&gt; information) or empathy to change consumer awareness</li> </ul>

Room 2, discussion round 2	
<b>Topic 2: Transnational supply chains and sustainable consumption (the relation of production and consumption) (Maria Hahnekamp)</b>	
Participants	
Florian Habermacher	florian.habermacher[at]unisg.ch
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Nuray Duman	nurduman[at]uni-hohenheim.de
Your three most important conclusions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The personal involvement in production</li> <li>- Knowledge production</li> <li>- Threat of overflow</li> </ul>	<p><b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'transfer'</li> </ul>

Room 3, discussion round 1	
<b>Topic 1: Reflecting about 'alternative hedonism': How to use it in empirical research? How does it relate to radical economic change? (Ursula Offenberger, Thomas Brückmann)</b>	
Participants	
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Your three most important conclusions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working less does not necessarily lead to less materialism (e.g. Norway)</li> <li>- Alternative hedonism and social differentiation (e.g. class, gender, poverty)</li> </ul>	<p><b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b></p>

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Room 3, discussion round 2	
<b>Topic 1: Reflecting about 'alternative hedonism': How to use it in empirical research? How does it relate to radical economic change? (Ursula Offenberger, Thomas Brückmann)</b>	
Participants	
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Your three most important conclusions	
<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b>	
AGENDA: - The need for visions - Make alternative hedonism visible - Small is beautiful: many 'islands' of alternative hedonist social groups can contribute to social change	RESEARCH: - focus on how people perceive/deal with ambivalences - How do (groups of) individuals adopt different/alternative practices - Let us not underestimated the power of consumers → Reclaim the power as citizens

*"It was a good way to meet people in small groups before the beginning of the conference. Makes young researchers feel less "lost" during a big conference."*

Room 4, discussion round 1	
<b>Topic 1: How can we integrate sustainable consumption practices into the existing economic system? Or do we need a new economic system? (Julia Blasch)</b>	
Participants	
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Your three most important conclusions	
<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b>	
- The economic system is also a social system - The prices for resources need to be changed (→ "real" costs) - Changes have an effect on everything (global interconnectivity) - Co-evolution of consumption and production	- Do we need a whole new system or do we just have to 'modify' the existing one?

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(systems) - Change means 'no going back to the past' (e.g. DDR) - Depends on how you define 'the economic system'	
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Room 4, discussion round 2	
<b>Topic 2: What are appropriate / useful frameworks and theories to study the mainstreaming of sustainable consumption (Georg Holtz)</b>	
<b>Participants</b>	
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<b>Your three most important conclusions</b>	<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b>
- Supply and demand influence each other (→ they are interwoven in many ways) - Infrastructure is important for consumption - Depends on precise research question	- Is sustainable consumption possible for (as) the mainstream consumption?

*"The time for the group discussions in the open space afternoon was each time a bit short, but that was still perfect; even in the quite short discussion rounds one was able to get some interesting insights from others and get to know their opinions."*

Room 5, discussion round 1	
<b>Topic 1: Consumption &amp; political steering (Laura Spengler)</b>	
<b>Participants</b>	
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<b>Your three most important conclusions</b>	<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional /</b>

## Sustainable Consumption – Towards Action and Impact

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	<b>national differences, further conclusions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Top-down regulation AND bottom-up local + individual approaches necessary</li> <li>- Influencing products and influencing behavior (through policy) is very different</li> <li>- Achieve acceptability before, when steering consumption</li> <li>- Policy mix needed</li> <li>- “democratic regeneration”</li> </ul>	

<b>Room 5, discussion round 2</b>	
<b>Topic 2: How to make policy impact (Gesche Huebner)</b>	
<b>Participants</b>	
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Zsofia Mozner Vetone	zsofia.mozner[at]uni-corvinus.hu
<b>Your three most important conclusions</b>	<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strategic partners (industry, government)</li> <li>- Scientists need to learn to communicate better</li> <li>- Higher standards of acknowledgement of scientific evidence in policy</li> <li>- “it just takes time”</li> <li>- Create many IPCCs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is impact? How can you measure it?</li> <li>- How to compete with non-scientific input?</li> </ul>

<b>Room 5, discussion round 3</b>	
<b>Topic 3: How can we apply the principle of sufficiency in policy? (Maarten Crivits)</b>	
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<b>Your three most important conclusions</b>	<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reconsidering well-being in terms of material and energy use</li> <li>- Problem: Different subjective perceptions of well-being</li> <li>- Education to help value sufficiency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive examples of individuals (Celebs)</li> <li>- Carbon tax</li> <li>- Progressive tax</li> </ul>

<b>Room 6, discussion round 2</b>	
<b>Topic 1: How can sustainable consumption discourse avoid feeding the individualistic approach to social change? (Alvaro Porro)</b>	
<b>Participants</b>	
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<b>Your three most important conclusions</b>	<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional /</b>



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	<b>national differences, further conclusions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do not forget social structures, historical context, ... → Broad picture</li> <li>- Go beyond the idea of sustainable consumption as a moral individual election</li> <li>- Rethink tensions between: individual freedom/choices vs. socio-environmental justice nationally and globally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive feedback</li> <li>- Sustainable consumption</li> <li>- Critical mass accepts/demands policies</li> <li>- Structural policy changes</li> <li>- Policies facilitate sustainable consumption practices and concerns</li> </ul>

<b>Room 7, discussion round 1</b>	
<b>Topic 1: New methods of increasing engagement and uptake of sustainability activities? (Leyla Acaroglu); From words to action. How to convert motivation / intention for sustainable lifestyle into follow-up actions (Ralf Cimander)</b>	
<b>Participants, Round 1</b>	
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<b>Your three most important conclusions</b>	<b>OPEN Space ( further questions, drawings, regional / national differences, further conclusions</b>
1) A(ttitude) – B(behaviour) gap (or is it B – A?) 2) Information and/or something else as motivator?	3) Promotion / transmission of s.c. practices? Does this require “leaders”? Does being sustainable have to be “cool”?

<b>Room 7, discussion round 2</b>	
<b>Topic 2: How the actions of real people influence sustainability? (Tullia Jack)</b>	
<b>Participants, Round 2</b>	
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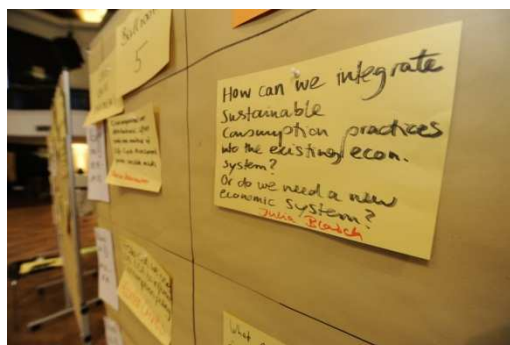
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Your three most important conclusions	OPEN Space
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consuming to communicate</li> <li>- prestige + status</li> <li>- role of outrage – vocal minority</li> <li>- conspicuous consumption (buying organic in shop rather than online)</li> <li>- cultural norms influence consumption + behaviour</li> <li>- social contagion (buying as activist → BOYCOTT + BUYCOTT)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- policy can be employed to shape consumption? → default position (e.g. organ donation)</li> <li>- consuming to fit in vs. consuming for status?</li> <li>- public (citizen consumer ← doubt) vs. private motivation</li> <li>- population increases out-do changes in consumption?</li> </ul>

Room 7, discussion round 3	
Topic 3: Do we have the right methods to study sustainable consumption? (N.N.)	
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Sidney Su Han	shan[at]uoguelph.ca
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Your three most important conclusions	OPEN Space ( further conclusions)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- there is not one best theory</li> <li>- maybe our problem is not a lack of theory, but a lack of suitable methods</li> <li>- methodology has huge impact on [word not readable – maybe crossed out] results and often results have limited validity for sust. cons. because of methodological shortcomings</li> </ul>	

The results of all discussions will be made accessible shortly for all participants of the pre-conference on the organization-committee’s website [www.young-sustainability-researchers.org](http://www.young-sustainability-researchers.org).




## **Conclusion**

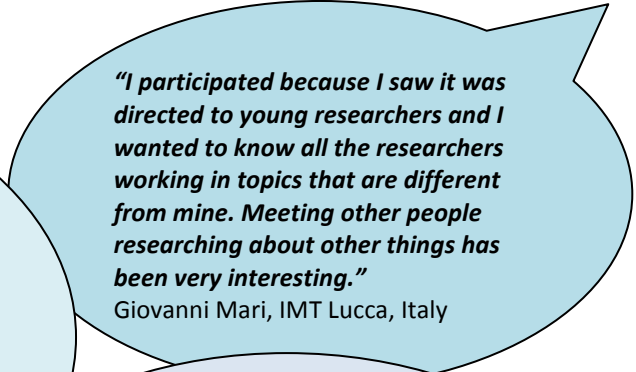
In sum, we can say that the Pre-Conference was a very productive, lively and joyful experience for most of the participants as well as the organizing committee. Besides the feedback that participants could give via an online-form after the conference, we interviewed some participants on the spot. We will conclude this report with some of the statements given during these interviews and would like to thank all participants for their valuable contributions, the speakers for their inspiring input and participation during the whole preconference as well as the staff of the University of Bern for their extensive support!

The organising committee:

**Dirk Dalichau, Christian Dehmel, Benjamin Diehl, Daniel Fischer, Melanie Jaeger-Erben, Pia Laborgne, Johanna Matzat, Malte Nachreiner, Ursula Offenberger, Markus Winkelmann**

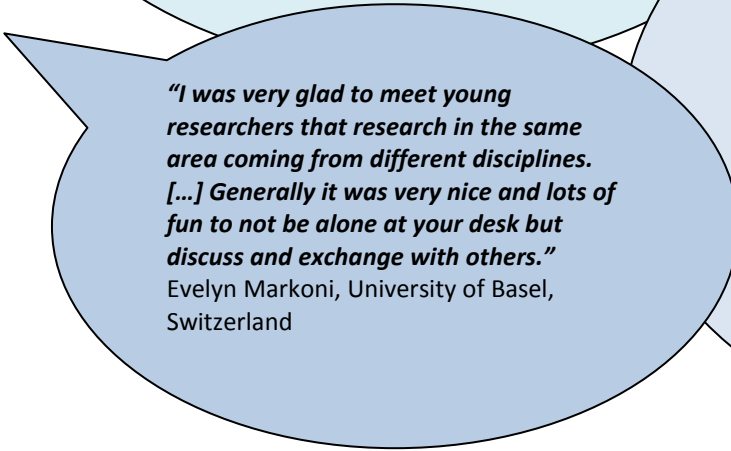


***“I was eager to meet other researchers interested in the same thing. Also to get some feedback to my ideas and hear what other people are doing. [...] I found the Pre-Conference was quite beautiful because everyone was listening, deeply listening to what other people were saying and then trying to understand it in the context of their own work and supporting or possibly providing an alternative viewpoint. I found it was very encouraging.”*** Tullia Jack, University of Melbourne, Australia

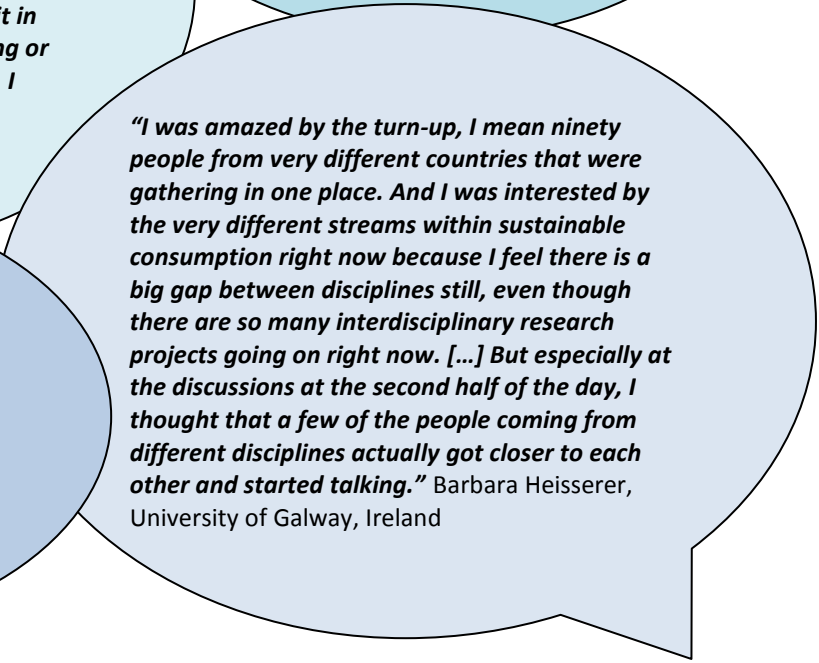


***“I participated because I saw it was directed to young researchers and I wanted to know all the researchers working in topics that are different from mine. Meeting other people researching about other things has been very interesting.”***

Giovanni Mari, IMT Lucca, Italy



***“I was very glad to meet young researchers that research in the same area coming from different disciplines. [...] Generally it was very nice and lots of fun to not be alone at your desk but discuss and exchange with others.”*** Evelyn Markoni, University of Basel, Switzerland



***“I was amazed by the turn-up, I mean ninety people from very different countries that were gathering in one place. And I was interested by the very different streams within sustainable consumption right now because I feel there is a big gap between disciplines still, even though there are so many interdisciplinary research projects going on right now. [...] But especially at the discussions at the second half of the day, I thought that a few of the people coming from different disciplines actually got closer to each other and started talking.”*** Barbara Heisserer, University of Galway, Ireland