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**CORCA DHUIBHNE
DINGLE PENINSULA**

Reflections on the Engaged Research Approach in a Regional Sustainability Transition: Dingle Peninsula 2030

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“Engaged research describes a wide range of rigorous research approaches and methodologies that share a common interest in collaborative engagement with the community and aim to improve, understand or investigate an issue of public interest or concern, including societal challenges.”

Campus Engage Engaged Research Working Group, 2017

There is a wide range of engagement activities that can be undertaken by academics, which may be classified based on the level of stakeholder participation. The “Public Engagement Onion” is a useful classification framework developed by (Wellcome Trust, 2011) that comprises three categories:

- Informing – one-way flow of communication, usually for the purpose of informed decision-making, awareness raising or educating, e.g. presentations at public events, policy submissions, online material.
- Consulting – two-way flow of communication, surveys, interviews, or workshops used to elicit stakeholder opinions; participants have an opportunity to shape the research results but not the research questions or objectives.
- Collaborating – open communication throughout the research process, participants are given the opportunity to shape research questions and direction through out the duration of the project.

MaREI has employed a variety of activities across each of these different engagement categories within the ‘**Corca Dhuibhne / Dingle Peninsula 2030**’ partnership. All three forms of engagement are important in different contexts. Informing is useful for sharing learnings, insights and recommendations arising from the project and also as an initial entry point into the community. Consultations are a means of gathering an understanding of the needs and priorities of people from the area. Finally, collaborating with the project partners and co-producing outputs enables the research to be embedded within the community and to actively support emerging projects.

Value of engaged research

- The most valuable engaged research contributions were: the energy and emissions analysis; mapping the evolving societal infrastructure; tracking and evaluating progress in both technology adoption and diffusion of sustainability; providing support in establishing a partnership structure and coordinating the active participation in partnership activities.
- MaREI developed and delivered an innovative reflective evaluation approach, including the production of a series of novel Learning Briefs, which captured the reflective learnings and policy and practice recommendations throughout the initiative – this is important for knowledge sharing and for informing future planning and practice.
- Organisations may be focused on delivering their individual projects and meeting their specific goals, while researchers can have a broader view of the bigger picture. MaREI has played a critical role in highlighting the links between the different initiatives evolving in the area.
- MaREI's engaged research focused on research co-production with the partners and communities on the Dingle Peninsula. Co-production builds upon and adds value to, rather than replacing, other research approaches. In this case it offered a means to both situate the research in a real-world local context, and to generate research outputs that are accessible to the partners and key stakeholders.
- The engaged research team provided valuable contributions to the development and success of the collaboration through active involvement in project development, membership on steering committees, offering ideas and plans for engagement when needed and being available as a sounding board to the project partners for all aspects of the partnership.
- MaREI's team provided a useful resource for the development and delivery of outreach events building on previous experience, as well as providing funding and materials.
- MaREI enabled significant funding support for Corca Dhuibhne 2030 through joint funding applications based on the engaged research approach. This has strengthened the local team by resourcing community engagement and coordination positions.
- MaREI translated the research findings into policy and practice insights and effectively communicated these insights to key policy makers and funders, resulting in ongoing improvements in the alignment of rural development with climate action.
- MaREI used this engaged research approach to bridge the communication gap between top-down national objectives (such as climate targets) and local bottom-up needs (such as housing, wellbeing, jobs, etc.). MaREI's team was uniquely placed, in that it was involved both 'on the ground' in transition processes and building an understanding of people's concerns, while also having channels to national policy levels.

Challenges

- A key element of the engaged research process is that stakeholders contribute to the research design and implementation. This requires a flexible and responsive approach that evolves along with an active project, which can conflict with a conventional project planning approach.
- The Corca Dhuibhne 2030 initiative demonstrated that engaged research requires a considerable time commitment, beyond conventional academic responsibilities. This is particularly pertinent for early-stage researchers who are required to publish journal papers and achieve other academic-based metrics, which are essential to building a successful research career.
- Funding a number of the costs inherent in engaged research proved challenging i.e. training, travelling to the community meetings and events, organising workshops, etc. which are not readily covered under the conventional research funding budgets.
- It was difficult to resource the research community partners in this project (i.e. reimbursing people for their time or expenses), due to the absence of appropriate mechanisms in the research funding ecosystem.
- The lack of sufficient funding for community development and community engagement on the ground slowed the development of the partnership, delayed the engaged research and impeded access to, and engagement with, the wider community.
- Co-production with communities is still relatively new for universities and requires new, more flexible, administrative and financial structures and timelines. It can be difficult to prepare collaboration agreements that allow funding to go to partners within the community in a timely manner.
- Training and development of engaged research practices within academic institutes is an evolving space - it will take time for it to filter through institutions and for capacity to be built, nurtured and retained.
- In co-producing outputs, time and commitment is required to overcome differences in approach, language and needs between researchers and partners, and to reach consensus. Building mutual respect and trust is a core part of the process.
- Impact evaluation in this space is challenging as the standard research metrics and evaluation methods are not fit for purpose in engaged research approaches.
- Co-produced outputs are often non-academic publications. Such 'grey' literature is currently undervalued within the academic system.

Reflections for future engaged research projects

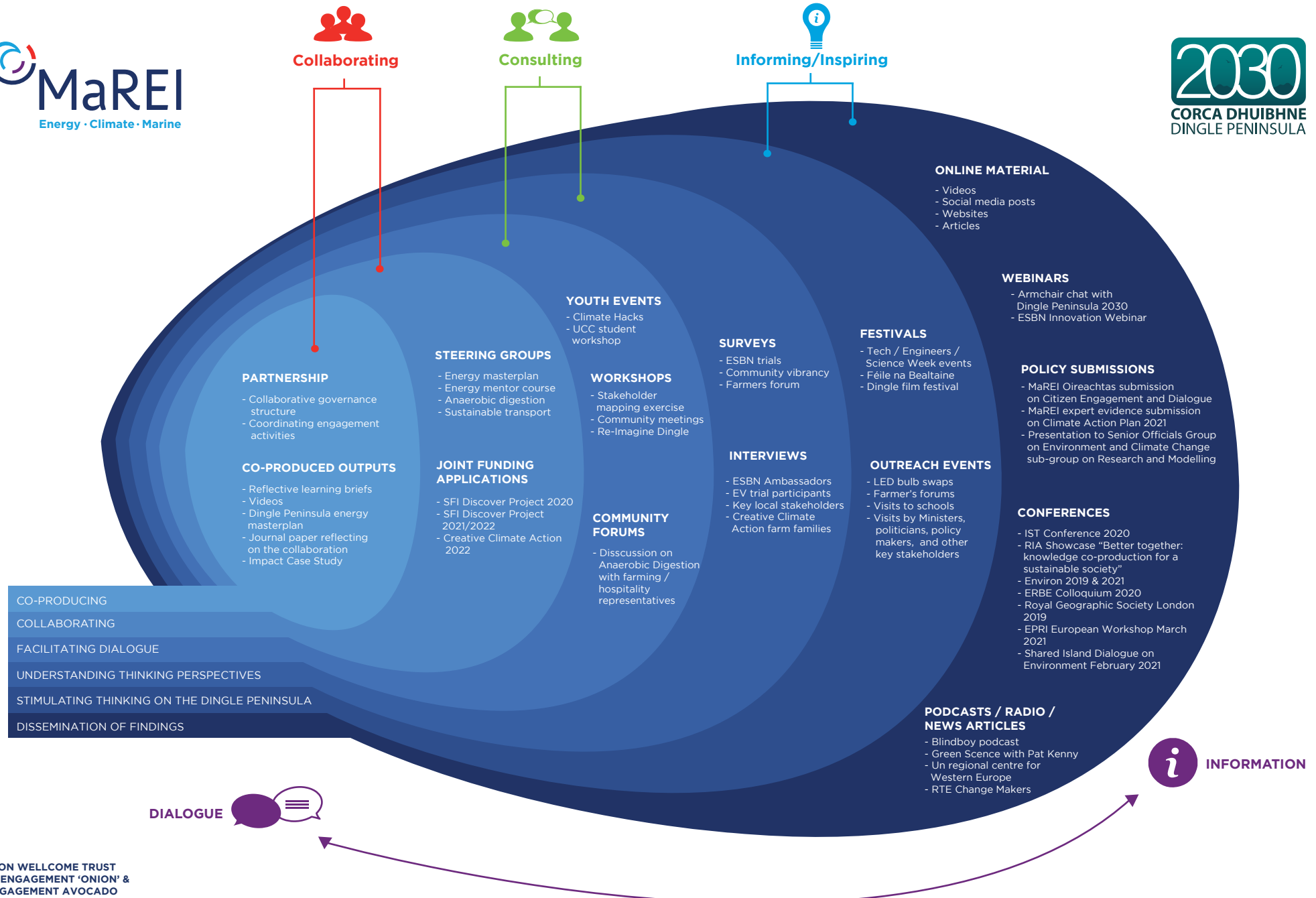
- There are different stages to an engaged research project. Firstly, an exploratory stage to identify research questions and agree initial goals, methods and outputs. Following this, there is the active period of relationship building, implementation, communication and knowledge sharing. Another key element throughout is reflective learning and evaluation, including post-project impact assessment.
- It is essential to anticipate and plan for unexpected delays, events and evolving dynamics within the partnership, community and wider policy context.

- Engaged research evaluation and impact assessment need to draw on a mixed methods approach. This can also help to capture societal impacts that may fall outside conventional metrics and thus require new evaluation methods.
- Establishing a good working relationship and research plan, as well as running practical engagements (such as interviews and workshops), requires a significant time investment. It is built on humility, respect, and common interests.
- Different disciplines are important in the engaged research team. In this case, the researchers came from community engagement, sociology and energy engineering, providing a broad interdisciplinary knowledge base on which to build the collaboration.
- Effective interpersonal and communication skills and empathy are important elements of successful engaged research projects.
- It is vital to reflect and capture learnings from experimental initiatives such as Corca Dhuibhne 2030, to identify and evaluate the process and to share the experiential knowledge.
- Institutions and funding bodies may need to reappraise the value of accessible grey literature outputs from engaged research projects.

Recommendations

- Community capacity and societal infrastructure should carry more value in research and policy.
- Roles dedicated to engagement in academia are required to support and facilitate multi-stakeholder collaborations and the engaged research process.
- Flexible, staged funding structures are required to facilitate joint funding applications.
- Engaged research with communities requires that funding bodies offer core funding for both the academic institution and the community group, to cover staff costs.
- More learning and development opportunities are needed for researchers looking to explore an engaged research approach. This is particularly important for very early stage (e.g. Master and PhD) researchers.
- There is a need for new or revised university administration mechanisms and supports to enable community involvement with engaged research.
- More research is required into novel approaches and tracking methods that can support participatory impact planning, track process change, and capture both intended and unintended outcomes and impacts.
- Further investigation into how sustainability initiatives diffuse through a community over time offers an important and insightful research area in the climate action space.

Mapping Our Research Approach to the 'Public Engagement Onion'



The Dingle Peninsula

Located in the south west of Ireland, the Dingle Peninsula is defined by the territory to the west of a line connecting Blennerville to Castlemaine and with an area of 583 sq km and extending 48 km into the Atlantic. It has a resident population of 12,764, with 2,500 living in Dingle Town (**CSO, Census, 2016**). Second (or holiday) homes account for c. 26% of all houses on the Peninsula and tourism accounts for c. 30% of the local economy. **Dingle Peninsula 2030** is an initiative aimed at transitioning the Peninsula to a low carbon and resilient community by 2030.



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