tise transition, innovation and sustainability environments

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# Visually Framing the Concept of Sustainability:

## A Photovoice Study of Migrants' Perceptions and Practices in Dublin

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Sabira Ataibekova

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## Abstract

What does it mean to live sustainably in a city that is not your own? What counts as sustainability when resources are limited, systems unfamiliar, and futures uncertain? In the world with definitive answers, my thesis instead offers a series of lived responses, layered and grounded in the everyday experiences of migrants in Dublin. Using a participatory Photovoice methodology, eleven migrant participants captured aspects of their lives through photographs and shared reflections in interviews. Rather than approaching sustainability as a fixed set of behaviors or a knowledge deficit to be addressed, this study explores the concept of sustainability as a developing phenomenon molded through limitation, adjustment, cultural memory and emotional attachment. Guided by Social Practice Theory and Affordance Theory, the analysis highlights how migrants adapt to and reinterpret their environment, often engaging in sustainability without naming it as such. The research also underscores structural and communicative barriers that hinder fuller participation. This thesis argues that sustainability must be understood not only as a policy goal, but as a situated practice. Migrants' insights offer valuable perspectives for more inclusive, responsive urban planning and contribute to broader conversations in sustainability research, migration studies, and participatory methods.

**Keywords:** *Sustainability; migrant lived experience; urban adaptation; photovoice; participatory methods; affordance theory; social practice theory*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

| *Abbreviation* | *Meaning* |
|---|---|
| CSO | Central Statistics Office |
| SPT | Social Practice Theory |
| CSR | Corporate Social Responsibility |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| MDG | Millenium Development Goal |
| TLMP | Temporary Labor Migration Program |
| ELE | English Language Education |
| MEI | Marketing English in Ireland |
| EU | European Union |
| ILEP | Interim List of Eligible Programs |
| MRCI | Migrant Rights Centre Ireland |
| PAR | Participatory Action Research |
| PEI | Photo Elicitation Interviews |

# Chapter 1. Introduction

*.....sustainability is, at its heart,a matter of ethics.*

Gomis et al (2011)

In a world marked by ecological crisis, social fragmentation, and urban complexity, sustainability is no longer simply a matter of environmental policy or technological innovation. Understanding sustainability through an ethical dimension as emphasized by Gomis et al (2011) involves mediating between competing interests across ecological, social, and economic domains. This ethical imperative is especially urgent in contemporary cities, where diverse populations, including migrants, navigate financial difficulties and moral questions in their daily efforts to live well and responsibly. Sustainability, in this view, is not only planned from above but practiced from below.

Cities are dynamic arenas where these tensions converge. Economic imperatives, climate targets, and social justice claims intersect in complex, often contradictory ways. Migrants, people who cross borders in search of opportunity, security, or belonging, are central to this picture.The International Organization for Migration (n.d.) defines migration as the movement of individuals across borders for various reasons including employment, education, environmental change, or family reunification. Despite their growing presence in urban environments, migrants are seldom visible in sustainability discourse. Their role is often framed in terms of vulnerability or burden, rarely as agents of transformation.

Ireland's demographic transformation over the past two decades is both striking and under-discussed. Historically a nation of emigration, Ireland has become a destination country. Nowhere is this change more evident than in Dublin. As of 2022, over 17% of

Dublin's population was foreign-born (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2023), with many migrants arriving from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and other regions. Migrants contribute to Dublin's economy, enrich its cultural life, and alter its everyday urban rhythms. Yet they also face structural barriers: housing precarity, limited access to public services, language barriers, and financial constraints. These conditions shape how sustainability is perceived. For instance, cycling may not be a lifestyle choice but a response to high transportation costs. These practices complicate mainstream narratives that equate sustainability with conscious, middle-class consumer behavior.

Sustainability in Dublin is increasingly framed through strategic documents such as the Dublin City Development Plan and climate action frameworks (Dublin City Council, n.d.). These emphasize green infrastructure, biodiversity, and emissions reduction. While commendable, these policies often reflect dominant cultural assumptions and overlook the perspectives of those living at the social and economic margins. Migrants, despite their presence and practices, are not included in the making of "sustainable Dublin." This thesis challenges that exclusion by giving voice to migrants not as peripheral but as part of the city's sustainability. By centering their everyday strategies and values it invites a broader understanding of a sustainable urban future.

### *1.1. Situating the Research*

The dominant sustainability literature has historically focused on climate systems, energy transitions, and environmental indicators. The Brundtland Report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) offered a broad and influential definition—meeting present needs without compromising future generations. However, its operationalization has often skewed toward ecological and economic frames. Social sustainability, while nominally included, remains under-theorized and under-prioritized.

Thompson (1997) has argued for a more just and inclusive sustainability paradigm with the focus on diversity, equity, and power relations. In particular, he differentiates between two paradigms: *resource sufficiency*, which evaluates sustainability through measurable inputs and outputs, and *functional integrity*, which focuses on the systemic reproduction of social and ecological processes. This thesis aligns with the latter, asking how sustainability is understood in relation to lived systems of adaptation, constraint, and care.

Migration studies offer a parallel evolution. Early paradigms focused on integration and assimilation, often treating migrants as subjects to be regulated or supported. But more recent scholarship (Scholten et al., 2022; Baas & Yeoh, 2018) emphasizes mobility, agency, and the politics of belonging. Migrants are not simply placed into host societies, they also shape them. By interacting with the city through unique habits and knowledge systems, their practices form part of the sustainability landscape, even if they are rarely acknowledged as such. If sustainability is to be truly inclusive and effective, it must be understood not just as a fixed framework, but as an evolving ethical commitment to human dignity, equity, and long-term well-being. Recognizing this perspective allows for a more holistic approach, acknowledging migration not as a challenge, but as an integral part of its ethical and rational foundation.

### *1.2. Theoretical Lens*

The thesis draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Social Practice Theory (SPT) helps to understand sustainability as part of the everyday routines. According to Shove et al (2012), practices emerge from the dynamic interplay of three components: physical artifacts, practical knowledge and abilities required to perform them, and symbolic or cultural meanings that give them significance. This framework moves beyond individual behavior to consider how practices are collectively maintained or transformed.

Second, Affordance Theory (Gibson, 1986; Chemero, 2003) provides a lens to analyze how environments enable or constrain action. Affordances are relational—they depend on both the features of the environment and the capacities of the user. For migrants, a recycling bin, a park, or a bicycle lane may afford very different possibilities than for long-time residents, shaped by access, familiarity, and trust. Together, these theories allow for a nuanced, context-sensitive analysis of how sustainability is experienced and negotiated by migrants within Dublin's urban context.

### *1.3. Research Design*

This thesis puts a simple, yet layered, question: *How do migrants in Dublin conceptualize and practice sustainability?* This research focuses on uncovering migrants' interpretations of sustainability through the lens of their everyday actions and decisions. These routines, shaped by cultural habits, living conditions, everyday choices etc., offer a rich entry point into how sustainability is practiced, not as policy, but as reality.

As migrants settle into new urban systems, their sustainability practices do not remain static. They shift—sometimes subtly, sometimes drastically. This research asks how those shifts unfold: *How have these perceptions and practices changed with their new environment? What insights can their perspectives provide for inclusive, sustainable planning?*

In doing so, the study pursues three main objectives. First, it seeks to understand how migrants conceptualize sustainability in relation to their daily lives. Second, it examines how the new environment (Dublin) shapes their behavior. And third, it aims to support the work of Future Learning Language School, where participants were recruited, by offering insights that can enrich the school's curriculum with sustainability topics and suggest how Photovoice can be used in future educational projects.

This project also speaks to a broader research gap. While migration and sustainability are both well-established areas of academic inquiry, they are rarely studied together. Yet cities like Dublin, where demographic change and sustainability commitments are evolving simultaneously, demand an integrated perspective. Understanding how migrants experience and contribute to sustainability is critical for building inclusive cities and for making sustainability not only greener, but fairer.

Moreover, by applying the Photovoice method to this specific context, the thesis offers a methodological contribution. This research not only documents migrant perspectives, it argues that these perspectives matter. And they matter because the future of sustainable cities depends not only on technology and targets, but on the lives of the people who inhabit them.

To explore these questions, the study employs a participatory, visual methodology: *Photovoice* (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice enables participants to express their perspectives through photography, capturing moments or objects that represent sustainability in their lives. This method is particularly suited to research with migrants, allowing for reflection across language barriers and offering a creative, collaborative space for meaning-making.

Eleven participants, recruited through Future Learning Language School in Dublin, were invited to take photographs over the course of one month. These images then served as entry points for *photo-elicitation interviews*, a technique that encourages deeper reflection and more vivid storytelling as photographs can evoke emotions, memories, and insights that may not surface in standard verbal interviews (Harper, 2002). The combined use of Photovoice and photo-elicitation strengthens the participatory nature of the research and facilitates richer, more grounded accounts of migrants' sustainability practices.

The data were analyzed in two stages. First, individual narrative profiles were constructed to highlight each participant's unique relationship with sustainability. Second, thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo, identifying cross-cutting patterns and insights. Both layers were informed by the theoretical frameworks outlined above, ensuring a grounded approach.

This methodology ensures that participants' voices and visual narratives are central to the analysis. It also challenges traditional researcher-participant hierarchies, framing knowledge production as a collaborative and interpretive process.

This thesis is structured in seven chapters: Chapter 1 introduces the study, situating it within the broader context of migration and sustainability, and outlines the research questions, aims, and relevance. Chapter 2 offers a critical review of existing literature on sustainability and migration, with attention to both global debates and the Dublin context. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical approaches that guide the study, including Social Practice Theory and Affordance Theory. Chapter 4 details the research methodology, including the use of Photovoice, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the results in two parts: first, individual narratives that highlight participants' personal understandings of sustainability; second, a thematic analysis of cross-cutting patterns drawn from interviews and photographs. Chapter 6 discusses these findings in relation to existing scholarship and explores their broader implications for urban sustainability and migrant inclusion. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarizing key contributions, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research. Supplementary materials, including interview questions and full photo collection, are included in Annex A and Annex B, respectively.

### *1.4. Researcher Positioning*

The idea for this research originated from my academic and personal journey. As a student of sustainability and a migrant myself, I have long been aware of the gap between abstract sustainability ideals and the realities of adapting to a new city. This thesis emerges from a desire to approach sustainability not solely as an environmental, economic, or technical concern, but as a social, lived, and often unevenly distributed experience. Neither does this research attempt to "measure" how sustainable migrants are. Nor does it seek to compare their behaviors against normative benchmarks. Rather, it asks: how do migrants themselves understand sustainability, and how do they enact it in a new urban context? Through these questions, the thesis opens a space to rethink sustainable city from the bottom up, from the perspective of those too often excluded from official strategies and public discourse. This project contributes both theoretically and methodologically by reframing sustainability as a socially constructed practice and by centering migrant voices in participatory research.

As Dublin continues to evolve as a multicultural urban center, understanding how migrants engage with sustainability is essential for fostering inclusive and effective sustainability policies. By applying Photovoice as a participatory research tool, this study seeks to amplify migrant voices in sustainability discourse, providing actionable insights for policymakers, urban planners, and sustainability practitioners. Recognizing migrants as active contributors to sustainability, rather than passive recipients, is key to developing a more equitable and resilient urban future.

# Chapter 2. Multidimensional Nature of Sustainability

## *2.1. Conceptual Fluidity*

Due to the complex and multidimensional nature of sustainability, attempting a comprehensive review of its literature within a single chapter would be impractical. However, omitting a discussion on this foundational concept would equally neglect the academic goals of this research. Instead, this chapter synthesizes key theoretical discourses on sustainability from various disciplines to provide the conceptual grounding necessary for understanding migrants' perceptions and practices of sustainability in Dublin.

Scholars have frequently debated the ambiguity inherent in the concept of sustainability, highlighting its fluid meanings and occasional internal contradictions. Historically, sustainability references can be traced back 300 years to Carlowitz, who emphasized the continuous and sustained use of forests (Michelsen et al., 2016). However, the concept gained significant global attention with the publication of "The Limits to Growth" (1972), which positioned environmental constraints and resource management at the core of sustainability discussions. In urban settings, these constraints manifest not as visible resource extraction or pollution, but through everyday infrastructures such as transport, energy systems, waste management, and housing—areas where city residents interact with sustainability directly (OECD, n.d.). Thus, urban sustainability is often defined as the practice of ensuring that cities are inclusive, resilient, and environmentally sound while supporting economic development and social well-being (UN, 2015). This conceptual evolution has contributed to notable fragmentation; by the mid-1990s, scholars had identified over a hundred distinct definitions (Marshall & Toffel, 2004), illustrating diverse interpretations influenced by varying political, economic, and societal narratives.

Despite this conceptual diversity, there is broad agreement that sustainability encompasses three main dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. Nevertheless, considerable debate persists about how these dimensions interrelate and which should take precedence. To illustrate, three conceptual models frequently appear in sustainability literature (see Figure 1).

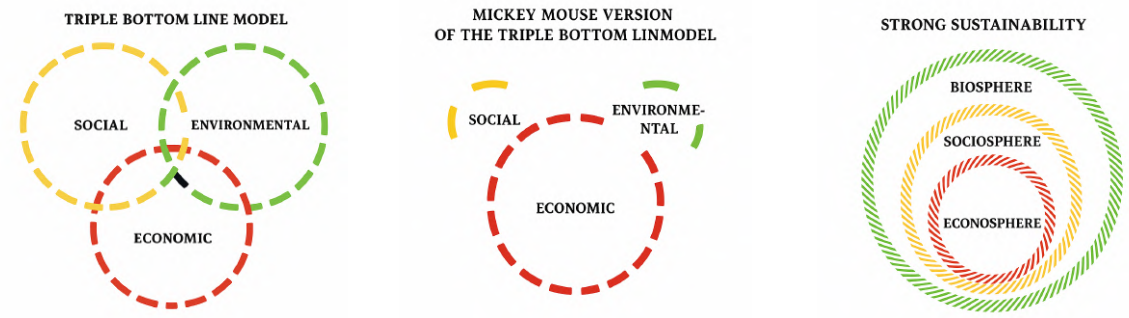



*Figure 1: Alternative Models of the Concept Sustainability(The Sustainability Society of New Zealand, 2023)*

The first model presents economic, social, and environmental sustainability as equally important, overlapping dimensions. In contrast, the "Mickey Mouse" or weak sustainability model argues that economic sustainability is foundational, asserting that without economic growth, neither social nor environmental sustainability can be achieved. In this view, losses in natural capital can potentially be offset by gains in human-made capital—an approach frequently adopted by corporations aligning sustainability with corporate social responsibility (CSR), often prompting critical assessments of their commitments' authenticity (Luan, 2024).

On the other hand, the nested or strong sustainability model posits that neither economic nor social sustainability is achievable without a viable environment. This ecological economics perspective emphasizes that natural resources and ecosystems have intrinsic value and are fundamentally limited, thus requiring human activities and economic systems to respect environmental limits. Spash (2011) promotes this view by arguing that sustainability requires

a rethinking of economic structures, placing ecological integrity at the center. In support of this model, critics have increasingly questioned the relevance of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary indicator of development and advocated for a degrowth economy instead (Kallis et al., 2018; Victor, 2010). They highlight the need to move beyond GDP-based growth, proposing for development that considers the scale and intensity of environmental impacts. Degrowth, in this view, is not an end state but a transitional strategy toward a steady-state economy (Kallis, 2012). In response, scholars like Bliznina (2021) propose a redefinition through the concept of "Sustainable GDP,"[1] which incorporates the value of goods and services produced using renewable energy, digital technologies, and circular inputs. This evolving approach reflects growing alignment with the nested model's core idea—that economic activity must operate within ecological boundaries and be evaluated accordingly.

This reconceptualization of sustainability metrics provides a useful bridge to the broader debates on sustainability's expanding scope. As sustainability discourse has evolved, the concept has increasingly encompassed broader societal goals such as poverty alleviation, governance reform, and urban quality of life improvements. Marshall and Toffel (2004) caution that such expansive interpretations risk diluting sustainability's conceptual clarity, advocating for definitions explicitly tailored to maintain analytical rigor and actionable guidance (Salas‐Zapata & Ortiz‐Muñoz, 2018).

Transitioning from these broader conceptual frameworks, the challenge of effectively implementing sustainability becomes evident. Defined too narrowly, sustainability often

[1] The Sustainable GDP is the standard measure of the value added created through the production of goods and services determining the proportional value of goods and services produced employing renewables, the proportional value of goods and services produced applying digitisation, and the proportional value of goods and services produced using inputs into production from recycling and remanufacturing in a country during a certain period (Bliznina, 2024, p.1)

overlooks the complexity of the systems it affects. As Thompson (1997) argued, sustainability only becomes meaningful when considered within the broader system of human practices and natural processes. These systems, ranging from communities to societies, can be resilient or vulnerable depending on how they respond to internal pressures. A practice is unsustainable if it contributes to system breakdown, especially when reinforced by economic or institutional incentives. For example, if individuals consistently avoid using a service due to accessibility or trust issues, the long-term viability of that system is compromised. My reading of Thompson (1997) suggests that sustainability is not only about endurance but also about the adaptability of systems to local values and behaviors. Thompson gives an example of industrial dairy farming in Erath County, Texas, which initially appeared sustainable due to abundant resources like feed, water, and land. However, the farmers who relocated there from California and the Netherlands did not integrate with local community norms, violating cultural expectations by wearing gold chains, drinking in public, and building lavish modern homes (Thompson, 1997). Their approach prioritized short-term profits and imposed industrial practices that negatively impacted long-time residents, leading to significant social resistance.

From this perspective, the systemic nature of sustainability demands an integrated approach that acknowledges how facts and values are interwoven. We do not ask whether something is sustainable in a vacuum; we ask because the answer has moral and social implications tied to the kind of society we hope to sustain. Therefore, implementing sustainability calls not only for technical solutions but also for intentional human judgment and coordinated governance, such as that envisioned in Agenda 2030. However, translating these aspirational frameworks into real-world practice encounters persistent barriers. As Javanmardi and Liu (2019) well

noted, these challenges often stem from human uncertainty and incomplete knowledge, reinforcing the need for collaborative, value-informed strategies.

Building upon the previously discussed complexities, clarity emerges when distinguishing between normative and operative sustainability. Normative sustainability definitions, such as those articulated by the Brundtland Commission, establish ethical guidelines emphasizing societal goals like intergenerational justice. Yet these normative definitions often lack the precise empirical specificity necessary for practical application. Operationalizing sustainability, therefore, demands measurable parameters (Salas‐Zapata & Ortiz‐Muñoz, 2018). However, not all the three pillars of sustainability are equally measurable or clearly defined. Environmental and economic dimensions are often supported by established quantifiable metrics, while social remains the least defined and most vague (Shirazi & Keivani, 2018).

This is particularly significant in the context of this research, as understanding how migrants perceive and engage with the city involves aspects of social sustainability that are difficult to quantify. While measurable indicators help translate sustainability into actionable frameworks, they provide only a partial view of interconnected systems. Building on the discussion of sustainability models, this perspective helps to illuminate how environmental, social, and economic dimensions are not only coexistent but mutually conditioning. It allows for an understanding of sustainability as a function of interactions between infrastructure, governance, individual behaviors, and ecological thresholds—rather than a checklist of indicators. Therefore, combining systems thinking with a practice-based lens provides a more nuanced view, offering a way to understand sustainability as both systemic and situated.

Another critical insight arises from examining who shapes sustainability discourses and whose perspectives are privileged. Scholars have argued that mainstream sustainability

discourses often emerge from Western scientific traditions, which can unintentionally exclude alternative cultural perspectives and local forms of knowledge, thereby limiting broader participation in shaping what sustainability means or looks like (Redclift & Springett, 2015). This framing tends to afford limited agency to ordinary people, including migrants, who may not see themselves reflected in abstract, expert-driven narratives (Beasy, 2019). Cultural background plays a key role in shaping how migrants perceive and practice sustainability—often informed by habits, social norms, and environmental values from their countries of origin. When confronted with unfamiliar sustainability paradigms shaped in the Global North, migrants from the Global South may experience a disconnect, potentially leading to resistance or reinterpretation. Acknowledging this cultural dimension is essential for inclusive sustainability approaches that reflect diverse realities and enable broader participation.

Sustainability remains a contested and context-dependent concept whose ambiguity encourages critical inquiry and nuanced understanding. Thus, balancing normative aspirations with practical realities, and global objectives with local experiences is essential.

### *2.2. Migration and Sustainability*

*„History in its broadest aspect is a record of man's migrations from one environment to another.“*

Ellsworth Huntington, 1919. *The red man's continent: A chronicle of aboriginal America*, *Chapter 1.*

As Huntington (1919) observed, migration has long influenced social, economic, and environmental systems. Its relationship with sustainability, however, remains complex and context-specific. Migration is often framed as a challenge, associated with environmental stress, economic instability, or political tension (Adger et al., 2024), yet it can also serve as a form of adaptation, allowing individuals and communities to respond constructively to changing conditions (Gavonel et al., 2021d). Framing migration as either inherently positive or negative oversimplifies its impact, which is shaped by a range of intersecting factors. For example, while migration may contribute to environmental pressures in some settings, it can drive innovation and resilience in others. Although the term 'migrant' is not without its limitations, it is used here to refer to individuals who have moved to Ireland from abroad for various reasons, regardless of their legal status. While internal migration may involve similar sustainability dynamics, this study focuses specifically on cross-border, voluntary migration.

Urban environments further highlight migration's dual sustainability potential. Migration, in particular, exemplifies the diverse sustainability implications of mobility. On the one hand, population influxes can intensify pressure on housing, transport, and energy systems (Gao et al., 2021). On the other, they may improve overall urban efficiency (Shen et al., 2024b). Drawing from urban metabolism theory, urban efficiency refers to the environmental gains made possible through dense settlement patterns, where high-density cities tend to support more efficient infrastructures, while suburban and peri-urban areas often lag behind in public transport and utilities (Kyttä et al., 2015). Another important aspect in a sustainable city is the sustainable habits that migrants frequently bring with them. These habits usually informed by resource scarcity in their home countries, such as water conservation or frugal energy use (Head et al., 2021) may fade over time due to structural barriers, limited resources, or economic uncertainty in host societies (Abu et al., 2023).

Migration governance often remains fragmented, shaped by national political ideologies rather than coordinated, evidence-based frameworks (Gavonel et al., 2021). Although global agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) acknowledge migration's relevance, they tend to treat it as a separate issue, focusing on remittances or mobility indicators, rather than integrating it into broader sustainability planning (Foresti & Hagen-Zanker, 2017).

Viewing migration as a structural part of sustainable development—not just a challenge to be managed—allows for a more nuanced understanding of its potential in a holistic way. Further. to understand how these broader ideas translate into everyday practice, it is essential to explore how migrants themselves experience and interpret sustainability in their urban environments. The next section illustrates this through the context of Dublin and profiles of migrant participants from a local language school.

*2.3. Dublin Context*

Sustainability and migration topics become more meaningful for this research when looking at it in the context of Dublin. City's transformation from a largely mono-ethnic city to a multicultural urban center has unfolded rapidly, reflecting broader trends in globalization and labor mobility. Until the early 1990s, non-Irish nationals accounted for just 2.8% of the city's population, and social divisions were primarily shaped by income and class rather than ethnicity or race (Fahey & Fanning, 2010). However, the rapid economic expansion during the Celtic Tiger years (1994–2008) triggered large-scale immigration, initially through the return migration of Irish-born individuals and later through the arrival of migrants from Eastern Europe and West Africa. Unlike in many Western European cities where migration reinforced entrenched socio-spatial divisions (Fahey & Fanning, 2010), Dublin's experience

was initially characterized by greater economic and social fluidity, raising important questions about the intersection of migration and sustainability.

Prevailing urban segregation theories suggest that migration typically exacerbates spatial and social inequalities, particularly in cities where housing markets and labor structures reinforce migrant exclusion. Globalization and post-industrialization create a polarized labor market, wherein migrants are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, precarious employment and segregated neighborhoods (Sassen, 2015). Yet, Dublin's trajectory does not fully align with these predictions. Research suggests that, while migrants did settle in disadvantaged areas, their presence contributed to positive socio-economic shifts, particularly during the economic boom (Fahey & Fanning, 2010). Unlike in cities such as London or Paris, where segregation has often been multi-generational, Dublin's migration patterns, at least in the early years, appeared to facilitate a degree of social mobility and integration, as migrants brought high levels of social capital into previously marginalized areas (Fahey & Fanning, 2010). However, this relatively optimistic narrative is highly contingent on economic conditions. The Celtic Tiger boom provided a favorable economic context for migrant inclusion, offering employment opportunities across various sectors and reducing economic disparities between migrant and native-born populations. Yet, the 2008 financial crisis exposed the fragility of this integration model. As in many cities, economic downturns disproportionately affected migrant communities, increasing their vulnerability to unemployment, housing insecurity, and downward social mobility. This raises a critique of migration and sustainability narratives: while migration can contribute to social sustainability under conditions of economic growth, it does not inherently lead to long-term social cohesion unless there are structural policies addressing labor rights, housing, and access to resources.

Dublin's migration patterns also diverge from those of other European cities due to the presence of non-traditional migrant groups, such as Latin Americans. Historically, Latin American migration flows have been directed toward the United States, Spain, and Portugal, owing to linguistic ties and colonial histories. However, stricter U.S. immigration policies and economic stagnation in Southern Europe redirected some Latin American migrants to Ireland, despite the country's lack of historical connections with the region (Marrow, 2012). The reception of Latin Americans in Dublin offers an intriguing counterpoint to racialized migration experiences elsewhere. Unlike in Spain or the U.S., where Latin American migrants often encounter strong racialization and systemic discrimination (Cano et al., 2021), Dublin's Latin American population has so far faced relatively low levels of racial stigma. This can be partially attributed to Ireland's selective migration policies, which favor high-skilled migrants, shaping public perceptions of their economic value (Marrow, 2012). However, this raises important questions about the conditional nature of inclusive migration governance. If positive reception is based on economic utility, what happens when migrants no longer align with labor market demands? How stable is this form of inclusion in the face of changing economic conditions or political climates? These concerns point to the fragility of migrant acceptance when it is primarily framed through an economic lens.

Latin American migrants in Dublin also challenge nation-centric migration models, as they actively compare their experiences across multiple host countries. As Marrow (2012) suggests that migrant integration is no longer confined to a single national context, but rather takes place within a transnational social field. Understanding migration through this lens highlights the interconnected nature of sustainability and mobility, yet mainstream sustainability frameworks continue to treat migration as a localized issue rather than a global phenomenon.

Despite the profound impact of migrants on urban sustainability, migration remains largely absent from sustainability governance. Adding to this critique, scholars have increasingly problematized technocratic models of cities, where they rely heavily on expert-driven planning, technical fixes, and performance indicators, often at the expense of participatory and context-sensitive solutions (Kaika, 2017). While these models emphasize efficiency and environmental performance, they tend to marginalize everyday individual experiences, emotional well-being, and social diversity. Empirical research across countries such as the United States, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium reveals that policy frameworks silo migration and sustainability as separate issues, with little institutional coordination (Zickgraf et al., 2024). Although migration gained more recognition in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) than in earlier frameworks like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it is still framed as a temporary and unplanned phenomenon rather than as a structural component of sustainable urbanization. The SDGs primarily conceptualize migration in terms of its impact on origin countries, focusing on financial remittances (Goals 10 and 17) rather than migrants' long-term contributions to sustainability in host cities. This reflects a broader policy bias that prioritizes stability over mobility, failing to recognize that migration is a permanent and defining feature of modern urban life.

Negative public attitudes, restrictive migration policies, and labor market segmentation limit migrants' ability to fully contribute to sustainability efforts (Hugo, 2005). Many temporary labor migration programmes (TLMPs) mirror aspects of the "Gastarbeiter" model seen in Germany and Austria during the late 20th century, where migrants were economically integrated but socially excluded (Rupnow, 2023). However, TLMPs go further by institutionalizing this temporary logic through strict employment restrictions, tying workers to a single employer and limiting their ability to change jobs or build long-term inclusion.

Although this helps destination countries address sector-specific labor shortages, it severely restricts migrants' labor market mobility, often trapping them in exploitative conditions (Ruhs, 2021). Some countries, like Ireland, now allow migrants to switch employers within specific sectors after a short time. Most TLMPs still restrict them to one employer, which is increasingly recognized as problematic (Ruhs, 2021).

In contrast, Canada and Sweden have adopted more comprehensive approaches, emphasizing migrants' rights, security, and participation in sustainability governance (MPG, 2020). Dublin occupies a middle ground, where migrants are neither explicitly excluded nor actively integrated into sustainability policymaking (Zickgraf et al., 2024). While the city has benefited from migrant-led social capital, this remains an informal and unrecognized contribution, highlighting the disconnection between migration policy and sustainability planning.

Public spaces like Dublin's parks have supported social interaction and community cohesion, yet their role in migrant integration remains overlooked in urban planning. While Dublin City Council (n.d.) cites Singapore's "City in a Garden," London's "All London Green Grid", and Copenhagen's carbon-neutral planning, only Copenhagen provides a clear example of migrant incorporation. Its Superkilen Park transformed a marginalized district into a space celebrating cultural diversity through design reflecting over 60 nationalities (Balik, 2020).

Another more integrated model is offered by Toronto. The Planning Review Panel, selected by civic lottery, includes immigrants and ensures their input in shaping public policies. In Regent Park, a historically immigrant neighborhood, revitalization included extensive consultation and resulted in inclusive facilities like the Aquatic Centre, with privacy swims for Muslim women, and Daniels Spectrum, a cultural hub for local organizations (Zhuang, 2018).

Dublin's current strategies, such as the City Corporate and Development Plans (Dublin City Council, n.d.), emphasize sustainability and well-being. However, to more fully harness its diversity, the city could adopt a longer-term vision that engages migrants as co-creators in shaping a sustainable urban future.

### *2.4. Language School–Work Migration Pathway in Ireland*

Ireland's English Language Education (ELE) sector has become an increasingly prominent entry point for international migrants seeking both education and employment opportunities. Besides, this sector has demonstrated its ongoing economic significance bringing €1.2 billion annually to the economy. According to Marketing English in Ireland (MEI), the total number of students exceeded pre-pandemic levels, where the number of adult students increased from 52,596 to 62,509 compared with 2019 (Kealy-Roberts, 2024). Adult learners, particularly from Brazil and other Latin American countries, represent a significant proportion of this growth (Hancox, 2024). Most adult students enroll in general English courses, while a smaller subset participates in work-experience programmes (Hancox, 2024). However, new policy shifts and severe shortages in affordable accommodation, particularly in Dublin, pose growing financial challenges for incoming students.

Beginning in June 2025, non-visa-required students from countries such as Brazil and Mexico will need to show €6,665 in available funds for an eight-month course, more than double the previous requirement (Irish Immigration Service, 2024). Critics argue that this change, made without consultation, undermines the accessibility of the ELE pathway, particularly since these students are legally permitted to work and support themselves while studying (Gleeson, 2025).

According to official Irish immigration policies (Irish Immigration Service, 2024), under Stamp 2 permission, non-EU students are allowed to work 20 hours per week during academic terms, with this limit increasing to 40 hours per week during official holiday periods. Students may attend up to three English language programmes, each lasting eight months, for a maximum of two years. These programmes must be full-time, listed on the Interim List of Eligible Programmes (ILEP), and require a minimum of 85% class attendance and successful completion of a recognized end-of-programme exam.

The impact of this new policy regarding the financial threshold on future enrolments is yet to be seen. Changes could affect the appeal of Ireland as a study destination, with potential implications for the sector's continued growth. Many international students have historically chosen Ireland due to the relative affordability of the ELE route. Their motivations often included the relative ease of obtaining a student residence permit, the ability to work part-time, and the presence of established migrant networks that provide housing tips and social support (Siedschlag, 2022). This community-based dynamic reflects the role of ELE not only as an educational pathway but also as a transitional route into the Irish labour market. The ability to study language and work simultaneously offers both short-term financial stability and a foundation for longer-term integration. A relevant example of migrant integration in Ireland is the case of Gort in County Galway. Beginning in the late 1990s, Brazilian workers initially recruited for meat processing settled in the town, later establishing families and businesses. Although not connected directly to the ELE pathway, Gort illustrates how temporary migration can lead to long-term community formation and local revitalisation (Healy, 2006).

Much of the academic and policy discourse has centred on international students in higher education, which can be used to understand Ireland's ELE sector that reflects a similar

migration dynamic. In countries like Australia and Canada, international education is increasingly tied to national strategies for skills development and labour market flexibility (Tran et al., 2025). Although language learners are often excluded from this dominant education–migration narrative, they too occupy a dual role: as learners and as temporary labour contributors. Their pathways are similarly shaped by shifting economic demands, institutional policies, and social realities, even if less acknowledged in mainstream discourse.

While international students in Ireland are legally permitted to work, their employment experiences often place them in unstable conditions, particularly those in non-degree programmes (such as language schools) (Gilmartin et al., 2016). Research and data from the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI), a Dublin-based NGO that provides support to migrants in Ireland, show that many students work in low-paid, unregulated sectors like hospitality, retail, cleaning, and care work—sectors previously filled by employment permit holders but now lacking equivalent protections (as cited in Gilmartin et al., 2016). Irregular working hours often disrupt class attendance, which is required for visa renewal, increasing the risk of falling into undocumented status. This is especially true for students who cannot transition into post-study visa schemes. A significant number of former students who contacted MRCI for help had become undocumented, with many continuing to work under exploitative conditions (Gilmartin et al., 2016). Financial constraints and limited protections often deter reporting, reinforcing precarious roles that blur the line between student and worker.

This subchapter was included to provide contextual grounding for the language school–work migration pathway, which is essential for understanding the background of the research participants and interpreting their perspectives on sustainability. With this context established, the next chapter turns to the theoretical approaches that inform the analysis of findings.

# Chapter 3. Theoretical Approaches

## *3.1. Social Practice Theory*

Social Practice Theory (SPT) offers a compelling lens to understand the embedded, collective, and material dimensions of sustainability. It shifts analytical focus away from individuals and their choices to the routinized activities and shared understandings that constitute everyday life. This repositioning is critical for examining how sustainability is enacted and transformed in situ, particularly among diverse populations such as migrants.

SPT draws from a diverse intellectual lineage including Bourdieu's (1977*)* theory of habitus, Giddens' structuration theory, and Wittgensteinian ideas about language and meaning (Reckwitz, 2002). Reckwitz (2002) positions SPT within a broader current of cultural theory that seeks to explain action not through deliberate intentions or formal rules, but through symbolic and embodied knowledge that is often tacit, habitual, and socially shared.

In this view, practices are the smallest meaningful unit of social analysis. Reckwitz (2002, p. 249) defines a practice as a type of behaviour composed of interconnected elements: bodily and mental activities, use of things, knowledge, emotions, and motivations. Individuals are seen not as autonomous actors but as carriers of practices, enacting and reproducing them through daily participation.

Importantly, this aligns with broader sustainability debates that increasingly emphasize distributed governance and systemic transitions over individual behavior, suggesting that individuals act within, rather than outside of, systems of practice and provision (Strengers & Maller, 2015, p. 3). This decentring of the individual challenges dominant models in environmental policy and psychology, where behavior is often reduced to linear, rational decision-making processes influenced by attitudes or knowledge (Strengers & Maller, 2015).

As Hargreaves (2011) observes, such models tend to isolate individual behavior from its social, material, and temporal contexts.

In contrast, SPT redirects analytical attention to the everyday enactment of practices like cooking, commuting, or recycling, which are shaped by deeply embedded habits, emotional attachments, and infrastructural affordances. Sustainability, therefore, is not an outcome of conscious decision-making alone, but an emergent property of how people live and interact with their environments.

Practices are dynamic assemblages of materials (e.g., infrastructure, tools), competences (e.g., know-how), and meanings (e.g., symbolic or normative significance) (Shove et. al, 2012). Change occurs when these elements are reconfigured. For instance, access to sustainable infrastructure (material), coupled with the skills to use it (competence), and reinforced by social acceptance (meaning), can enable a shift in routines.

Kuijer (2014) emphasizes that practices are not static. They evolve as their elements shift in response to new technologies, changing cultural meanings, or shifts in collective knowledge. For example, the introduction of more energy-efficient appliances—such as washing machines or lighting—does not necessarily reduce overall energy use. Instead, it may lead to increased frequency of use, offsetting the intended gains (Kuijer, 2014). This phenomenon, known as the rebound effect (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2013b), illustrates that focusing on individual behaviors or technological fixes is insufficient; sustainability efforts must consider how entire practices are organized and performed.

Sahakian and Wilhite (2013b) also underscore the interconnectedness of practices and the importance of understanding them as part of wider "bundles" or systems. Change in one practice can trigger shifts in others, sometimes in unexpected ways. For instance, promoting

tap water consumption in restaurants (as seen in the London on Tap campaign) required more than raising awareness about cost or environmental impact. It necessitated changes in social norms (making tap water acceptable in public settings), the introduction of new material objects (designer carafes), and public discussions that reframed the act of ordering water as socially permissible. Thus, no single element can drive change alone. Instead, transformations in sustainability arise when multiple elements of a practice are shifted together. As Hargreaves (2011) argues, behavior change should be understood as practice change—requiring careful attention to how practices are recruited, sustained, or defected from over time, and how they interact with surrounding infrastructures and power relations.

This emphasis on distributed agency resonates with Schatzki's (2014) argument that governance toward sustainability does not simply emanate from the top but is shaped by various actors, including households, technologies, and local groups. All participate in an evolving mosaic of change, highlighting the importance of both bottom-up and top-down interventions.

Taken together, these theoretical insights caution against oversimplified interpretations of sustainability and behavior change. Practices are complex, interconnected, and integrated in social orders. Sahakian and Wilhite (2013b) and Reckwitz (2002) both emphasize that sustainability cannot be imposed through policy slogans or efficiency technologies alone. Instead, it requires a more nuanced understanding of how people live sustainability—what meanings they attach to it, what skills they need to enact it, and what material and institutional conditions support or hinder it.

Crucially, SPT also addresses the question of ethics and identity. It suggests that ethical living, such as living sustainably, is not merely about making the right choices, but about participating in good practices: socially and ecologically informed routines that align with

particular visions of the good life (Reckwitz, 2002). Individuals adopt and perform practices not in isolation, but in ways that reflect commonly held expectations—often motivated by a desire to fit in, avoid judgment, or align with what is considered ‘normal’ within a given context. This is increasingly echoed in ethical arguments that stress the right to sustainable ways of living, viewing sustainability as a matter of equity and capability rather than personal virtue or consumption choice (UNDP, 2011)

This reframing of sustainability opens up space for considering alternative futures grounded not in individual virtue, but in shared and materially supported ways of living well.

SPT is central to the analysis, as it foregrounds how sustainability is enacted, learned, and negotiated through situated practices. While the primary focus is on practices rather than individuals, it is necessary to also consider the role of agency, acknowledging that knowledge, values, and individual decisions still play a role within these practices. Migration often requires the reconfiguration of habitual practices in response to new socio-material conditions, and this process is not merely passive. As Hui et al.(2017) suggest, while individuals do not control practices outright, they are still active carriers who can innovate, improvise, and adapt within them.

If, however, praxis is understood as a contingent accomplishment, individuals become autonomous actors with practical knowledge that enables them to respond skillfully and creatively to new demands. This aligns with theories of subjectivation, which propose that individuals are not merely shaped by practices, but actively (trans)form themselves through engagement. Learning, in this view, is not passive acquisition, but the cultivation of "play-ability"—the capacity to align with, critique, or transcend the normative expectations embedded in practices (Hui et.al, 2017).

For instance, one of the most prominent forms of creative adaptation appears in cooking. Migrants often cannot find all the necessary ingredients to recreate traditional dishes from back home. In such cases, they begin to improvise, substituting ingredients, adjusting methods, or planning their lives differently to sustain food-related practices. In this light, agency is not positioned outside the system of practices but emerges within it, through moments of friction, learning, and experimentation. Recognizing this dimension allows for a richer understanding of how practices evolve and how sustainability might be reimagined through individual and collective adaptation.

### *3.2. Affordance Theory*

Social Practice Theory tends to emphasize the cultural and normative structuring of practices, therefore, to deepen the understanding of how migrants engage with their environments in situated ways, Affordance Theory offers a complementary perspective. In this regard, Affordance Theory provides a crucial complement, revealing how agents(migrants) engage with their material surroundings and how environments invite or inhibit particular forms of action.

James J. Gibson (1986) first introduced the concept of affordances to describe the actionable properties inherent in the environment relative to an agent's capabilities. Affordances are present in the environment regardless of whether individuals perceive them, but they only become meaningful or functional when someone interacts with them intentionally (Fayard & Weeks, 2014). Unlike cognitive models of perception, Gibson's ecological approach posited that perception directly informs action without requiring mental representations. Affordances, therefore, embody a dynamic complementarity between environmental properties and the capacities of perceiving organisms.

The ecological view challenged traditional dichotomies between subjective and objective realities. Gibson (1986) emphasized that affordances are relational: they are neither purely environmental nor entirely constructed by the agent. This ontological stance underpins much contemporary affordance research, situating meaning in the dynamic coupling of agent and environment (Heft, 1989).

Debates within ecological psychology have further refined this ontology. While some, like Turvey (1992), proposed a more formalized understanding of affordances as dispositional properties, others, including Chemero (2003), emphasized their relational, emergent nature. These debates reflect ongoing tensions regarding whether affordances should be conceived as intrinsic to objects or as arising in interaction with specific agentive abilities. In the context of this study, affordances are approached from a relational perspective, as this aligns more closely with the aim of understanding how migrants perceive and respond to possibilities for sustainable action within specific social and material contexts.

Fayard & Weeks (2014) advance a relational interpretation of affordances, emphasizing that they are perceived possibilities for action dependent on an agent's embodied skills, social norms, and material environment. Perception, from this view, is always already action-oriented: individuals encounter the world as a field of possibilities shaped by their practical engagements and social histories.

This relational focus is further enriched by Scarlett and Zeilinger's (2019) critical review, which contrasts Turvey's (1992) interactional view with Norman's (as cited in Scarlett and Zeilinger's, 2019) design-centered concept of "perceived affordances." While Turvey (1992) stressed that affordances exist regardless of perception, Norman focused on how designers can shape the usability of objects by making affordances perceptually salient. Norman's

emphasis on "perceived affordances" became influential in design studies but arguably diluted Gibson's more radical relational ontology.

Moreover, recent scholarship foregrounds the role of materiality in shaping affordances. Pavlyuchenko and Dion (2024) introduce the principle of post-hylomorphism, arguing that the material composition of objects — not just their form — crucially conditions their affordances. By emphasizing the "matter-ness" of objects, they shift attention from user intention to the agency of materiality itself, suggesting that objects can resist or redirect user practices.

Affordance theory not only conceptualizes the environment-agent relation but also offers a dynamic model of learning and adaptation. As environments change and as bodies and skills evolve, agents continually renegotiate what actions are possible. Perceiving affordances thus requires attunement to both environmental dynamics and one's bodily capabilities.

In applied contexts, such as architectural design, Maier et al. (2009) argue that recognizing affordances can improve the fit between built environments and user practices. Rather than designing spaces solely around intended functions, designers should consider how users might creatively appropriate environments in unintended ways, revealing latent affordances beyond prescriptive models.

Similarly, Fayard & Weeks (2014) propose that affordance theory, when combined with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, offers a richer account of how practices emerge at the intersection of social dispositions and material affordances. Habitus captures the embodied, historically sedimented tendencies that guide perception and action, while affordances frame the immediate, situated possibilities presented by the environment.

A recurring argument in contemporary discussions is that affordance theory should be treated as a middle-range theory rather than a grand, all-encompassing framework (Fayard & Weeks,

2014). Positioned between micro-level perceptions and macro-level structures, affordance theory provides a powerful but bounded tool for analyzing how practices are materially and relationally anchored.

Rather than attempting to explain all facets of human-environment interaction, affordance theory excels at illuminating how specific actions become possible, desirable, or constrained in particular socio-material contexts. For research concerned with everyday practices, particularly in transitional contexts such as migration or adaptation to new environments, affordance theory offers a nuanced lens. It accentuates the subtle, often overlooked ways in which material and perceptual conditions shape possibilities for action, without falling into determinism or voluntarism.

The combined use of Social Practice Theory and Affordance Theory enables a processual reading of everyday life, one that traces how possibilities for action emerge within migrants' interaction with norms, infrastructures, and environments. This perspective supports an analysis that remains sensitive to both patterned social expectations and the contingent material conditions in Dublin.

# Chapter 4. Methodology

## *4.1. Photovoice*

Photovoice, a participatory action research (PAR) method initially developed by Wang and Burris (1997), has become a prominent qualitative methodology designed to empower marginalized populations through visual narratives. Originally applied in reproductive health contexts, Photovoice has expanded across diverse research domains, including urban planning, intercultural integration, and community empowerment (Wang & Burris, 1997; Liebenberg, 2018). It operates on three core principles: enabling participants to document and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns; promoting critical dialogue and generating locally situated knowledge; and reaching policymakers and stakeholders to foster meaningful social change (Wang, 1999).

Photovoice draws upon Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed that promotes reflection and action through dialogical learning, feminist theory that values experiential knowledge and challenges hierarchical research paradigms, and documentary photography that emphasizes the role of visual methods in eliciting and communicating lived realities (Freire, 2005; Frisby et al., 2009; Collier & Collier, 1986). These theoretical foundations together reinforce Photovoice's focus on participant empowerment, collaborative knowledge production, and the generation of socially relevant insights. emphasizes collaborative knowledge production, participant empowerment, and social advocacy (Cubero & Garrido, 2023; Liebenberg, 2018).

The method can support participants in critically examining and communicating their own experiences, thus providing insights into deeper socio-cultural dimensions that are often invisible or misunderstood in traditional research methodologies (Ramirez, 2023). Photovoice has been widely recognized for its efficacy in highlighting marginalized voices, bridging

language and cultural barriers, and fostering social cohesion through visual storytelling and reflective dialogue (Liebenberg, 2018; Cubero & Garrido, 2023).

However, the method also presents challenges such as potential ethical dilemmas, the risk of misrepresentation or selective portrayal of participants' experiences, and the need for methodological flexibility to adapt to participant needs and sensitivities (Cubero et al., 2024; Liebenberg, 2018). In this research, these challenges are addressed through detailed informed consent procedures, careful facilitation of discussions and an adaptive methodological approach designed specifically to ensure individual participant comfort and privacy . Notably, while Photovoice typically involves group discussions using methods like the S-H-O-W-E-D technique (Wang, 1999) to facilitate dialogue and collective analysis, this research adopted one-on-one interviews to better suit the linguistic diversity and privacy preferences of participants. The individualized format allowed for a more comfortable environment where participants could explore personal meanings without the pressure of group dynamics.

Alongside Photovoice, this study integrates Photo Elicitation interviews (PEI), a visual method that uses photographs as a stimulus during interviews to explore participants' subjective meanings and social contexts (Harper, 2002). Unlike Photovoice, which is a methodology, Photo Elicitation is a method that can be employed across diverse qualitative paradigms, including ethnography, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology (Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibanez, 2004). It enables a deeper and often more nuanced discussion by allowing participants to "show" rather than "tell" aspects of their lives that may remain hidden in verbal-only interviews. PEI emphasizes the collaborative interpretation of visual material and can overcome linguistic limitations and power dynamics, making it especially relevant for research involving culturally diverse or multilingual participants (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Frohmann, 2005).

The integration of Photo elicitation enriched this study by deepening the interpretive layer of the research process. It allowed participants to revisit and discuss the significance of their photos during the interviews, facilitating more layered, reflective, and contextually grounded narratives. In contrast to the generative and activist roots of Photovoice, Photo Elicitation emphasized dialogical co-construction of meaning, making it an ideal complement. Crucially, their combination enabled a form of methodological triangulation—allowing cross-validation between what participants chose to document visually and how they interpreted those choices.

The relevance of these visual methods for this thesis lies in their demonstrated capacity to generate rich, nuanced, and culturally sensitive insights into migrant experiences. The novelty of applying both Photovoice and Photo Elicitation in this research context stems from their specific adaptation to migrant perspectives on sustainability within Dublin. While these methods have been used separately in studies of migration and environment, their combined application to explore the intersection of migration, sustainability, and place-based experiences remains significantly underexplored. This research therefore contributes original insights to the fields of migration studies, urban sustainability, and participatory visual methodologies, and opens new avenues for advancing social inclusion, informing policy, and enhancing community engagement.

### *4.2. Data Collection*

#### *4.2.1. Visual Data*

The data for this thesis was collected in Dublin through a participatory research design. The study was conducted in collaboration with Future Learning Language School, where the researcher had previously completed an academic internship. Building on the trust and familiarity developed during the internship, the researcher initiated formal collaboration with

the school for participant recruitment. With the assistance of the Academic Director's Assistant, a call for participation was disseminated among the student body. The inclusion criteria were broad to encourage diversity: participants of any nationality, age, or gender with a minimum English proficiency level of B1 and availability to participate in a one-and-a-half-month visual study.

The recruitment strategy was purposive and convenience-based, resembling approaches used in similar participatory studies where the emphasis lies not in representativeness but in co-constructing context-rich data (Liebenberg, 2018; Cubero & Garrido, 2023). Approximately 20 students expressed interest, and the researcher held two online introductory sessions tailored to different class schedules. These sessions introduced the research aims, methods, and ethical considerations, and provided clear photo instructions. The guiding question was: "What is sustainability for you in Dublin?" Participants were encouraged to capture everyday scenes that reflected their understanding and experiences of sustainability.

Unlike studies using analog or digital cameras (e.g., Wang & Burris, 1997), participants in this project used their mobile phones—a practical and accessible tool considering the context and digital fluency of the group. To maintain independence in visual narratives and avoid peer influence, each participant was given a private Google Drive folder for uploading their images and accompanying descriptions. The limit of 15 photos was a flexible guideline, with actual submissions ranging from 3 to 17 photos per person. This flexibility mirrors the approach taken by other participatory visual researchers who prioritized meaning over uniformity (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016).

Throughout March, participants engaged with the task at their own pace, supported by a WhatsApp group created for logistical questions and emotional encouragement. In total, 115 photographs were collected. This visual dataset reflects the breadth of experiences and

interpretations of sustainability held by the group. While 17 participants initially confirmed their participation, 7 later withdrew due to various personal reasons, resulting in a final sample of 10 student participants.

Additionally, the Academic Director's Assistant, who supported the recruitment process, chose to participate in the study as well. With over 20 years of living experience in Dublin and as a migrant from another European country, she contributed a valuable insider perspective. This individual is included as an expert voice in the dataset, offering reflections that are both personal and professionally informed. Her contributions provide an additional interpretive layer and are referenced throughout the analysis.

The final participant group consists of individuals from a range of countries, durations of residence in Dublin, gender identities, and English proficiency levels. Although not statistically representative, the sample reflects the diversity of migrant experiences in an urban European context and supports the aim of generating nuanced, situated insights into how sustainability is understood and practiced in daily life.

This data collection strategy underscores the relevance of participatory visual methods in contexts where voice, inclusivity, and reflexivity are central concerns. The following table (see Table 1) summarizes key characteristics of the participants involved in the project:

| **Name** | **Gender** | **Residence period** | **Nationality** | **English Level** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ana | Female | 4 months | Brazilian | B2 |
| Lina | Female | 1 year 6 months | Brazilian | B2 |
| Leo | Male | 4 months | Mexican | B1 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mateo | Male | 1 year 2 months | Colombian | B2 |
| Nina | Female | 1 year | Brazilian | C1 |
| Emil | Male | 6 months | Brazilian | B2 |
| Tomas | Male | 2 months | Mexican | B1 |
| Noa | Female | 2 months | Mexican | B1 |
| Ella | Female | 2 months | Brazilian | C1 |
| Maria | Female | 1 year | Russian | C1 |
| Petra | Female | 20 years | Slovakian | C2 |

*Table 1. Participants profile*

### *4.2.2. Photo-Elicited Narratives*

In order to bring participants' visual contributions into a more reflective and discursive context, a series of semi-structured interviews followed a photo elicitation format, using participant-generated photographs as prompts to guide discussion and reflection a series of interviews were conducted. All eleven interviews were structured around ten core questions (see Appendix 1) which were designed to explore multiple dimensions: participants' emotional and practical engagement with the photo-taking process, their evolving understanding of sustainability since arriving in Dublin, and the comparisons they made with sustainability practices in their countries of origin. Several questions also encouraged them to assess the city's infrastructure and how city life could be improved. Finally, participants were invited to reflect on how the project itself influenced or reshaped their thinking on the topic.

Each interview was guided by the visual material submitted by the participant, allowing a co-constructed narrative to emerge.

Eight interviews were conducted in person during the researcher's field trip to Dublin, all hosted in a quiet, designated room at the language school premises. This arrangement contributed to a focused, familiar, and comfortable atmosphere. The remaining three interviews were conducted online, arranged according to the convenience and availability of the participants.

Interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile phone and supplemented with field notes taken by the researcher. Each session lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English, and while participants varied in language proficiency, they were able to express themselves effectively. The conversational format encouraged spontaneous elaboration and allowed participants to steer the discussion toward aspects of sustainability that resonated with their individual circumstances.

Rather than simply clarifying the meaning of visual material, the interviews functioned as dialogical spaces in which participants explored their personal and cultural relationships to sustainability, urban infrastructure, and local norms. This methodical use of semi-structured interviews served to enhance the depth of interpretation while preserving the participatory ethos of the project. It provided a platform for multilingual migrants to voice complex perspectives on place, adaptation, and sustainability in their own terms, expanding the scope of visual inquiry into a reflexive, collaborative process.

### *4.3. Data Analysis*

The data analysis followed a two-layered qualitative approach grounded in the interpretivist tradition, which views social reality as constructed through everyday meaning-making

processes (Parsons, 1978). This approach informed the construction of individual sustainability narratives as well as the identification of shared thematic patterns across the dataset.

First, individual narratives were built for each participant by weaving together their interview responses and selected photographs. These narratives aimed to capture participants' individual experiences and situated understandings of sustainability, as expressed through visual and verbal media. The dialogic relationship between photo and text was essential; interviews were structured around participants' photographs, allowing for a grounded yet participant-led articulation of meaning.

Second, thematic analysis was employed to identify overarching patterns that transcended individual accounts. All 11 interviews and 94 photographs were coded using NVivo software, employing a hybrid inductive-deductive approach. While broad analytical categories were informed by the guiding research questions and theoretical framework, the specific codes were derived inductively from the data itself. This enabled a flexible yet structured process that remained close to participants' language and experiences.

The analysis yielded five core themes: (1) *Sustainability by Necessity*, (2) *Belonging in Green Spaces*, (3) *Collective Sense of Sustainability*, (4) *Barriers to Practicing Sustainability*, and (5) *Imagining a Sustainable Future*. These themes are not mutually exclusive but rather interwoven, reflecting the complexity and contextual nature of sustainability as practiced and envisioned by migrants in Dublin.

The interpretation was theoretically informed by affordance theory and social practice theory, which guided the analysis of how participants engaged with their environments and constructed sustainability through everyday practices. While the study aims to center

participants' voices, the researcher's role as an interpreter remains acknowledged—both in how the interviews were conducted and how meaning was ultimately assembled and framed.

### *4.4. Ethical Considerations*

This research was guided by strong ethical commitments to care, respect, and participant agency crucial in participatory, image-based research with migrant participants. As a migrant herself, the researcher was aware of the potential for shared experiences to foster empathy and understanding during interviews. Her positionality enabled a certain cultural proximity and mutual trust, especially when navigating language barriers or discussing personal experiences. At the same time, she was cautious not to assume similarity or impose interpretations based on her own background.

Verbal consent was obtained during the initial online sessions, where I explained the project goals, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without explanation. In-person signed consent forms were later collected from all participants during fieldwork in Dublin. Participation in the Photovoice activity—including photo-taking, selection, and discussion—was fully voluntary and flexible. Participants decided what, and how many, photographs to submit, and were in control of what they chose to share and discuss. All names have been anonymized, and no identifiable information is included in the thesis. I do not plan to use the photographs beyond this academic work, and no exhibitions are foreseen.

Ethical care was also part of the research design. Interviews were conducted in a conversational, informal manner to allow participants to express themselves freely. Sensitive or potentially uncomfortable topics were approached with caution or avoided altogether. Still, the researcher acknowledges the possibility of subtle research bias. To mitigate this, the

analysis focuses strictly on participants' words and images, refraining from speculative interpretation or extrapolating beyond what was shared.

Photovoice project offered reflective value to participants. For many, this was their first experience taking part in a research study. Beyond contributing to knowledge, it served as an opportunity for self-expression, reflection, and being heard. Participants retain access to their own photos, and can request access to research findings upon completion. All photographs are securely stored, with access limited to the researcher.

Visual research carries its own set of ethical limitations. While the researcher has taken care to anonymize data, the nature of photography may still present implicit risks of recognition. Non-verbal and verbal cues during interactions may have shaped participants' responses, potentially encouraging agreement or reinforcing specific narratives. Acknowledging this, the researcher tried to remain critically reflexive throughout the research process and its presentation.

# Chapter 5. Results

*5. 1. Personal Sustainability Narratives*

This section presents eleven co-constructed narratives based on interviews and Photovoice images. In line with Parson's view of reality (1978) as socially constructed, the narratives reflect diverse, situated understandings shaped by individual backgrounds and stages of settlement. Narratives are ordered by participants' length of stay, from recent arrivals to a long-term resident, to consider how time may shape perceptions and practices. Each story includes at least one participant photo (others in Annex B) and is presented with minimal interpretation, supported by direct quotes.

**Tomas**

Tomas, an architect from Mexico, had been in Dublin for two months when he joined the project. He views sustainability as a reflection on "how we live and what we leave behind". One of his photos showed the International Space Station (Photo 1) in the night sky. He sees it as a paradoxical symbol. "The project isn't sustainable, but the experiments inside are looking for sustainable solutions," he explained. Watching the night sky has always been part of Tomas's life; he often used a telescope back home to track planets and stars. In Dublin, even without one, he finds excitement in looking upward. Another photo captured a theme park (Photo 2) powered by fuel generators, which he criticized as wasteful: "They're burning something just to entertain people for a few hours."

Tomas compared Dublin's transport and energy systems to those in Mexico. He praised hybrid buses (Photo 3) and contactless payment as efficient and environmentally friendly. In contrast, in Mexico: "When you pay the driver in cash, the bus stays longer at the stop and burns more fuel. It's inefficient," he noted. One of his photos featured solar panels (Photo 4),


which he sees as a step in the right direction. He reflected on his family's home in Mexico, where they use solar thermal tubes to heat water without relying on electricity or gas. "I used to pay nothing to heat water," he said. "Now, I pay a lot. For me, it's too expensive."

*Photo 2*

Participating in the project, Tomas said, helped him connect the dots between his scientific knowledge and everyday life. "I always thought about these things," he reflected, "but now I realize how they are involved in everything around me."

**Noa**

Noa, a 28-year-old from Mexico, similar to Tomas, has only been in Dublin for two months when she joined the project. With a strong connection to outdoor sports like running and climbing, her view of sustainability is grounded in physical interaction with nature and emotional well-being. In Mexico, Noa often hiked in the mountains and appreciated shared community practices. In Howth, she photographed

*Photo 11*

cows (Photo 11) grazing and learned they were placed there to help maintain the grass—a method she found effective and familiar. It reminded her of similar practices back home,

where dry grass often causes fires in spring. In Mexico, families send their cows to the mountains and pay a

herdsman to look after the animals. The cows often belong to several families, and the man is paid by keeping one calf for every two born. “It’s a hard life,” she said, “but it helps manage the land and gives people work.” A Patagonia event poster (Photo 8) also caught Noa’s attention. It promoted *El Rugido del Marañón*, a film about conserving a major river in Peru through a sport called packrafting.

As someone passionate about nature and outdoor sports, Noa had already watched several Patagonia films and admired how they promote environmental awareness. She was also excited to learn that in Dublin Patagonia hosts clothing repair events where anyone can bring their piece of cloth, regardless of brand. “You can meet people, do something social, and take care of what you already have,” she said. In Mexico, Patagonia clothing is rare and expensive. “We joke that when someone says, ‘Wear your best clothes,’ we show up in our hiking outfit,” she laughed. But Noa sees its value. “They have a good quality,” she said. “That’s why I prefer to buy one good item instead of many cheap ones.”

Recycling was not a regular part of her life in Mexico, but Dublin’s infrastructure helped her understand its purpose. “In Mexico, we just collect the bottles,” she admitted. The clear sorting systems and visibility of bins in Dublin prompted her to adopt recycling as a regular habit.

Reflecting on the project, Noa admitted it wasn’t easy at first to decide what to photograph. “because you don’t realize that you are doing something related to sustainability,” she said. People follow rules because “someone said it was legal or illegal,” For her, photovoice helped reveal that sustainability is more than bins or rules—it’s about intention. “It helped me

to be more conscious," she said, "about why you're doing something and what it really means."

**Ella**

Ella, a Brazilian primary school teacher before and environmental enthusiast, had been in Dublin for almost two months. Her understanding of sustainability is coming from her upbringing: her father was all into recycling, and her sister works in environmental protection. "If it's not accessible, it's not sustainable," she said, quoting her sister—an idea that shapes all of her decisions.

Ella's sustainability practices are present in her daily life. At the supermarket, she deliberately chooses bananas wrapped in paper (Photo 13) instead of cheaper plastic-packaged ones. "It wasn't about the price or appearance," she explained. "It was about the packaging." Same reasoning with a candle in a real coconut shell on Photo 20.

*Photo 20*

Her commitment extends to where and how she eats. As a vegan, she evaluates not only the menu but also the materials and processes. "I ask many questions," she admitted. "Do they fry things in the same oil? Is the bread made there, or is it frozen?" She prefers to visit restaurants alone at first to observe how food is prepared and whether sustainable choices are truly part of the service. She also checks the waste situation outside cafés. "If I see trash everywhere, it tells me something." But socially, this can be a challenge. "Some people(friends) find it boring to talk about the environment," she said."

In her free time, she visits nature spots like Phoenix Park (Photo 21), observing the animals without feeding them. “It’s not part of their nature,” she said. “We have to respect that.” Participating in the project helped her shift focus from her own habits to those around her. “I started observing people,” she said. “Some don’t act because they don’t care—but others just don’t know how.”

**Ana**

Ana, originally from Brazil, returned to Dublin after a difficult first experience in 2019. This time, she described her life in the city as “perfect,” appreciating everyday moments like biking, working, and simply spending time outdoors. One of her photos captured a group of volunteers cleaning a coastal zone (Photo 24). “They were listening to music and collecting trash, just having a good time,” she recalled. The scene reminded her of cleaning walks with her parents in Brazil. “But that was just something we did ourselves—not an organized thing.

*Photo 24*

Recycling became an important habit in Dublin. At both of her jobs, she is required to separate waste (Photo 25)—something she found impressive compared to Brazil, where recycling infrastructure was limited. “In my city, I had to drive two hours to find a place to recycle,” she said. Now, “it’s much easier”, but she’s the only one in her apartment building who separates waste. “Everyone says, ‘Just put it all in general waste,’ but I still do (separate) it.”

Ana also highlighted a photo of dog waste bags in the public spaces (Photo 26). At first, she questioned the sustainability of using plastic, but later learned they are compostable and made specifically for this purpose. “In Brazil, we’d just use shopping bags because they’re free (from supermarkets),” she explained. “Here, the government provides proper bags.”

Water use was another major contrast. “In Brazil, we pay a lot for water, around 60 euros a month in my currency. So we’re more conscious,” she explained. “If something’s leaking, we fix it. We turn off the tap. We take shorter showers.” Although water isn’t metered in Dublin, she still follows the same habits. “At work, I only turn on the dishwasher when it’s full,” she said. Ana’s life in Dublin is more indoors than outdoors, but she brings a strong sense of care. “For me, it’s(sustainability) about learning how to take care of what we’ve already done,” she said.

**Leo**

Leo, a young man from Mexico, arrived in Dublin just four months before the project began. Participating in the photovoice project helped him begin noticing the deeper value behind ordinary moments: “At first, I didn’t know what to take pictures of,” he said, “but then, each photo led me to the next one.” One of his photos showed a bottle return machine (Photo 27), unfamiliar back home. In Mexico, he explained, bottles are sold by weight, and the system is less accessible. “Here, it’s easier. You just bring them to the supermarket.” He also praised Dublin’s color-coded bins, and the one for clothes (Photo 33)


*Photo 33*

A sign prohibiting public consumption of alcohol (Photo 28) caught his attention during St. Patrick's Day celebrations. For him, it reflected the importance of social behavior and safety in public spaces. "Sustainability is not only about the environment," he said. "It's also about social and economic well-being."

Other small but meaningful examples stood out to him: signage reminding dog owners to clean up after their pets (Photo 29 and 32) and pedestrian buttons that help manage traffic flow (Photo 36). Leo also appreciated Dublin's bilingual signs (Photo 34). "Everything is in English and Irish. I think it's important to keep the language alive," he said, comparing it with Mexico, where many Indigenous languages are disappearing. "Nobody is doing anything to save them," he added.

However, he also noted a key difference between the countries: In Mexico, cars are restricted from driving on certain days depending on the license plate number—a system meant to reduce traffic and pollution. "It works well," he said, "because if you drive on the wrong day, you get fined." He found it surprising that Dublin, despite having traffic issues, does not have a similar system.

**Emil**

Emil, a 25-year-old from Brazil, arrived in Dublin seeking new experiences after working in PR, fashion, and events. He views sustainability through a social lens, emphasizing human behavior, public responsibility, and cultural values.

One of his photos captured an OxFam volunteer recruitment table (Photo 38) on the street. "When we talk about sustainability, we talk about nature," he said, "but we forget people." Unable to donate money, he offered to help with PR tasks instead—his way of contributing.

“I’m not good at many things,” he said, “but I’m good at communication, and I can help with that.”

Emil shared a photo from his restaurant job (Photo 39), picturing the way food waste is minimized through creative reuse. “We boil leftovers like shrimp shells to make sauces,” he explained. “It’s not for eating directly, but it adds flavor and avoids waste.” Back home, he saw similar practices promoted by Brazilian media, like using banana peels to make bread.

*Photo 39*

He is also responsible for waste separation at work (Photo 41). He appreciates how seriously Dublin treats recycling. “In Brazil, we recycle bottles because people can earn some money…not for the planet,” he said. “Here, it’s part of the system. You have to do it.” However, reflecting on cleanliness, Emil described Dublin as still "a very dirty city".

A strong advocate for sustainable fashion, Emil shops second-hand and admires Europe’s openness to recycled clothing. “In Brazil, there’s prejudice against used clothes,” he said. “Here, vintage is stylish. "I love that.”

**Nina**

Nina moved to Dublin from Brazil a year ago with the ambition to improve her English and explore Europe. In Brazil, she was a psychologist, but in Dublin, she juggles two jobs—working as a minder for two children and as a waitress. One of her photos captured the city’s outdoor seating areas (Photo 49), which she believes promote a sustainable lifestyle. "I

think it's good that we have environments where we can stay outside more without using electricity.." she explained.

Nina also finds inspiration in Dublin's vibrant culture of secondhand shopping, which contrasts sharply with her experiences in Brazil. "Most of my winter clothes are from secondhand," she said. She observed how Dublin's streets are dotted with secondhand shops, providing accessible cloth options. In Brazil, this culture is still emerging, "In São Paulo, it's mostly vintage, and it's more expensive…we are huge consumers. We always buy in Shein, you know, fast fashion."

*Photo 49*

Her role as a minder also opened her eyes to sustainable transportation. She was impressed by the number of children biking to school (Photo 50), even in winter. "My kids, they go to school by bike, and all their friends too...I think it's a good habit here that the kids have," she noted, admiring the norm of cycling over driving—a rare practice in her hometown.

Waste management in Dublin also stood out to Nina. In one of her photos, she captured public trash bins (Photo 52)—something she rarely saw in Brazil. "In my house, we always separate the paper, the plastic, and the organic...But again, it's something that I only had because we can afford it. In Brazil,...you pay for half of this...the truck that will take the trash separately" she explained. The cost associated with proper waste collection services is a barrier for many Brazilian families, unlike in Dublin, where public and private waste separation is standard.

Adjusting to grocery shopping in Dublin was also a learning curve. Back home, Nina used to buy groceries monthly, stocking up for weeks. In Dublin, however, she found herself

shopping weekly. "I think I buy more stuff that I don't really need...I waste more food here. I also eat more because it’s cold.." she admitted. She observed that bread spoils quickly, contributing to more waste. "Sometimes I buy it one day, and in two days it’s gone," she explained, noting how the colder climate and shorter shelf life of products changed her consumption patterns.

**Maria**

Maria moved to Dublin from a small village close to the Baikal lake in Russia, nearly a year ago, driven by her dream to learn English in an English-speaking country. Having lived in one of the coldest regions in the world, she finds Dublin’s climate surprisingly mild. "It's very warm. Outside is warm, inside not very warm," she laughed, comparing it to Siberian winters.

Her photovoice journey revealed how Maria blends beauty and simplicity in her daily life. One of her first photos showed fallen flowers (Photo 54) she had picked up in a park. “I didn’t cut or buy them,” she explained. “They were already on the ground.” For her, beauty doesn't need to be purchased or wasteful, reusing what nature offers is enough.

Another flower photo (Photo 55) carried symbolic meaning. In Ireland, she discovered that the daffodil symbolizes hope and is used by the Irish Cancer Society. This association touched her deeply, linking the natural life cycle to human vulnerability. “People are born and die… that’s sustainability too,” she reflected.

Recycling was a theme she explored through her photos of bottle return machines (Photo 56) and home waste separation. In Russia, her family composts in the backyard by digging holes in the soil and letting organic waste enrich it over time. Paper is burned in ovens as fuel, especially in winter, and plastic is sometimes stored until it can be brought to the nearest town with recycling facilities. “We don’t have separate trash bins like in Dublin,” she said. Yet her

habits (cleaning, drying, and sorting waste) carried over naturally. “I don’t like the smell. But more than that, I want to respect the people who do the sorting. It’s easier for them if I clean it.”

*Photo 62*

At home, she and her housemates began growing onions (Photo 61) from unused bulbs they had forgotten in the kitchen. “You cut what you need and it grows again,” she said. They also hang their laundry outside to dry (Photo 62), a practice she cherishes: “I like the smell of sun-dried clothes.”

Public transport and urban messaging also caught her eye (Photo 59). During a trip to Malahide, she photographed a DART poster highlighting the reduction of $CO_2$ emissions compared to driving. “It was a small reminder,” she said, “but maybe it inspires people to choose better.”

**Mateo**

Mateo, originally from Medellín, Colombia, arrived in Dublin in early 2023. Although he submitted only two photos for the project, his interview was rich in detail, offering thoughtful reflections. Even before moving abroad, Mateo practiced recycling diligently. He recalls having separate bins for organic and recyclable waste in his family home and being personally disturbed when others littered: “If a candy wrap fell out of my pocket, I would go back and pick it up. I can’t be peaceful if I leave trash behind.”

Another photo Mateo contributed showed an electric vehicle charging station (Photo 65). His view of this technology was nuanced: while he appreciated the reduction in emissions from electric cars, he was also concerned about the environmental impact of battery disposal. Reflecting on Colombia's evolving infrastructure, he noted that while electric vehicles are gaining traction there, high costs remain a barrier. Still, he sees the expansion of EV parking spaces and charging stations in malls and universities as positive steps. "If people know they can charge their car anywhere, they'll be more confident to make the switch," he said.

*Photo 65*

While he admired Ireland's infrastructure and incentives, he also shared examples of innovative Colombian solutions, like solar-powered benches and water filtration systems using gray water for toilets and irrigation. Daily sustainability habits also shape Mateo's life in Dublin. Although he mostly uses the bus, because he "isn't good with bikes", he prefers public transport over driving. He also actively conserves electricity at home: turning off the lights, using LED bulbs, and ensuring the boiler runs only when necessary. This motivation, he admitted, is partly economic due to high utility costs.

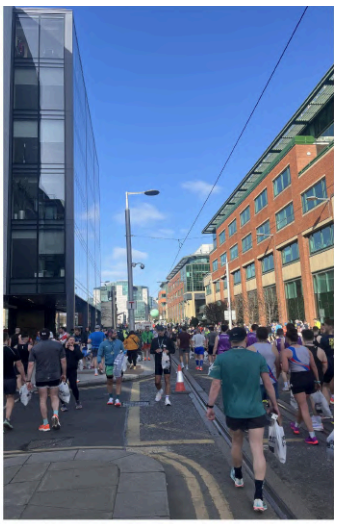
Mateo also shared insights into Colombia's unique approach to utility pricing. In Colombia, the government uses a stratification system called "estratos," which classifies neighborhoods from Level 1 (low income) to Level 6 (high income). "If you are in Level 1, sometimes you can get a discount of 90 or 80% on your bills," he said. This system, although sometimes criticized, allows for economic equity by offering subsidies for utilities, groceries, and even

school supplies for those in lower levels. Reflecting on his family, Mateo shared that his grandmother lived in a Level 2 area and received significant support for everyday expenses.

Beyond sustainability, Mateo shared how living in Dublin has expanded his cultural perspective. He spoke warmly of Irish friends and the lessons he learned from them, especially around emotional communication and relationships. A humorous moment of culture shock came at the gym: “The first time I saw people changing clothes so openly—I was shocked. In Colombia, we’re really insecure about that kind of thing,” he laughed. But instead of judging, Mateo chose to learn. “If you are in their country, try to understand why they do that. It’s probably cultural,” he reflected.

**Lina**

Lina, a 25-year-old from Brazil, has been living in Dublin for a year and a half. With a background in human resources and plans to begin a master’s program at Griffith College, she describes herself as always being an active and sociable person. Her photovoice participation marked a shift in how she perceives everyday spaces: “I see these things every day, but I didn’t realize what they meant before. Now I see them differently.”



One of the first images she took from a bridge showed heavy traffic below (Photo 68). It reminded her of the pollution caused by cars and the need for more sustainable transport options. In contrast, a photo from the Dublin half marathon (Photo 69) highlighted a healthier, more community-driven vision of the city—where people run, walk, and celebrate together in open spaces.

*Photo 69*

Lina's understanding of sustainability expanded further through recycling. At home, she now separates waste into categories—something she hadn't done in Brazil. "It's common in the city here," she observed, "and the signs make it easy." She has also adopted the use of eco-bags for grocery shopping. "When I go back to Brazil, I'll take my eco-bag. That's something I learned here."

Community life emerged as a strong theme for Lina. A photo of a local Irish football match (Photo 72) and Dublin marathon made her reflect on the importance of shared moments. She values the cultural exchange she experiences every day: "You can go to a bakery, a pub, anywhere, and you'll talk to someone from a different country." In contrast to Brazil, where exposure to different nationalities was limited, Dublin feels vibrant and globally connected.

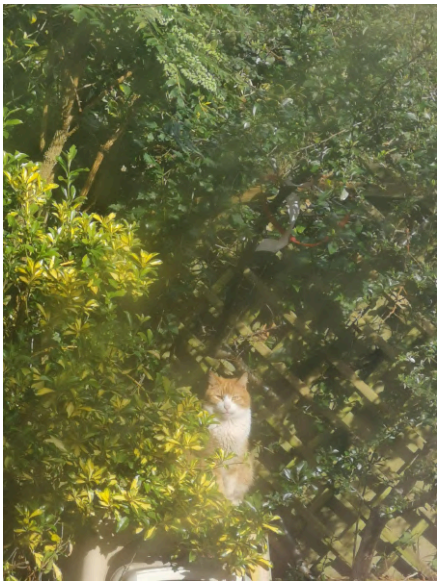
**Petra**

Petra, a long-settled migrant from Slovakia, represents a rare profile in this project: that of a fully integrated European resident. After living in the city for nearly twenty years and currently working at the Future Learning Language School, Petra brings a perspective rooted in personal journey and civic observation.

Her photographs convey both critique and hope. The first image she captured was a pile of rubbish torn open by seagulls (Photo 73). "Dublin doesn't have proper bins with lids or locks," she said. For Petra, this everyday mess represents more than inconvenience—it's a systemic failure. "Seagulls are Dublin's rats (referring to the problem of NewYork city)," she quipped. To her, the repeated cleanup costs more than simply providing secured bins, a missed opportunity in urban planning.

Petra's critical lens extended to the city's housing infrastructure. She photographed the under-construction 'tallest building in Dublin,'(Photo 80) reflecting on the lack of high-rise apartment living. "If you want to house a lot of people in a small area, you have to put them on top of each other," she said, drawing on her upbringing in Eastern Europe.

Although this research focuses on sustainability in Dublin, Petra often turned her lens toward Bray, where she resides. Located in County Wicklow, outside the study's formal geographic scope, Bray nonetheless played a central role in how she experiences sustainability. Her reflections there were especially emotional. One image shows a grand seafront hotel (Photo 81), now used to house refugees. "It makes me so happy. Instead of selling it or developing it, they gave this beautiful building to people who really need it. Imagine, you've fled your country, and you get to wake up to the Irish Sea. It's good for the soul."



Her garden also became part of her sustainability story. Photo 82 and 83 featured her cat. Initially hoping for a house cat, Petra described how her pet gradually adapted to the garden environment. "He has become part of this little ecosystem. He's a harmonious pet." This reflection triggered a broader critique of pet ownership in urban spaces: "Is it sustainable to keep dogs in apartments? Cities barely have parks for people, never mind dogs."

*Photo 83*

Other images captured hopeful shifts. She highlighted hybrid Dublin buses (Photo 84) —quieter, cleaner, more frequent—and celebrated pedestrianized Capel Street (Photo 93). Once car-filled, the street is now a thriving commercial public space. "There are no cars, no pollution. It's people-focused now." Her commute on the DART offered another discovery:

Booterstown Nature Reserve (Photo 86). Once dismissed as “the smelly station,” she now recognizes it as a protected ecosystem for over 20 bird species: “That’s the smell of nature.”

Petra also touched on themes of inclusion and justice. A photo of a Dublin Bus campaign (Photo 87) promoting accessibility moved her deeply: “I grew up in a world where people with disabilities weren’t visible.” She praised Ireland’s progressive shifts—such as the 2015 marriage equality referendum—and contrasted it with Slovakia: “Ireland is a good place for changes to happen.” Yet, she noted gaps. Community recycling, common in Slovakia, is lacking in Dublin. “There, on every corner, there’s a recycling point. Here, if you want to recycle glass, you need to drive.”

Petra's concept of sustainability is holistic. From supporting local businesses and secondhand shopping to preferring simple meals without imported goods, she believes that “simple choices are sustainable choices.” Reflecting on the photovoice experience, Petra was emotional. “I thought I was just contributing to a research project,” she said. But, ultimately, the project altered Petra’s relationship with the place. “Before this, I thought, do I really want to settle here? Now I know—I’ve already found the place I was looking for.” She described a meaningful conversation with her partner about staying in Bray permanently. “It’s safe, clean, by the sea, and the local government makes good choices. It’s a sustainable place to live.” The process opened her eyes not just to waste and infrastructure but to the quiet, often-overlooked moments of collective progress. “If you look for the good, you find it. It’s been here all along.”

### *5. 2. Identified Themes*

The following section presents the second layer of analysis, which builds upon the preceding participant narratives. While the narratives reflect individual interpretations and

context-specific reflections - many of which were unique - the thematic analysis identifies patterns shared across the dataset. All participants contributed, to varying degrees, to the themes presented here. Unlike the descriptive and grounded tone of the narratives, the thematic analysis takes a more conceptual and comparative approach, preparing the ground for the theoretical engagement that follows in the Discussion chapter.

***Sustainability by Necessity***

For many participants, sustainability in Dublin was not a deliberate lifestyle choice but a response to financial and situational constraints. Practices such as walking, biking, minimizing consumption, and using public transport were adopted primarily for affordability and practicality reasons.

Public transport was universally used and valued. “It’s not just about sustainability,” Mateo said. “It’s the only way to get around without spending too much.” Lina described how she shifted from driving in Brazil to buses in Dublin: “It was a big change for me.” Walking was also common, with Noa noting, “I walk because it’s safe here, and it’s free.”

Biking served similar functions. Leo, who relied on a secondhand bicycle, explained, “It saves money and clears your mind.” Participants frequently cited Dublin’s cycling infrastructure and how it supports safe, legal cycling. “Even traffic lights for bikes! It’s amazing,” said Noa. This stood in stark contrast to Mexico, where biking in traffic is dangerous. “We ride in the bus lane,” she admitted. “It’s illegal, but it’s safer for us—so we don’t care.”

Participants also expressed frugal consumption habits. Ella described a shift to reusing and avoiding purchases: “If I already have something, why buy more?” Living in a rented place in Dublin with limited space, Noa has embraced a minimalist lifestyle. “I just have one sweater,

one jacket—and it's enough for me," she explained. With uncertainty about moving and no permanent home, she avoids accumulating things she may later struggle to carry. Additionally,

Nina discovered the "Too Good to Go" application. It allows people to buy surplus food from cafes, hotels etc. at low prices. "I usually buy from a hotel...especially breakfast...croissants and things like that," she shared. Drawing from her own experience working in a hotel, she understands how much food is typically discarded, making the initiative not only sustainable but practical. "I think it helps me a lot to save money too," she noted.

*Photo 75*

The return machine was mentioned by every participant—praised not only for its environmental value, but also for the cash incentive. "People use it because they get money back," Petra explained. "But that's what works."

Recycling, by contrast, was not framed as necessity-based. Most found it easier to adopt in Dublin due to the availability of separate bins. As Ana said, "I recycle more here—just because the bins are there."

Ultimately, sustainability for these migrants often emerged from navigating limited budgets and constrained living conditions. As Tomas reflected, "You just learn to use less—because you can't afford to waste." These sustainability choices reflect an unintended but effective form of daily survival.

***Nature as Emotional Refuge and Ground for Belonging***

For many participants, green spaces in Dublin served as essential emotional refuges in moments of uncertainty and dislocation. Nature offered a quiet kind of relief: from homesickness, from urban stress, and from the loneliness often experienced in early stages of migration. Noa shared how a simple run in her neighborhood transformed her state of mind. She regularly runs in a park near her home (Photo 10), which became a personal refuge during a difficult time. “I felt really bad that day,” she shared. “Because I’m alone, I don’t have work yet, and many things.” But being outdoors helped.“You only hear birds and the river,” she said, explaining how it helped her cope during moments of stress.

*Photo 10*

Ana also described how nature structured her everyday well-being: “Here in Ireland, I love to go to parks and just enjoy. Even now, the sun is so good that I just want to stay outside.” Lina’s photo captured a small tree in the street (Photo 66)—a symbol of environmental care in the midst of urban development. “It brings us a little expectation about the environment,” she said.

Participants from urban regions in Latin America noted how such access to nature was rare back home. Noa reflected that in her city, “we don’t have green areas between the cities,” and even in rural areas, “people don’t have time to sit and watch the trees… they’re too busy surviving.” In contrast, Dublin’s parks were seen not just as green zones but as emotional commons—free, calming, and accessible to all.

For others, the contrast with their home environments underscored the importance of green spaces. Leo reflected, “I like to walk or sit in parks here. In Mexico, I wasn’t used to it. There are parks, but they’re far, and sometimes dangerous. Here—even in the dark—I feel safe.” In this sense, nature was offering a rare sense of security in public space.

Whether through running, observing animals, or simply walking through tree-lined streets or parks, migrants described nature as a space where they could momentarily feel safe, peaceful, and present.

***Community and Integration***

The theme of community emerged strongly across interviews, revealing how migrants in Dublin experience both connection and distance—sometimes simultaneously. While many participants spoke warmly of Irish people, building meaningful relationships was often shaped by context, language, and access.

Lina, who lives with an Irish family, offered a clear example of positive integration: “I think they are really fun. My relationship with them is really nice.” Others, like Mateo, expressed admiration for local friendliness: “Before coming here I heard Irish people are really nice. And when I arrived, I discovered it’s completely true“, he smiled.

Yet, several participants also highlighted the limits of this connection. Leo admitted, “All my friends are from the school… Brazil or Mexico. I don’t share a lot of time with Irish people.” While he acknowledged that those he met were welcoming, his social world remained largely within migrant circles.

For Noa, sports provided a bridge. “I found a group of people who invited me to climb in a boulder gym… they were really friendly.” Such moments of bonding through shared activities were key to feeling part of something larger.

Others reflected on how ethnic communities filled the gaps left by limited local integration. Emil remarked, “In Dublin, you have strong communities—Brazilian, Indian… but it’s hard to get inside Irish spaces.” He suggested that integration was easier outside Dublin, where interactions were more open.

Ella, arriving alone, relied on pre-arranged online connections: “Before I came, we had a group… so we didn’t feel lost or alone.” Her ability to build friendships was tied to language: “It’s easier when you speak their language.”

***Barriers to Practicing Sustainability***

Despite a strong willingness among participants to live sustainably, many encountered systemic and everyday barriers that limited their ability to do so. These obstacles, ranging from infrastructure gaps and affordability to cultural disconnects, often created frustration or disillusionment.

Waste and packaging emerged as a major point of tension. Ana expressed frustration with excess packaging she noticed in Ireland. “There are so many products where you open one big package and inside are six smaller ones—just plastic for no reason.” She found it especially surprising to see fruit pre-cut and packed with forks. “In Brazil, that exists, but not nearly as much.” Mateo observed that shopping in Dublin generated twice the waste he was used to: “You need to open plastic things, boxes, everything just to get vegetables. I think we use more plastic here.”

Participants also pointed to social and environmental awareness gaps. Emil criticized Dubliners' attitudes toward littering (Photo 42): "People don't have the conscience to keep the city clean. The city hall tries, but people just drop things." Ella echoed this disillusionment: "I expected Europe to be more environmentally responsible. But the streets are really dirty." Infrastructure limitations also hindered sustainable action. Ella missed the composting options she had in Brazil: "I feel really bad when I have to put vegetable peels and paper into the same bin. Dublin could improve this." Mateo noted that housing in a student accommodation made recycling difficult: "People don't recycle at all, because we just had one bin."


*Photo 42*

Cost was another persistent barrier**.** Tomas described the emotional and financial toll of trying to cook traditional meals: "I spent eight euros on vegetables that would cost less than 1 euro in Mexico. It's not sustainable at all. I can't afford that every weekend." Nina, too, struggled with prioritizing local or organic food due to price: "It's hard because it's more expensive."

***Imagining Sustainable Futures***

This theme emerged from a question asked during all interviews: *What do you think could be improved in Dublin to make it more sustainable?* While some participants felt unsure about offering suggestions, just focusing on the present: "We can learn to take care of what we already have." Others shared some ideas for how Dublin could become a better place to live in.

Petra offered some of the most detailed ideas for improvement, shaped by her nearly two decades of living in Dublin. Her long-term perspective allowed her to reflect on how the city

has changed—and how it could improve. She envisioned more offshore wind farms (Photo 76) despite local opposition— saying, “People complain that it will ruin their sea view. But it’s clean energy. That’s the view we need for our future.” She linked resistance to generational attitudes: “Younger people understand this is about our collective future. And there may be a lack of concern or urgency among older generations...” She criticized abandoned buildings (Photo 74 and 78) in central Dublin, advocating for more housing: “Make a city for the people, not for businesses.”

*Photo 74*

Other participants also contributed ideas for change. Emil emphasized the need for early cultural education to address racism and social division in a growingly diverse city. He viewed intercultural education as essential for future generations to live together more respectfully: “We’re in the middle of a new revolution of migration and globalization… maybe in the next few years, this generation changes.”

He also highlighted simple yet impactful urban interventions, such as placing more public bins across the city: “If I had a litter beside me, I wouldn’t throw garbage on the ground.” Ella emphasized the importance of system transparency: “People don’t know where the trash is going… if we knew, maybe we’d feel the responsibility.” For her, knowing what happens to waste is key to building environmental accountability. Though varied in tone and scope, these reflections show that migrants are not only adjusting to Dublin—they are imagining its potential. Their visions point to a more inclusive, transparent, and community-rooted sustainability that values both the environment and the people who live in it.

## Chapter 6. Discussion

At the earliest stage of this research, participants were asked to share a single word that they associated with "sustainability." The resulting word cloud (see Figure 2) visually captures this immediate, unfiltered understanding. Unsurprisingly, *recycling* and *environment*


*Figure 2. First sustainability associations with sustainability*

dominate, along with *green*, *compost* and *trash,* they reinforce the widespread association of sustainability with ecological issues. However, other words such as *balance*, *life* and *opportunity* hint at broader interpretations that go beyond environmentalism. Words like *creativity*, *innovation*, and *research* suggest an openness to sustainability as a dynamic, future-oriented concept, while terms such as *expensive* and *survive* point to the practical and critical dimensions participants associate with it.

These initial associations reflect a discursive terrain in which sustainability is both material and aspirational, shaped by previous cultural exposure. While the dominance of ecological terms echoes public discourse and policy messaging (Thompson, 1997), the presence of some affective and critical terms confirms what later interviews and narratives would make more explicit: for migrants, sustainability is not fixed but actively negotiated—shaped, constrained, and enforced by economic pressures and urban infrastructures. The word cloud thus serves as

a conceptual entry point, grounding abstract ideas in the material and emotional contours of life as it unfolds.

This project investigated how migrants make sense of and perform sustainability amid the transition to a new environment. The goal was not to test a predefined model, but to listen closely to how individuals with diverse backgrounds navigate this change. As a result, personal narratives offer more than a catalog of behaviors; they provide insights into how sustainability is experienced and enacted across diverse personal, cultural, and material contexts. While participants entered the project with varied levels of familiarity with the term "sustainability," all demonstrated meaningful engagement with sustainable practices mainly rooted in their values, prior experiences, and current living conditions.

Participants' stories support and deepen the themes identified in the previous section. First, they confirm that many sustainability practices among migrants arise from necessity rather than ideological commitment—a finding consistent with the concept of "sustainability by necessity." Participants adapted to new living constraints by walking, biking, and minimizing possessions. This reflects broader understandings in sustainability scholarship, where constrained conditions and systemic limitations shape adaptive and often unintended sustainable behaviors (Bruckmeier, 2009). These actions reflect not just economic adaptation but forms of sustainable urban living, aligned with the concept of "affordances" (Gibson, 1986). Dublin's infrastructure: bike lanes, return machines, public bins - enabled or restricted these behaviors. When such affordances were present and legible, migrants readily adopted the behaviors, as seen in Lina's waste management or Nina's enthusiasm for secondhand culture. Yet, where infrastructures were absent or inefficient, such as composting options or excessive packaging, participants expressed frustration, highlighting the systemic barriers to fuller sustainable participation.

At the same time, these practices were socially shaped, resonating with SPT. Another vivid example is the widespread use of return machines in Dublin, which influenced migrant behaviors around waste. Rather than treating the act of returning bottles as a standalone behavior driven by environmental values, SPT prompts us to look at how this practice is socially and materially assembled (Shove et al., 2012). Their material presence provides a structured routine around which new competencies and meanings emerge. Participants who had never encountered such machines in their countries of origin gradually learned how to operate them, often by observing others, experimenting themselves, or mostly receiving informal guidance from friends. This reflects the acquisition of practical know-how—a key element of practice performance.

Simultaneously, the practice of using return machines took on new meaning within participants' everyday lives. While many initially engaged with them for economic reasons (e.g., receiving small reimbursements), over time some began to associate the act with "being responsible". This shift illustrates how meanings can evolve through repeated practice and social embedding. Moreover, the availability of these machines institutionalized the practice by normalizing certain behaviors, reinforcing them through visible infrastructure. It shifts attention away from individual attitudes and toward the socio-material fabric of everyday life, where sustainability is not taught but intuitively understood and performed (Reckwitz, 2002). This interplay between available material conditions and evolving competence speaks to how practices emerge at the intersection of opportunity and constraint: what the environment makes possible, and what individuals come to see as normal or necessary.

Building on the practice-oriented lens, it is also interesting to see how individuals move beyond participation and become active agents themselves. As suggested by Hui et al. (2017), individuals (migrants) develop capacities for "play-ability". Several participants in this study

illustrated such moments of adaptation. Maria's regrowing of onions from unused bulbs and her reuse of fallen flowers for home decoration were not prompted by external systems, but emerged from her personal resourcefulness and sense of aesthetic reuse. Similarly, Ella's deliberate "investigation" of places for eating on sustainability efforts reflected a critical and self-reflective engagement with social norms. Leo's interpretation of bilingual signage as a cultural sustainability gesture further exemplifies how participants infused existing structures with personal meaning. These examples suggest that sustainable practices are not merely reproduced through systems of provision but are actively interpreted, reconfigured, and extended through individual agency.

A deeper reading of the narratives also reveals the contradictory nature of sustainability as it plays out in urban settings. While participants often embraced Dublin's infrastructure improvements or environmental initiatives as signs of progress, these changes sometimes carried unseen or conflicting consequences. Petra, for example, described the transformation of a major street into a pedestrian zone as a positive move toward car-free urban living. Yet, she also noted, without necessarily framing it as a contradiction, that the street *"had become a shopping area"*. This shift, while environmentally framed, may ultimately reinforce consumerism, generating more waste and emissions. Ella, on the other hand, was especially attentive to packaging: she deliberately avoided places that used plastic and chose cafes that offered paper containers and wooden utensils. Yet this practice, while seemingly sustainable, raises new questions: what are the environmental costs of producing single-use paper goods? What about deforestation and the carbon footprint of alternatives that only appear greener? Several participants appreciated Dublin's hybrid buses as a sign of environmental progress, but some, like Tomas, questioned whether such innovations merely offer a greener image without addressing deeper systemic issues, such as the environmental costs of producing new

technologies. These examples suggest that sustainability is not a fixed achievement but a field of tensions, where well-intentioned practices can have unintended consequences. Participants did not always name these contradictions explicitly, but their reflections reveal how sustainability is often partial.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the narratives revealed a strong emotional and symbolic dimension to sustainability. Participants often spoke of nature not in ecological terms but as spaces of mental well-being and belonging. Noa's solitary runs, Lina's appreciation of street trees, and Petra's reflections on seaside views show how emotional and existential needs are met through interaction with green space. These insights challenge purely technocratic models of urban sustainability (Kaika, 2017) and support the idea of nature as "emotional commons" (Gu et al., 2023), a term that emphasizes its shared and restorative function. These practices were not consciously labeled as "sustainable," yet they reveal how sustainability is intimately tied to well-being. The environment did not only afford physical activities like walking or resting, but also affective states—peace, joy, clarity. These emotional attachments became motivations for sustaining certain routines, reinforcing the idea that meaning is not imposed but emerges through engagement (Reckwitz, 2002)

The study also complicates assumptions about linear integration, particularly the idea that sustainability engagement deepens simply with time spent in the host country. Among the eleven participants, six were newcomers (under 6 months in Dublin), and four had resided in the city for a year and more. Yet, no clear correlation emerged between the length of stay and the depth of understanding or engagement with sustainability. Both groups expressed comparable reflections. Tomas, for example, having resided for only two months, offered complex reflections on the paradoxes of technological sustainability and praised the efficiency of hybrid buses. Ella, also a newcomer, brought with her a strong environmental ethic shaped

by family values and scrutinized everything from restaurant waste practices to packaging in supermarkets. These examples suggest that sustainability learning is less a product of time per se and more shaped by prior knowledge, values, and the immediacy of new urban systems.

What stood out, however, was the contrast between these short-term migrants (N=10) and Petra, the only long-term resident in the group. Having spent half of her life in Dublin, Petra offered a more layered interpretation of sustainability shaped less by direct comparison and more by accumulated knowledge and emotional attachment. Contrarily, recent migrants often framed their insights through comparisons between their country of origin and Dublin, with sustainability perceived through the lens of contrast. Petra's perspective moved beyond everyday practices to include reflections on urban policy, environmental symbolism, and social justice. For her, sustainability encompassed not just recycling or transport, but broader questions of how cities grow, how communities care for one another, and how responsibilities are shared. While one case alone cannot draw general conclusions, Petra's account invites reflection on how longer-term settlement, coupled with personal interest and accumulated local knowledge, might contribute to a more integrated understanding of sustainability. Rather than seeing time as a linear determinant, this observation points to its relational nature—shaped by individual trajectories, experiences, and levels of integration.

The last theme points to a collective imagination of a better urban future. This imaginative engagement is not detached from daily life; it grows out of the disjunctures they encounter. Migrants, often positioned as newcomers or outsiders, emerged here as engaged city-makers. They offered ideas to improve waste management and its transparency, promote intercultural education, and renovate old buildings into livable spaces to fight the housing crisis. These proposals reflect more than pragmatic suggestions; they represent moments where migrants assert themselves as urban participants. As Isin (2008) argues, citizenship is not merely a

legal status but something performed through acts. Most of the migrants lacking formal rights or recognition, enacted a form of urban citizenship by imagining alternatives and suggesting how systems could work better. These expressions reveal that belonging is not just inherited through policy but shaped through everyday engagement, care, and envisioning. Migrants bring with them alternative perspectives and experiences that can enrich urban space discourses. Thus, involving them in co-creation processes is not only inclusive but potentially generative, offering new ways of thinking.

A striking pattern across narratives is how sustainability was often discovered retroactively—participants realized only through the photovoice process that their daily routines held sustainable dimensions. This suggests a disconnect between sustainability as a formal discourse and as an intuitive, situated practice. Several participants, particularly recent arrivals, described a shift in awareness as they began to *"see things differently,"* recognizing acts like preserving water, recycling, or opting for second hand clothing not as mere habits but as meaningful contributions to sustainability. Equally noteworthy is the diversity in participants' framing of sustainability: for some, it was about minimalism and affordability (Noa, Ella); for others, about social cohesion and cultural preservation (Leo, Emil, Lina); for some, sustainability meant maintaining emotional well-being and connection to nature through daily practices (Maria, Ana); while others emphasized access to infrastructure, public systems, and technological solutions (Tomas, Petra, Nina, Mateo).

This heightened awareness was not incidental, but actively facilitated by the reflective nature of the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997), which demonstrated its transformative potential. Participants frequently described how the act of photographing led them to notice details they had previously overlooked. As one said, *"I noticed these things, but I didn't pay enough attention."* What began as a task gradually shifted from unconscious habit to

conscious action. The method also appeared to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility. One participant noted, *"Sometimes sustainability just feels like it's only about your own actions—what I am doing, what I am buying… In this project, I started observing what people are doing..around me."* For many, the camera became more than a recording device; it became a lens through which to connect individual behavior to broader systems. This way, photovoice functioned as both a research instrument and a process of co-learning. Its impact was not limited to data collection but extended into participants' sense of agency - suggesting that participatory visual methods may be uniquely well-suited to exploring complex topics like sustainability in migration contexts.

Taken together, these narratives, interpreted through the lenses of affordance theory and SPT, reveal that sustainability among migrants is neither accidental nor derivative. It is cultivated in the friction between inherited knowledge and new systems, between personal values and public norms, between material constraints and emotional needs

# Chapter 7. Conclusion

This thesis began with a deceptively simple question: *How do migrants in Dublin conceptualize and practice sustainability?* Through Photovoice interviews, participants not only shared visual fragments of their daily lives but also co-constructed understandings of sustainability grounded in life stories rather than policy discourse. What emerged was not a singular definition but a plurality of meanings shaped by necessity, memory, care, and improvisation.

Migrants in this study did not arrive in Dublin with fixed sustainability agendas. Their practices evolved—sometimes subtly, sometimes drastically—as they encountered a new urban environment. The research showed that sustainability is not imported or adopted in a linear way, but compromised in the tension between existing habits and unfamiliar systems. In answering how sustainability is conceptualized and practiced, this thesis found that it is often not recognized as such by the individuals themselves until prompted by reflection. Participants spoke of saving, reusing, cycling, conserving, and sharing—practices born from cultural values or financial constraints, not from an explicit environmental morale. Yet these practices align closely with sustainability goals. Their power lies not in their intentionality, but in their consistency.

The second layer of inquiry asked how these practices and perceptions shift with migration. The answer unfolded through patterns of adaptation: learning new recycling codes, overcoming the stigma attached to second-hand goods, improvising within new living conditions, or developing trust and a sense of safety in public spaces. These shifts were not only behavioral but affective. The meaning of sustainability changed as it was re-anchored in the emotional and material realities of life in Dublin. These adjustments challenge static

understandings of sustainability and instead reveal it as dynamic, relational, and responsive to context.

Finally, the thesis explored what insights migrants' perspectives offer for inclusive, sustainable city planning. One key contribution lies in the recognition that sustainability, as practiced by migrants, often falls outside dominant models of "green behavior." It is enacted through frugality, communal living, care for belongings, and embodied relationships with space. These practices may be invisible to policymakers, yet they contain rich potential for informing bottom-up sustainability transitions. Importantly, migrants' experiences also expose infrastructural and cultural barriers. Inclusion, therefore, must go beyond representation; it requires that urban systems become more responsive, and open to diverse ways of living sustainably.

*Implications*

These findings carry several key implications for policy, practice, and research. They suggest that migrants are already contributing to sustainability in ways that are under-recognized by dominant narratives and policy frameworks. Rather than viewing sustainability as a knowledge deficit to be corrected through education, urban planners and policymakers should acknowledge the adaptive, resourceful practices already in place. Leveraging this insight means designing systems that are accessible, visible, and intuitive, for example, expanding return schemes, simplifying signage, and embedding sustainability into public services and housing design.

These insights call for a broader reframing of urban sustainability, which explicitly includes emotional resilience, social connection, and cultural integration alongside environmental performance. For many participants, public green spaces were not merely aesthetic amenities

but vital emotional anchors. These environments offered migrants a sense of calm, safety, and continuity during a period of upheaval and transition. Several participants expressed an openness, and even enthusiasm, for contributing to sustainability efforts of the city. Ana reminisced fondly about volunteering to clean coastal areas, and Emil offered his communication skills to support OxFam. These narratives highlight an underutilized opportunity: migrants are potential collaborators of the city. Rather than expecting migrants to "catch up" to established norms, sustainability can be a domain of mutual learning and co-creation. Institutions such as schools, community centers, and local councils could facilitate participatory projects that foster dialogue and shared ownership of sustainable futures.

This study also contributes methodologically by showing the power of participatory visual methods. Photovoice proved to be more than a data collection tool; It opened up a reflective space that altered how participants viewed themselves, their routines, and their environment. Participants frequently identified sustainable behaviors only when taking photographs and discussing them aloud during the interview. This method thus not only captured existing practices but catalyzed new recognitions, thus, offering a valuable contribution to participatory sustainability research.

Besides, the study contributes to a limited but growing field that examines how sustainability is understood within diverse cultural and migratory contexts. Although demographic background was not systematically collected, several participants voluntarily referenced their educational or professional histories, suggesting that many may come from middle-class or relatively educated backgrounds. This brings important implications for future research. The capacity to critically reflect on sustainability, relate it to global discourses, or compare it across countries may be shaped by such socio-economic positioning. Future studies would

benefit from deliberately incorporating questions about education, occupation, and class background to explore how these factors intersect with sustainability perceptions and practices. This would offer richer insight into how values, routines, and infrastructures interact over time, and how sustainability might be more inclusively imagined and practiced across communities.

Finally, the findings contribute theoretically, particularly in advancing a relational understanding of sustainability. By foregrounding relationality, the findings challenge behaviorist and normative models that overemphasize awareness or moral intention as primary drivers of change. Instead, they point to the significance of lived experience, adaptation, and creativity in shaping sustainability outcomes. Theoretically, this positions sustainability not as a linear progression of informed choices, but as a situated, evolving practice shaped by ongoing negotiation between people, places, and systems.

This thesis has given lots of insight into how migrants' understanding of sustainability but the third objective – supporting the Future Learning Language School – goes beyond the scope of this written work. The findings are to be shared with the school in a tailored way, highlighting practical actions that can inform the curriculum around sustainability. The project also shows how Photovoice can be used as a teaching tool to get learners to reflect, dialogue and co-create. Sharing both the process and findings with Future Learning will fulfill the participatory ethos of the research and create space for future collaborations.

*Limitations and Further Directions*

Within this study several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and limited to participants attending a language school. This creates a relatively narrow demographic, predominantly young, urban, and internationally mobile individuals. As such,

the findings may not reflect the full diversity of migrant perspectives in Dublin, particularly those of long-term residents, older migrants, or individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Second, although the Photovoice method enabled rich visual and narrative data, not all participants engaged with it equally. Despite all participants sharing vivid reflections, some submitted multiple photos, others provided fewer, which might have influenced the interview outcomes. Additionally, interviews were conducted in English, which, while functional, may have constrained more nuanced or emotionally complex expressions from speakers. Another thing, while participatory and reflective, may also have made participants inclined to present themselves in a favorable light, particularly in a project with an implicit sustainability focus.

Furthermore, the study focused only on migrants, without a comparative perspective from local Irish residents. Including such a comparison could have offered valuable insights into differing perceptions of sustainability or highlighted systemic gaps in integration. Similarly, group interviews might have deepened the understanding of how sustainability is discussed and co-constructed within communities.

Future research might address these gaps by expanding participant diversity, incorporating comparative perspectives, or employing longitudinal approaches to track how sustainable practices evolve over time. Despite these limitations, the findings remain robust within the study's scope, offering a grounded and interpretive account of how sustainability is experienced and redefined through the migrant lens.

*Concluding Thoughts*

Insights from this research suggest that sustainability is not only something to measure, but something to witness. That it is not always found in policy, but sometimes in the photo of a

cat lying in the garden, or in the way someone decides to carry their habits from one place into another.

The migrants who participated in this study spoke in emotions, routines, and reflections. Their sustainability was not always visible or intentional. But it was there—in the choices made, the things reused, the spaces cherished. It reflected the ongoing mix of remembering where they came from and learning to adapt. Ultimately, this research reminds us that sustainability is not the property of institutions or experts. It is not a checklist to be completed. It is often born not of abundance but of constraint, not of certainty but of improvisation. And in the migrant stories shared here, we see its most genuine forms.

If cities like Dublin are to become truly sustainable, they must not only welcome migrants as residents but include them in the future vision. As a researcher and as a migrant myself, I carry this work not as a conclusion, but as a beginning of a small invitation to rethink not only how we define sustainability, but whose voices we let define it.

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# Annex A

*Interview Questions:*

1. How did you find the experience of capturing sustainability through photos?
   *Was it enjoyable, challenging, or did anything unexpected occur?*

2. How does(do) this photo (these photos) relate to the topic of sustainability?

3. Has your understanding of this concept changed since moving to Dublin?

4. Could you describe any new sustainability-related behaviors or habits you've developed since coming to Dublin?
   *How do these differ from your practices back home?*

5. How has moving to Dublin influenced your views on what sustainable living means?
   *Are there any aspects of sustainability that you see differently now compared to when you lived elsewhere?*

6. What aspects of sustainability do you find most important or relevant in your daily life here in Dublin? Why?

7. How does living in Dublin facilitate or hinder your ability to live sustainably?
   *Could you provide some specific examples or experiences?*

8. Are there sustainability practices or ideas from your home city/country that you feel could positively influence sustainability in Dublin?
   *Could you describe these practices and why they might be beneficial?*

9. Do you know of any urban sustainability initiatives in Dublin? In your opinion, how could urban sustainability initiatives in Dublin become more inclusive and reflective of migrants' experiences?
   *What recommendations would you offer to policymakers or city planners?*

10. After participating in this Photovoice project, have your thoughts on sustainability changed or deepened in any way? If yes, how?

# Annex B

*Participants Photos*

Photos by Tomas:

Photo 1

Photo 2



Photo 3

Photo 4


Photo 5

Photo 6


Photo 7

Photos by Noa:


Photo 8

Photo 9

Photo 10

Photo 11

Photo 12

Photos by Ella:


Photo 13

Photo 14

Photo 15


Photo 16

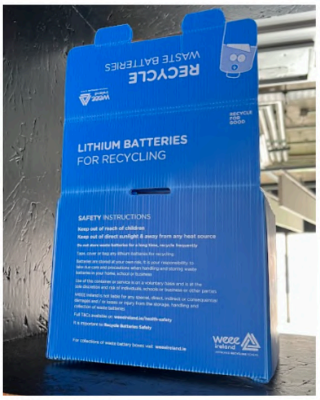


Photo 17


Photo 18


Photo 19

Photo 20

Photo 22

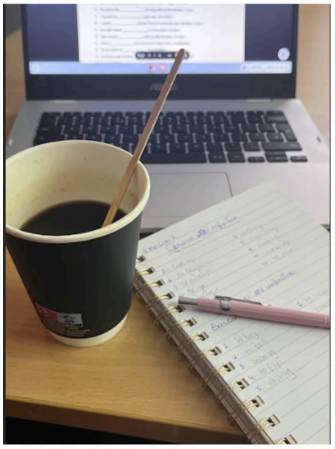

Photo 22

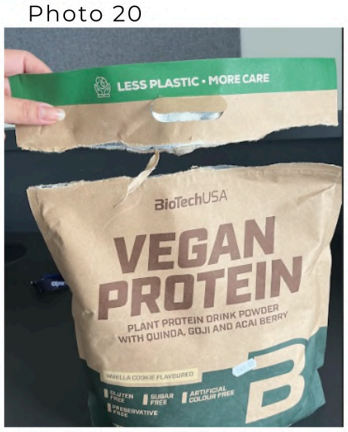


Photo 21

Photos by Ana:

Photo 24

Photo 25

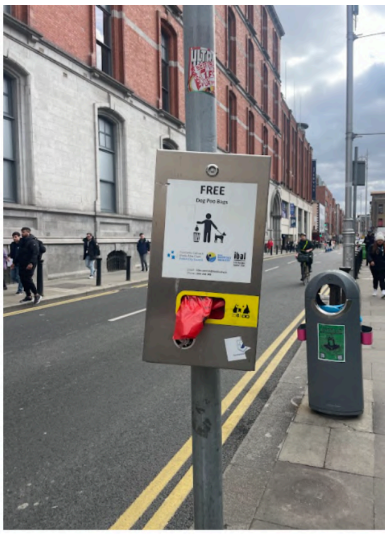


Photo 26

Photos by Leo:


Photo 27


Photo 28


Photo 29

Photo 30

Photo 31


Photo 32


Photo 33


Photo 34

Photo 35

Photo 36

Photo 37

Photos by Emil:


Photo 38

Photo 39

Photo 40

Photo 41


Photo 42

Photo 43

Photo 44

Photo 45

Photo 46

Photos by Nina:

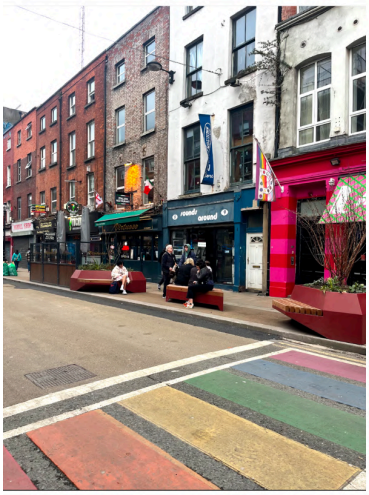

Photo 47

Photo 48

Photo 49

Photo 50

Photo 51

Photo 52


Photo 53

Photos by Maria:

Photo 54


Photo 55


Photo 56


Photo 57

Photo 58

Photo 60

Photo 61


Photo 59

Photo 62

Photo 63

Photos by Mateo:


Photo 64

Photo 65

Photos by Petra:

Photo 73

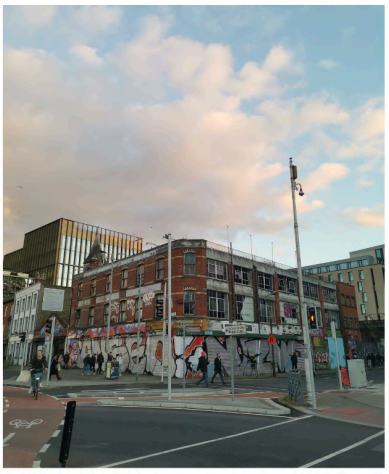

Photo 74

Photo 75

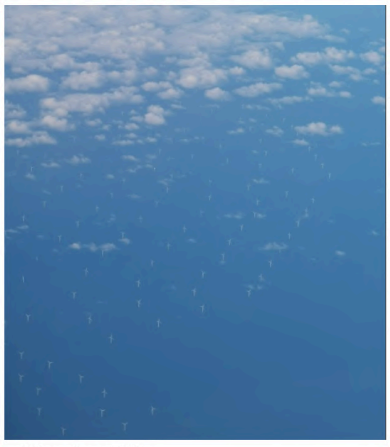

Photo 76

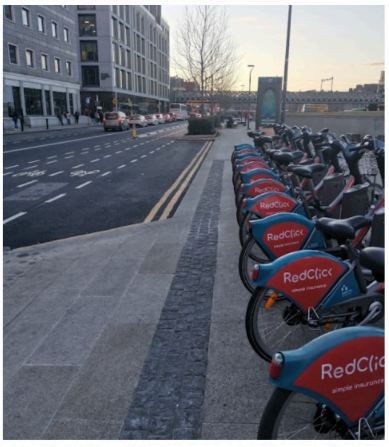

Photo 77

Photo 78


Photo 79

Photo 80

Photo 81

Photo 82

Photo 83

Photo 84

Photo 85

Photo 86

Photo 87


Photo 88

Photo 89

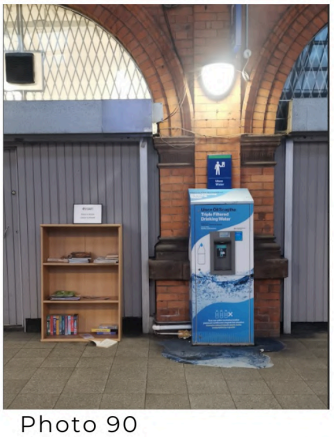

Photo 90

Photo 91

Photo 92

Photo 93

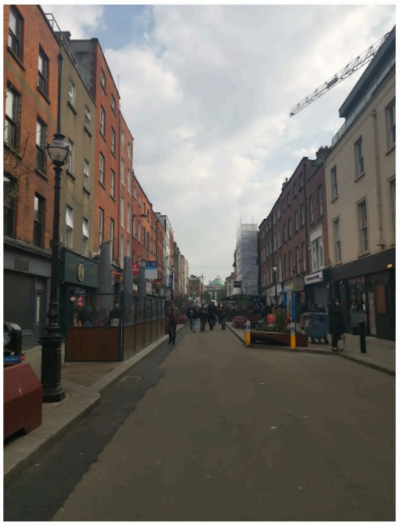

Photo 94