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Supporting Evidence-Informed Spatial Planning in Ireland: A Research Perspective

Cormac Walsh and Rob Kitchin

Abstract

The Irish Planning Institute has recently highlighted the need for ‘coordinated and comprehensive research on planning and development matters at a national level’ to support evidence-based planning in Ireland (President’s address, Autumn Conference 2010). New legislative requirements and a rapidly changing planning and development environment have served to highlight the need for a robust evidence and research base to support decision-making and monitoring at local, regional and national levels. The National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) has since its foundation played an active role in articulating and implementing an applied research agenda for spatial planning in Ireland providing tools, analysis and research support on a wide range of issues. The recently launched All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) provides a freely available spatial data portal where key statistics, indicators and mapping can be easily accessed in a user-friendly manner. The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), of which NIRSA is a founding partner, is very active, working at the interface between research, policy and practice with a particular focus on issues of North-South cross-border cooperation through spatial planning. Through participation in the ESPON programme, NIRSA is active in disseminating research findings and policy implications at a European level and translating them to an Irish context. This paper provides a research perspective on some of the key challenges and opportunities associated with the further development of an evidence-informed approach to spatial planning policy and practice in Ireland. In particular, experience in NIRSA points to the positive benefits of a dynamic interactive relationship between research, policy and practice, which is well positioned to respond to a rapidly changing economic, planning and policy environment.

Introduction

The need for planning and development decision-making in Ireland to be supported by a strong evidence and research base has never been clearer. The Irish planning system has become progressively more complex over the last twenty years with increased and more sophisticated demands and expectations placed on spatial plans at all levels of governance: central, regional and county. With more than 400

City/County Development Plans and Local Area Plans, seven sets of Regional Planning Guidelines, over 20 Ministerial Guidelines and a National Spatial Strategy, there is a strong imperative for coordination between planning authorities and across the planning system in Ireland. Spatial plans are also increasingly expected to provide strategic frameworks for economic development and recovery, supporting the ‘Smart Economy’ and the international competitiveness of strategic Gateways (Forfás and National Competitiveness Council 2009, Forfás 2010). Furthermore, European Union Directives and increased environmental awareness in Ireland have placed significant demands on the planning system to take account of a wide and broadening range of environmental concerns from river basin management and flood risk to urban biodiversity, green infrastructure and sustainable travel. Finally, the 2010 Planning and Development (Amendment) Act introduces further requirements in relation to consistency with river basin management plans, mandatory objectives regarding climate change, mitigation, and evidence-based core strategies for land-use zoning and population distribution. The development legacy of the past decade is characterised by an oversupply of private sector residential and commercial development and critical shortfalls in public sector housing, infrastructure and services provision. This has placed into sharp relief, the need for greatly improved spatial and functional coordination between planning authorities, semi-state agencies and government departments as well as greater consistency across the spatial planning hierarchy (see Walsh 2010a). Recent experience has also raised questions of probity and process integrity in the planning system (Gleeson 2010).

The current context of economic recession, budgetary crisis and oversupply of residential and commercial development has meanwhile led to renewed calls for a re-evaluation of the role of the planning system in regulating development in Ireland. Critical questions are asked in relation to the capacity of the planning system to guide the spatial distribution of development, support sustainable and socially equitable regional development and regulate markets (see Convery et al. 2006, Bartley 2007, Kitchin et al. 2010, Williams et al. 2010). Kitchin et al. (2010), in particular, attribute the current over-supply in housing and commercial development to the failure of the planning system to act as a counterbalance to the pressures of development and the lack of a sufficiently evidence-based approach to decision-making in planning. Murphy et al. (2011) argue that recent legislative changes to the planning system in Ireland serve to facilitate elite interest groups in society at the expense of the ‘common good’. Lloyd (2011, p19) contends that ‘much remains to be done’ in order to realise the potential of spatial planning as a ‘transformative process’ in Ireland. In his closing address to the 2011 Irish Planning Institute Annual Conference, outgoing Chairperson of An Bord Pleanála, John O’

Connor (2011), noted that ‘many sections of Irish society are now in the process of evaluating how things were done in the past and how matters can be improved for the future’. He argued that the planning profession must participate fully in this process of ‘national re-appraisal’.

It must be recognised, however, that the legislative and policy framework for planning in Ireland has not remained static in this context of heightened complexity and increased demands and expectations. Rather, the reforms of the planning system incorporated within the 2000, 2006 and 2010 Planning and Development Acts, mean that the current system in many respects is fundamentally different from that in place in the 1990s. The 2010 Amendment Act, in particular, entails a substantial realignment of the relationship between central and local government, with a specific requirement for consistency between local plans and regional and national strategies. The introduction of core strategies specifically seeks to respond to the need for an evidence-based approach to planning and to land-use zoning in particular, ensuring zoning objectives correspond to the settlement strategies and population targets identified in local, regional and national plans. O’ Connor (2011) argues that ‘a more sustainable, coherent, evidence-based and objective approach to zoning will avoid a repeat of the disorderly sprawl of inefficient and wasteful development and restore credibility to the planning system as a whole’. The shift to more strategic approaches to spatial planning, since the 1990s, has been supported and informed by the parallel development and application of expertise in spatial analysis, spatial strategy making and regional development.

In view of a heightened climate of anticipation around re-evaluation and system strengthening in Irish planning, this article provides, firstly, an overview of the research contribution to evidence-based spatial policy in Ireland to date. It subsequently discusses some of the current challenges relating to spatial planning in Ireland, from a research perspective.

The Concept of Evidence-Informed Planning and Policy-Making

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on evidence-based approaches to public policy. The role of scientific evidence is possibly most obvious in the case of international climate change policy, where scientific consensus is central to gaining political support, but has implications for all areas of policy, including spatial planning. Morphet (2011, 77) in a recent book entitled ‘Effective Practice in Spatial Planning’ and based on experience in the UK, identifies three principal questions which evidence-based policy has sought to provide answers to:

- What needs to be done?
- What has worked before – here and elsewhere?
- Did a particular approach work to solve the problem or improve outcomes?

Evidence may thus be used to identify particular areas or issues where attention is required, to justify a particular policy intervention, to identify what the likely outcome of a particular policy may be or to evaluate the extent to which a particular policy achieved its aims. The role of evidence and expertise in policy-making may be contested, however. In a planning context, it may well be asked whether the opinion of professional experts should be given a greater ‘weight’ than the views and concerns of local residents. Flyvbjerg (1998) in his highly cited study of planning in the Danish city of Aalborg raises further questions about the ways in which evidence is used in political-decision-making. He asks whether evidence is used to justify decisions that have already been made or actually to inform the process of decision-making. This may be seen as a critically important question in relation to any discussion of evidence-based approaches to planning in Ireland. In practice, evidence-based policy can lead to reduced transparency, obscuring rather than illuminating the reasons behind particular decisions.

Davoudi (2006) is also critical of simplistic or ‘instrumental’ views of the policy-research interface. She argues that an instrumental view assumes that either research drives policy or research is shaped by policy concerns (see Figure 1 below). Policy driven by research and ‘hard evidence’ can, of course, be problematic as little room may be left for democratic input and political leadership. On the other hand, a scenario where research agendas are shaped by policy requirements can lead to a very selective approach, where the ‘bigger picture’ or concern for more fundamental issues may be lost (Davoudi, 2006, 15). She suggests an alternative approach based on an ‘enlightenment model’ of *evidence-informed* rather than evidence-based policy. Under this approach, the relationship between research and policy may be less direct. Research projects may serve to inform wider public debate, rather than providing answers to specific policy problems. It may be argued that research focused on understanding particular phenomena in society is more valuable in the long-term than approaches which focus on providing as much information as possible about a problem. Kahn and St. Clair (2011) similarly take a more holistic view of the research-policy interface. Drawing lessons from policy initiatives in the Boston Metropolitan area for the Irish context, they identify the need to address the challenge of being ‘data rich but insight poor’.

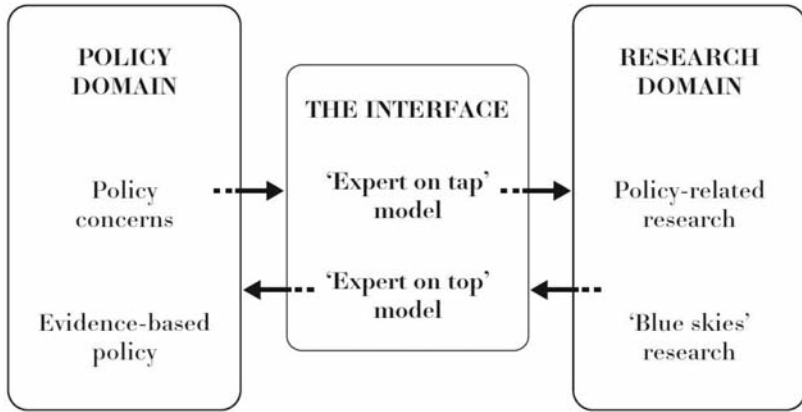


Figure 1: Simplistic instrumental perspectives on the research/policy interface (Davoudi, 2006, 15).

How has research supported the development of evidence-informed approaches to spatial planning in Ireland since the 1990s? This article focuses on the work of the National Institute of Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) and related organizations, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) and the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO).

The authors acknowledge, however, that other third level institutes are also active in supporting evidence-informed planning in Ireland. Urban Institute Ireland, the School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy (both University College Dublin) and the School of Spatial Planning (Dublin Institute of Technology) have significant research profiles in this area, while the Planning and Sustainable Development Programme at University College Cork is emerging as a focus for practice-orientated applied research. Indeed the *Professional Planning Interface Seminar Series* at University College Dublin (starting May 2011) has been organized (in conjunction with the IPI and Royal Town Planning Institute) with the specific aim of disseminating UCD research to the professional planning community. The President of the Irish Planning Institute (IPI) has recently argued that a coordinated multi-institutional and multi-sectoral approach is required in order to gain maximum value from existing efforts (Daly 2011) and enhanced coordination between research institutes, the planning community and other stakeholders can only be welcomed. The capacity of research institutes to support evidence-informed policy and planning and to actively engage with practitioners in applied research projects is critically dependent on the availability of dedicated funding to support

such initiatives. In the current context of massive reductions in strategic core funding and significant uncertainty around academic resourcing more generally, there is a strong imperative to maintain existing competences and develop strategic inter-institutional and cross-sectoral linkages (see Department of Education and Skills 2011).

The Contribution of NIRSA: Research Informing Policy and Practice

Since its foundation in 2001 as a university research institute at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) has sought to engage with policy and practice in the field of spatial development and planning in Ireland. The Institute was initially funded under Cycle 2 of the Irish Government's 'Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions' (PRTL12) as part of the National Development Plan, 2000-2006. Although centred in NUI Maynooth, it is a collaborative project involving researchers from a number of social science disciplines, located in four partner institutions (NUI Maynooth, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Institute of Technology, Sligo and Queen's University Belfast. NIRSA's remit is to undertake fundamental, applied and comparative research on spatial processes and their effects on social and economic development in Ireland⁷.

In an early example of engagement with the spatial planning policy community, researchers in the Department of Geography at NUI Maynooth formed a key role in the background research programme to the preparation of the National Spatial Strategy (NUI Maynooth and Brady Shipman Martin 2000, Brady Shipman Martin, NUI Maynooth and Fitzpatrick Associates 2000). This extensive programme of research focusing in particular on urban and rural development issues from a spatial perspective was put in place to ensure the NSS was evidence-based. This process of engagement across the research/policy interface was, however, also critical in ensuring that the key concepts of the NSS were informed by the most recent academic thinking on European spatial planning and regional development (Walsh 2009). Following the establishment of City/County Development Boards (CDBs) as a new framework for cross-sectoral community development planning, NIRSA provided a strong evidence-base for the new CDB 'Strategies for Economic, Social and Cultural Development', through the preparation of socio-economic and demographic profiles in 2003. These profiles used consistent datasets and enabled local patterns to be compared with those in contiguous counties and benchmarked against national trends. Subsequent updates were later used to inform the preparation of County Development Plans in Kildare and Meath (Walsh et al 2005,

⁷ This article focuses primarily on the applied research work of the Institute.

Roche et al 2006). This approach to engagement focused on both empirical spatial analysis and concept development and application, has informed the applied research work of NIRSA since its inception ten years ago.

Facilitating and Informing Cross-Border Cooperation through Spatial Planning

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the establishment of the North-South Ministerial Council and associated implementation bodies in 1999, made it possible to think in terms of cross-border relationships and all-island perspectives for the first time in thirty years. It became increasingly evident that strategic and evidence-informed approaches to spatial planning could play a significant role in fostering and understanding these new relationships. The active support and keen interest of Prof. Francois Vigier and John Driscoll from the Centre for Urban Development Studies at Harvard University, subsequently led to the development of a North-South-US partnership⁸, known as the International Centre for Local and Regional Development specifically focused on applied spatial planning research and evidence-informed policy (see O' Connor T., 2011).

The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) has been instrumental in providing independent and international expertise as well as facilitating North-South collaboration in spatial planning. The ICLRDR has worked closely with practitioners and community groups at a local level as well as with the key government departments, North and South. Its activities have directly supported and informed the development of key policy initiatives including the *Framework for Collaboration for Spatial Planning on the Island of Ireland* (DRD and DoECLG, 2011, ICLRDR 2006) and the Memorandum of Understanding between Newry and Mourne District Council and Louth Local Authorities signed in Brussels in March of this year. Recent research projects of the Centre have explored and made recommendations across a range of planning related themes including river basin management, shared services and the development of a spatial monitoring framework for the island of Ireland. In each case the focus is on applying expert knowledge and research insights to inform particular problems and challenges identified by practitioners and policymakers (Creamer et al. 2011, Peel et al. 2011, Walsh et al. 2011).

A key feature of ICLRDR's working model is combining the development of long-term relationships with policy-makers and practitioners working in the North-South cross-border and all-island context. This long-term engagement and capacity to act as an expert and independent voice or 'critical friend' is complemented by a

⁸ The core academic partners of ICLRDR are NIRSA (NUI Maynooth), University of Ulster, the Institute for International Urban Development, Cambridge, MA and the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh.

commitment to high-quality applied research with clear conclusions, outputs and recommendations. Research projects are directly informed by international experience and good practice, with recent studies drawing directly on case studies in Basle, Boston, Germany and Spain. ICLRD training programmes, conferences, seminars and workshops furthermore provide opportunities for local authority professionals and elected representatives to engage in evidence-informed discussion, debate and active learning⁹.

Developing and Applying a Spatial Data Evidence Base

In 2007, NIRSA published a large-scale census atlas, based on the small area population data from the 2002 and previous Censuses of Population (Walsh 2007). For the first time, the underlying geography behind a wide range of demographic and socio-economic statistical indicators was graphically illustrated at the scale of 3,400 Electoral Divisions. The atlas (launched by the late Dr. Garrett Fitzgerald) provided a first confirmation of the extent of the demographic and socio-economic changes of the Celtic Tiger era and more importantly identified the new and distinct spatial patterns associated with development patterns since the 1990s (see also Walsh & Walsh 2008). In spatial planning terms the atlas is particularly significant in providing a benchmark for the National Spatial Strategy. This atlas was followed in 2008 by the *Atlas of the Island of Ireland*, which provided a fully comparable set of maps of Ireland North and South drawing primarily on 2002 Census data for the Republic of Ireland and 2001 Census data for Northern Ireland (Gleeson et al. 2008). This atlas was produced as the first major output from the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) in conjunction with ICLRD.

The All-Island Research Observatory started off as a pilot project (under the title Cross-Border Regional Research Observatory), based at the Cross-Border Centre for Community Development in Dundalk Institute of Technology in 2006. The initial aim of the project was to provide precise and reliable regional intelligence that would enable a better understanding of the dynamics of the cross-border region and aid the formulation of strategic policy development and cross-border cooperation (Kitchin et al. 2007, 30). Five years later, the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO), now based at NIRSA in Maynooth, acts as research unit and data portal, focused on providing high quality spatial data for practitioners and policy-makers across the island. AIRO's web-based data portal was formally launched on November 25th 2010 (AIRO online). It provides an invaluable resource for planning practitioners, particularly in relation to the preparation of core strategies for City/County Development Plans. Thematic modules currently available on the AIRO system focus on a range of issues including housing vacancy

⁹ See the ICLRD website - www.iclrd.org for further information.

and supply, social inclusion and unemployment. At the regional scale, AIRO is also actively involved in the process of developing a common set of indicators for monitoring the Regional Planning Guidelines¹⁰.

Providing a European Perspective

Since 2002, NIRSA has played an active role in the ESPON research programme. ESPON was set up in 2002 as the *European Spatial Planning Observation Network* and funded by the INTERREG 2000 – 2006 Programme. It aimed to provide detailed spatial information for the EU and to set up a network of spatial research institutes across Europe. The establishment of ESPON was also strongly influenced by the *European Spatial Development Perspective*, the key European Union spatial policy document published in 1999 (CEC 1999). It was recognised that a comparable Europe-wide evidence base using consistent definitions was needed to support the future development, monitoring and application of European policy on spatial development issues. Since 2007, ESPON has been renamed the *European Observation Network for Territorial Cohesion and Development*. The results of the ESPON programme are intended to provide a direct support for integrated spatial planning and territorial development policy at European, national and regional levels (see Dühr et al. 2010, ESPON 2010). Most recently, the ESPON programme provided a strong evidence-base for the *Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020*, agreed at a ministerial meeting under the Hungarian Presidency of the EU in May 2011 (see ESPON Ireland 2011).

In its role as the official Contact Point for the ESPON programme, NIRSA works with the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, as well as regional and local authorities to ensure that the added value and practical relevance of ESPON to spatial planning is realised in Ireland (see Bartley 2009)¹¹. ESPON provides the European context for spatial planning in Ireland; it is a valuable reference point for new and innovative methodologies and frameworks for analysis and can provide a valuable source of funding for spatial planning research in Ireland. The Dublin Regional Authority is currently (2010-2012) directly involved in the ESPON programme as a stakeholder in a project focussed on ‘Territorial Performance Monitoring’ (ESPON online). This project has specific application to the monitoring and implementation of the Regional Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area and will be a key source for developing indicators for monitoring the implementation of the NSS and Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland. NIRSA has also participated directly in ESPON research projects, focussing on variety of themes including agriculture

¹⁰ See the AIRO website at www.airo.ie for further information on AIRO.

¹¹ See the ESPON Ireland website at www.espon-ireland.ie for further information on ESPON in Ireland. This website is administered and managed by NIRSA in its function as ESPON Contact Point for Ireland.

and territorial impacts of the Common Agricultural Policy, urban-rural relationships and metropolitan governance¹².

Conclusions: Responding to Current Challenges

Spatial planning policy and practice faces particular challenges in the current context of fiscal austerity and economic recession. In response recent policy statements and reports highlight the need to prioritise investment at key locations and to the Gateway cities in particular, in order to drive regional and national competitiveness (Forfás and National Competitiveness Council 2009, DoEHLG 2010). It is further argued that spatial planning through the NSS, RPGs and City/County Developments is the critical to providing an evidence-informed and spatially balanced approach to decision-making on capital infrastructure investment (DoEHLG 2010, 33). It is evident, however, that the capacity of spatial planning strategies to inform decision-making in this context is critically dependent on ability of the planning system to shape development outcomes and regulate the property market (see Walsh 2010b, 2011). To be effective, spatial planning strategies must have the capacity to:

- a) Steer the geographical distribution of development;
- b) Provide a reliable indication of the intensity, quantity and type of development anticipated over the period of the plan.

The introduction of core strategies for City/County Development Plans and the requirement for consistency across the spatial planning hierarchy should serve to increase the capacity of the spatial plans in this regard. It is evident, however, that a key part of the challenge rests at the interface between planning practice and political decision-making. Open forum discussion at recent events¹³ hosted by NIRSA and ICLRD has highlighted the significant challenges involved in changing mindsets and gaining acceptance for more sustainable, evidence-informed approaches to land-use zoning (ICLRD, January 2011, NIRSA, ICLRD & Border Regional Authority, March 2011). Reflecting on experience in Aberdeen, invited speaker David Jennings (2011) demonstrated that it is possible to achieve political agreement on spatial plans that make hard decisions, even where this means that one urban centre is designated for development at the expense of another.

¹²Teagasc (agricultural research agency), the Coastal and Marine Research Centre (University College Cork) and the National Centre for Geocomputation (NUI Maynooth) have also actively participated in ESPON research as project partners.

¹³NIRSA, ICLRD & Border Regional Authority: *Developing Core Strategies: Adopting a Bottom-up Approach*, Athlone, 9th March 2011, <http://www.airo.ie/news/developing-core-strategies-adopting-bottom-approach-all-presentations-and-discussion-now-availa;>
ICLD Sixth Annual Conference: Doing More with Less, Challenge and/or Opportunity? Sligo, 20-21st January 2011, <http://iclr.org/web/category/conferences/>.

The current context of oversupply of both housing and commercial development coupled with economic recession further dictates that significant areas of the state are unlikely to see significant development over the next five years or more. A reappraisal of the role of spatial planning and policy must thus consider the prospect of planning for decline as well as planning for growth. Ireland may have much to learn from experience in Eastern Europe over the past decade where planning for ‘shrinking cities’, where current trends of demographic and socioeconomic decline are expected to continue in the medium-term (see Müller and Siedentop 2004, Pallagst 2010, Charles 2011).

The key challenge for evidence-informed planning in Ireland is to ensure that future plan preparation and decision-making is informed by a continuous monitoring of spatial development trends and assessments of need and future development prospects. Within this context, the spatial planning research community can provide external and independent expertise, acting as a ‘critical friend’; facilitate access to spatial datasets and analytical tools and assist in concept and strategy development. Spatial planning researchers, will, however, also to continue to push the boundaries, asking difficult questions and querying established assumptions.

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