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# Creating City-region Governance Structures in a Dysfunctional Polity: The Case of Ireland's National Spatial Strategy

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## Abstract

Devolution of powers and functions from national to regional level has been a common experience internationally in recent times. A range of possible driving forces underpinning this trend are reviewed. The city-region has become a favoured spatial unit for organising direct regional participation in global markets. New governance structures are being forged for mobilising joint cross-communuty action in pursuit of broad regional objectives. A range of influences can shape the configuration of these structures, giving rise to a varied geography of regional governance arrangements. This paper focuses on the dysfunctional governance structures which have inhibited the implementation of the National Spatial Strategy, introduced by the Irish government in 2002 with the objective of achieving balanced regional development through the creation of a polycentric system of city-regions. These structures are described and their origins attributed to features of the Irish system of government which favour administrative centralisation over devolution.

## Introduction: The New Regionalism

The past 30 years have seen a widespread process of restructuring of the spatiality of governance structures across the globe, involving a general reordering of the relations between different spatial scales within these structures (Brenner, 2004; Jessop, 2002). Key features of this restructuring process have been the transfer to sub-national regions of greater responsibility for their own affairs (Loughlin, 2001) and, deriving from this, an increasing tendency for socioeconomic planning to be framed in regional terms.

The emergence of this so-called 'new regionalism' (Keating, 1998) is attributable

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to a complex range of factors (Pike *et al.*, 2006). Some have seen it as representing, at least in part, a response to growing popular demands for politic devolution (Gualini, 2004; Parkinson *et al.*, 1994). Others view the strengthening of sub-national regional structures as an outgrowth of the dilution, in recent decades, of the status and role of national governments which had earlier been greatly enhanced by the post-war burgeoning of the interventionist welfare state (Brenner, 1998; Jessop, 1994; Ohmae, 1995). This reduced competence of national governments, in turn, has been variously attributed to the increasing influence of neoliberal thinking in government policies (as reflected in processes of privatisation, deregulation, reduced taxation and accompanying cutbacks in central state spending), the impact of globalisation processes and the expanding role of supranational institutions (Brenner, 1998, 2004). One consequence of the reduced fiscal and regulatory capacity of central governments has been the widespread transfer to sub-national levels of functions and responsibilities previously performed at national level (Brenner, 2004).

While this viewpoint may tend to portray the relative strengthening of regional institutions as an incidental offshoot of developments at national level, an alternative argument is that, at least in some cases, the 'new regionalism' represents a deliberate strategy on the part of central governments to recast the spatiality of their respective states in order to strengthen their ability to compete in an increasingly globalised world (Brenner, 1998; Ward and Jonas, 2004). Thus, traditional, centralised, top–down, regional development policies are now widely regarded as having been unsustainable, of limited effectiveness and lacking the flexibility required in the marketplace of the post-Fordist informational economy (Parkinson *et al.*, 1994). By contrast, bottom–up endogenous approaches

are seen as being preferable for a number of reasons, including their capacity for putting in place more co-ordinated and comprehensive development programmes tailored to local needs and resources, for developing local linkages with suppliers and service providers, and for facilitating innovation via information sharing (Pike *et al.*, 2006).

In a globalising world, ability to compete in export markets is increasingly supplanting the more traditional focus on national markets. Porter (1990) has argued that, historically, successful export sectors have been built upon localised clusters of interlinked firms and other actors. The new regionalism, therefore, seeks to expand the range and depth of internationally competitive but regionally based economic activities. Accordingly

> the region has reemerged to challenge the taken-for-granted position of the nation-state as the preeminent site and scale for territorial economic organisation in contemporary capitalism (Ward and Jonas, 2004, p. 2119).

Brenner (2004) uses the term 'glocalisation' to refer to the increasing emphasis on the local region as the locus for competing in global markets. As a result, according to Gualini (2004), regions which were previously defined in terms of their place within nested national hierarchies are now becoming increasingly integrated into international networks.

A key feature of the new regionalism is its focus on the city-region (comprising a focal city and its adjacent functional hinterland) as its basic organisational construct. As Brenner puts it

> As urban economic restructuring intensified in conjunction with processes of global and European integration, western European central governments began more explicitly to target major cities and city-regions as the locational keys to national economic competitiveness (Brenner, 2004, p. 470).

City-regions comprise territories wherein multiple (and frequently interlinked) spatial systems are simultaneously articulated, embracing such activities as commuting, supply of consumer and public services, transport, communication, contact networks and production chain linkages; they therefore constitute the most appropriate spatial units for integrated socioeconomic and environmental planning (Committee on Spatial Development, 1999; Robson *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, Brenner has suggested that city-regions are now replacing national states as the "fundamental geographical units" in the spatial organisation of the global economy (Brenner, 1998, p. 5).

This paper focuses on the National Spatial Strategy, a plan introduced by the Irish government in 2002 to achieve balanced regional development throughout the country through the promotion of a 'polycentric' system of city-regions. The main objective of the paper is to show how the failure to put in place appropriate governance structures has, in effect, crippled the strategy's implementation. The next section of the paper reviews a range of influences which shape the configurations which governance structures can take in different city-regions. The main elements of the National Spatial Strategy are then outlined, prior to an examination of the problems arising from inadequate governance arrangements which have acted to profoundly obstruct achievement of the strategy's objectives. These problems are traced to peculiar features of Ireland's system of government which have blocked the introduction of much-needed reforms, particularly in the structure of sub-national government. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of the prospect of such reforms emanating from the economic crisis in which Ireland is currently enveloped.

# Governance Structures for City-region Development

Accompanying the growing focus on city-regions as actual or potential drivers of growth has been a corresponding movement towards the creation of new governance structures, whereby the design, implementation and monitoring of development strategies and programmes embrace a range of stakeholders, including elected representatives, local government functionaries, state agencies and the private and voluntary (not-for-profit) sectors, operating in various parnerships and networks which offer their members the prospect of mutual benefit via joint action (Pike *et al.*, 2006). Such 'development coalitions', it is argued, have the capacity to transcend sectional and geographical interests, mobilise cross-community support for development objectives and facilitate co-ordinated action in pursuit of these objectives (Keating, 1998).

At the same time, given the diversity of sectoral and geographical interests involved, and operating at different spatial scales, constructing effective regional governance structures is a challenging undertaking (Ward and Jonas, 2004). A key factor in this respect is what Meijers and Romein (2003) call 'regional organising capacity', one of whose determinants is the degree to which regional actors perceive themselves as sharing a common interest or identity. This will be influenced, in the economic sphere, by the extent to which the regional economy is articulated at the regional level and the consequent level of interdependency among regional economic actors. In the political/institutional sphere, the formation of region-wide partnerships and networks can be inhibited by intraregional fragmentation of civil jurisdictions and corresponding organisational systems in the private and voluntary sectors. On the other hand, a

strong and widely shared sense of regional identity arising from cultural/historical and/or geographical circumstances, can be crucial in building alliances around regional-level concerns (Jones, 2001; Meijers and Romein, 2003).

The ability to construct effective governance systems will also vary with regional endowments of social capital, and particularly the availability of a leadership cadre capable of articulating and mobilising popular support around region-wide interests (Keating, 2001). This function requires a particularly demanding skillset, involving a combination of charisma and sensitivity, vision and patience, energy and tact, and an ability to move potential partnership participants towards consensus without exerting duress.

A third key factor in the forging of competent urban/regional governance systems is the extent of local domain over those activity realms relevant to the governance systems in question and/or the ability to exert leverage in relation to these activities where the formal locus of control is externally based. Thus, a high level of regional identity, coherence and organisational capacity may not result in competent governance where control of crucial regional functions is exercised externally in ways not sympathetic with regional needs.

While the trend towards greater regional competences and associated governance structures is a widespread phenomenon, the actual institutional configurations which result from this trend are highly variable, giving rise to a complex geography of regional outcomes. Loughlin (2001) has highlighted two key considerations which contribute to shaping this geography. The first of these relates to the political agendas underpinning the devolution process which, as already outlined, are themselves quite variable. Thus, for example, regions which have actively sought devolution from below will produce very different configurations from regions which have had devolution thrust upon them by diktat from above. Even where the devolution process is driven by central government, the actual form which it takes at local level will vary depending on the desire and ability of pre-existing regional institutions or agencies to 'filter' directives from above and mould them to fit local circumstances (MacKinnon, 2001).

Loughlin (2001) also points to the fact that institutional configurations at regional level were already highly variable prior to the onset of the new regionalism. Thus, the extent to which government functions are devolved to regional and local levels is highly variable across Europe, with some countries having a tradition of strong regional government and others having none at all. In addition, even where regional government is already in place, the extent to which it is politicised is also very variable. Apart from existing political configurations, the capacity of regions to make the most of the opportunities presented by the devolution process depends on the range of social, cultural, economic, environmental and knowledge assets which they possess; these, in combination, constitute the variable 'territorial capital' upon which regions draw in shaping their future development (ESPON, 2006).

In sum, the processes of political and institutional change associated with the 'new regionalism' are being superimposed on local configurations which themselves have been shaped by earlier change processes. The resulting organisation of state space therefore

> represents a multilayered territorial mosaic in which political geographies established at different moments of historical time are tightly interwoven (Brenner, 2004, p. 455).

Among the possible outcomes from this complex process of interaction is that it

may leave some regions largely unchanged. Ward and Jonas argue that

> the trend—geographically uneven as it is—towards competitive city-regionalism is best understood as representing an on-going, dynamic, and conflict-ridden politics of and in space … rather than a smooth switch to a new postnational era of capitalist territoriality (Ward and Jonas, 2004, p. 2134).

Accordingly, the emergence of the city-region form cannot be taken for granted as being inevitable: "rather it is the contingently structured medium and outcome of struggle and strategies of territorial management" (Ward and Jonas, 2004, p. 2130). A key arena of struggle in this respect is that between what Brenner (2004, p. 455) terms "modernising forces" seeking to impose "new geographies of state territorial organisation" on the pre-existing spatial order and those whom Lipietz (1994) terms the "conservative defenders of the old spaces". This can lead to the kind of situation envisaged by Meijers and Romein (2003, p. 180)—and which, as we shall see, perfectly describes the situation in Ireland—where formal acknowledgement of the potentialities of devolved regional planning and application of the city-region concept "do not consequently result in the development of regional institutional frameworks for co-operation and co-ordination". Explaining this requires "analysis of the current political, institutional, cultural and spatial contexts of polycentric urban regions and the way these interfere with the building of regional organizing capacity". This provides the cue for us to turn our attention to the fate of one attempt to apply the precepts of the 'new regionalism' in Ireland.

## Ireland's National Spatial Strategy

In November 1999, the Irish government announced that a National Spatial Strategy (NSS) was to be prepared which would provide a planning framework for coping with the effects of the very rapid growth experienced by the Irish economy in the second half of the 1990s. Particular concern was being voiced at the disproportionate concentration of productive investment in the Greater Dublin Area which, apart from generating acute land use and transport problems in the national capital, was creating a growing problem of unbalanced regional development (Davoudi and Wishardt, 2005; NESC, 1999).

The basic approach followed in preparing the NSS was that of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), a framework for spatial planning which had been adopted by the EU member-states in 1999 (Committee on Spatial Development, 1999). The aim of the ESDP is the strengthening of economic and social cohesion (i.e. promotion of solidarity through reduction of disparities) within the EU through achieving spatially balanced and sustainable development. Strongly influenced by the 'new regionalism' school of thought, the ESDP seeks to restructure the EU space economy by replacing the inherited hierarchical urban structure built around focal metropolitan core regions and attendant peripheries with a more balanced 'polycentric' urban system. This involves cities in the EU's less developed, more peripheral regions pursuing a self-reliant development path founded on direct participation in EU-wide and global markets, in place of what had been their primary role as subordinate regional centres within national urban systems.

The ESDP visualises these regional cities, not as stand-alone entities, but as organising centres for the mobilisation of their surrounding regions. Through strengthening the links between cities and their hinterlands, the ESDP aims to create a set of coherent city-regions, acting as 'functional spatial entities', each pursuing a shared and

integrated development strategy. This both broadens and deepens the regional economic structure, thereby enhancing its capacity for competing in international markets. The focal urban centre in each city-region should act as a 'gateway' through which the region's interactions (i.e. flows of goods, people, money, information, etc.) with the outside world are primarily channelled.

An important aspiration of the ESDP is that, rather than replicating each other, regions would pursue the creation of specialised economic structures based on local strengths and resources. Regional development within the EU, therefore, would involve expansion of overall production levels within the Community (based either on internal interregional trade or trade with non-EU markets) rather than just transfers of production between regions.

## The National Spatial Strategy: Main Elements

In accordance with the precepts of the ESDP, the key proposal of the NSS was the creation in Ireland of a polycentric national urban structure through the identification of a set of regional gateway cities which would 'drive' economic development in their respective regions and act as conduits for direct links between the regions in question and the global economy. This, it was planned, should permit the mobilisation of each region's full 'development potential' over the 20-year plan period, thereby facilitating maximum overall development at national level while simultaneously reducing, if not completely eliminating, the difference in population growth rates between the Greater Dublin region and the other regions.

The NSS sought to achieve these objectives by attempting to replicate in the gateway cities the conditions which had underpinned strong growth in the Dublin region. This involved the creation in these cities of a 'critical mass' of economic resources (a range of skills, innovation capacity, infrastructure and business services and facilities) which would support self-sustaining growth. The envisaged minimum population required in order to qualify as a gateway (and therefore, presumably, to achieve critical mass) was identified as 100,000 (NSS, 2002, p. 40). The derivation of this figure was not explained.

The NSS identified nine urban centres (or groups of centres) for designation as gateways. Five of these (Ireland's five largest cities) were presented as 'existing' gateways, with the other four being termed 'new' gateways (Figure 1). One of the latter comprises a group of three neighbouring towns located in the midlands while the strategy document envisaged Letterkenny in the north-west being developed as a gateway in conjunction with nearby Derry in Northern Ireland. None of the four 'new' gateways came anywhere near the minimum population size of 100,000 deemed necessary in the NSS document in order to qualify as a gateway (Table 1), while two of the so-called existing gateways also fell well short of the threshold population.

## The National Spatial Strategy: Governance Issues

From the outset, the NSS was beset by a number of weaknesses and obstacles which fatally undermined its prospects of ever being successfully implemented. These include the failure to identify and put in place the governance structures necessary for successful implementation which is the focus of the remainder of this paper. In essence, the proposed gateways and their surrounding regions lacked virtually all of the ingredients for the forging of effective urban-regional developmental governance identified earlier
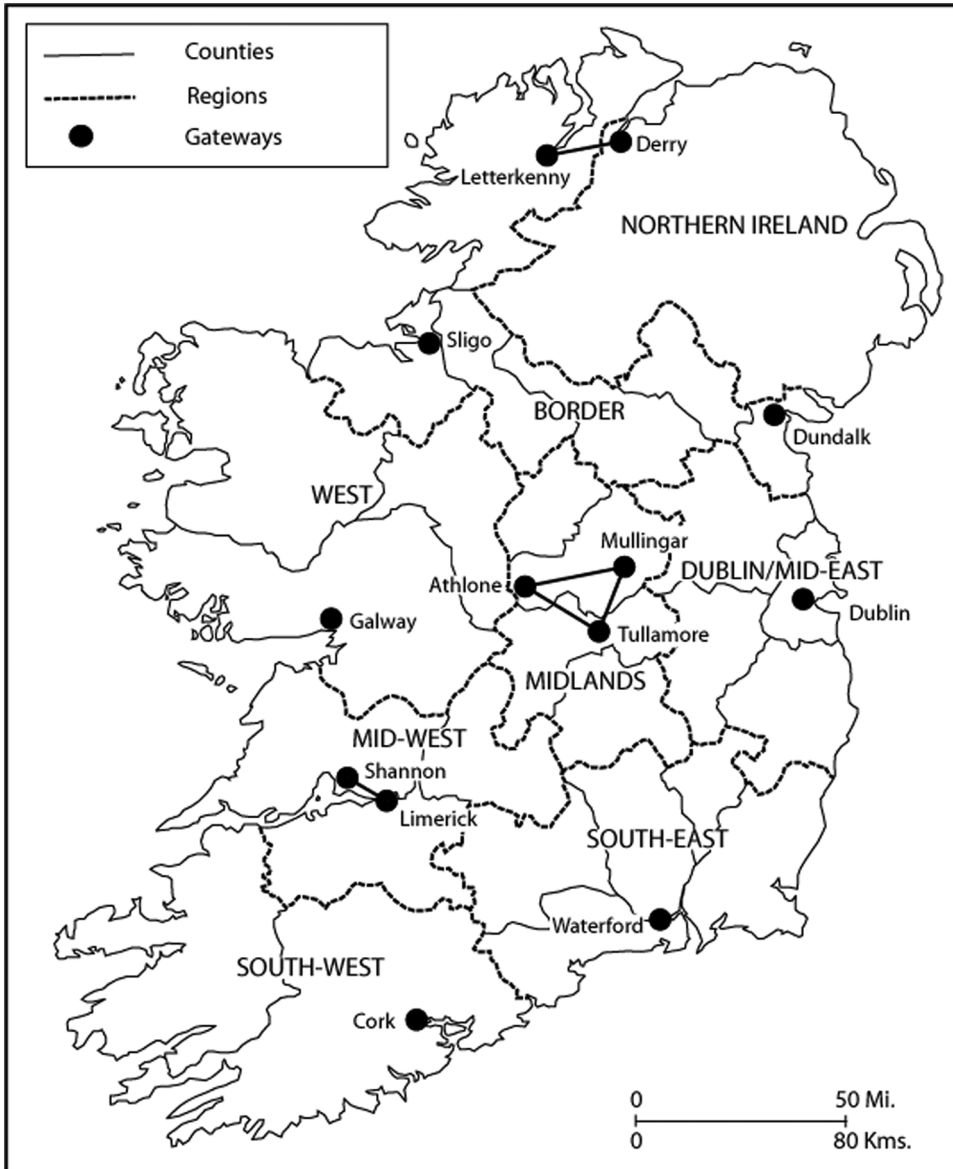
**Figure 1.**   National Spatial Strategy: regions and gateways.

in the paper, a critical deficiency which was not addressed in any meaningful way in the implementation arrangements proposed in the NSS document.

The ESDP devotes considerable attention to the need for appropriate governance structures to facilitate an integrated approach to the development of gateway cities and their hinterland regions through cultivating active collaboration between the various stakeholders with an interest, and role to play, in the future development of the regions in question. The NSS was quite aware of the importance of local

**Table 1.**   Gateway populations, 2002

|  | 2002 population | Percentage of region | Region |
|---|---|---|---|
| 'Existing' gateways | | | |
| Cork | 199,411 | 34.4 | South-west |
| Limerick/Shannon | 109,061 | 32.1 | Mid-west |
| Galway | 65,832 | 17.3 | West |
| Waterford | 46,739 | 11.5 | South-east |
| 'New' Gateways | | | |
| Athlone/Mullingar/ Tullamore | 45,287 | 20.1 | Midlands |
| Dundalk | 34,081 | 16.2[a] | Border (Cavan/Monaghan/ Louth sub-region) |
| Sligo | 25,958 | 30.9[a] | Border (Sligo/Leitrim sub-region) |
| Letterkenny | 18,598 | 13.5[a] | Border (Donegal sub-region) |
| Ireland | 3,917,203 | | |

[a]As a percentage of respective sub-region.
*Notes*: Dublin excluded; census postponed from 2001 due to outbreak of foot and mouth disease. Population figures relate to contiguous built-up areas, plus immediately adjoining enumeration areas in order to facilitate comparison with 2011.

development coalitions in driving development in the gateway city-regions. It identified as a key step in the strategy implementation process the "mobilisation of the appropriate civic, business and community interests to establish a consensus" on development objectives in the different gateways and issued "a call for action by all relevant stakeholders to work in partnership and with enthusiasm to achieve an enhanced role for gateways … and their broader regions" (NSS, 2002, p. 123). The task of establishing these partnerships was assigned to the local authorities as part of an overall brief for implementing the NSS on the ground. This in effect meant the county and city councils which are the only meaningful tier of local government in Ireland.

From the beginning, the allocation to the county councils of responsibility for delivering the NSS created major implementation problems. The NSS is essentially a *regional* strategy and six of the gateway cities identified in the NSS were expected to act as the main drivers of economic development in the regions in which each is located (Figure 1). The Border region was an exception: due to its unwieldy shape it was divided into three sub-regions, each of which was allocated a gateway (Dundalk, Sligo and Letterkenny). Since these regions are amalgams of counties, it follows that no one county council on its own has a regional remit.

A key problem for NSS implementation, therefore, was the absence of a regional tier of government in Ireland. Each of the regions does have an associated Regional Authority, and the NSS document does state in several places that these Authorities had a role to play in the implementation of the strategy. However, these are ineffectual bodies, set up in 1994 primarily to monitor the expenditure, at regional level, of EU structural funds and, despite their title, devoid of power or status (Fitzpatrick Associates, 1997). Implementation of the

NSS, therefore, required co-operation between the county councils which make up the regions, but no structures or mechanisms existed—nor were any provided for in the NSS document—to bring this about. Instead, it was left to the relevant county councils to do this on their own initiative.

This presented particular problems in the Irish case where rivalries between neighbouring counties tend to be intense, in large measure due the extraordinary popularity of Gaelic games (hurling and Gaelic football) and the fact that the premier competitions in both codes are organised on a county basis. This is further compounded by the fact that the Irish local government system separates the main cities from their adjoining rural hinterlands, with the result that urban growth leads routinely to overspill beween the two. Since this overspill has a high commercial content (factories, warehouses, shopping centres) and since commercial rates (local taxes) are an important source of local government funding, there is recurring conflict as rural county councils resist attempts by the city councils to extend their boundaries. An additional source of intraregional tension arising from the NSS itself was the widespread perception that the benefits of NSS-generated growth would be mainly concentrated in the gateway cities themselves, at the expense of their surrounding hinterlands.

The facts that the gateway cities are separated, for administrative purposes, from their rural hinterlands, and that these hinterlands may, in turn, be divided between different county councils, create obvious difficulties for the forging of governance structures at city-region level. Of course, apart from civic administration, the cities do have functional hinterlands relating to commuting zones, commercial services, etc. which extend across these civic divisions and which do provide a spatial basis for the organisation of common-interest groups.

However, there is, in most cases, a substantial spatial mismatch between these functional hinterlands and the boundaries of the regions in which the gateways are located, these regions being made up of areal units (i.e. the counties) of medieval origin.

We have, therefore, in the Irish case, a combination of circumstances all of which were identified earlier in this paper as being unamenable to the creation of effective urban-regional governance systems. The regions to which the NSS gateways are supposed to relate have no identity at either popular or functional level. This derives from the fact that these regions have no historical basis and virtually no administrative or representative status and are irrelevant both to ordinary residents and economic/organisational functionaries due to their spatial discordance with the urban-regional system around which the national space-economy (and most people's everyday lives) is built. Meanwhile, at the intraregional level there is fragmentation of both civic jurisdictions and popular territorial identities.

Despite these difficulties, the county and city councils in each region have managed to come together to create collaborative gateway implementation groups. However, the effectiveness of these groups is profoundly constrained by a further distinctive feature of the Irish local government system—i.e. its very limited range of functions and powers and hence its ability to leverage action at local level. The functions of Irish county and city councils are largely confined to social housing, physical planning and the provision of environmental services and facilities. They have little or no role in such key areas of everyday life as economic/business development, education and training, healthcare, social welfare and transport and communications.

These functions, many of which have a major role to play in gateway development, are the responsibility of central government

departments and agencies. In cognisance of this, the NSS document proposed a series of measures to engender compliance by these bodies with the objectives of the strategy. Thus, the NSS was to be 'embedded' in the programmes of all relevant departments and agencies, and interdepartmental and cabinet committees were to be established to co-ordinate and monitor the strategy implementation process at central government level.

However, there is little evidence that these measures were actually implemented or, if they were, that they had any effect. This is demonstrated by the case of the National Development Plan (NDP) for 2000–06, which largely consisted of a set of programmes managed by different government departments. One of the core objectives of the NDP was the achievement of balanced regional developments and, indeed, the Plan document included a commitment that "from the outset of the NDP, investment within and between the Regions will take full account of regional development policy" (NDP, 1999, p. 46). However, no mechanisms for achieving this were built into the Plan: not only was there no provision for integration, at regional level, of the various Plan programmes, but there was no regional dimension in the individual programmes themselves. Not surprisingly, therefore, the independent mid-term review of the Plan found that regional development had not been a criterion in the allocation of funding for projects under the plan (FitzGerald *et al.*, 2003). However, although this review recommended that regional development objectives should be included in the Plan's project selection criteria, this was not acted upon and, despite an assertion in the NSS document that "Implementation of the current National Development Plan will be a key step towards balanced regional development" (NSS, 2002, p. 123), in the final review of

the NDP prepared by the Department of Finance, the issue of regional development was not mentioned at all.

The NSS therefore failed to transcend the lack of interdepartmental interaction that has long been a deep-seated feature of Ireland's highly centralised system of government, as was highlighted in a recent evaluation of the Irish public service by the OECD which identified a major problem of fragmentation leading to a lack of "coherence in policy development, implementation and service delivery" (OECD, 2008, p. 12). This applies both at national and sub-national levels where, as the OECD reported, local authorities "have no responsibility for nationally provided services and limited, if any, levers to direct how national service providers actually operate" (OECD, 2008, p. 244). The problems this presented for attempts at development planning at regional level were highlighted in a report on the implementation of the NSS, published in 2006 by Forfás, the Irish government's advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation policy. While noting continuing disquiet within the gateway cities relating to problems of co-operation between neighbouring councils, this report identified even more widespread concern relating to problems of co-operation between local councils, on the one hand, and a wide range of government departments and agencies, on the other (Forfás, 2006). Again, we see here the problems for regional governance, identified earlier in the paper, arising from the absence of a capacity for urban-regional self-government compounded by the lack of mechanisms for co-ordination, at regional level, of national-level actors.

The Forfás report also highlighted problems relating to another key ingredient of effective regional governance identified in the literature review—i.e. the absence from the Irish regions of the kinds of leaders

who, elsewhere, have played a key role in mobilising cross-community support (embracing organs of local government and the central state along with the private and voluntary sectors) in pursuit of shared regional objectives. As the report put it, the NSS gateways "are not championed by their regions in any kind of popular or political way" (Forfás, 2006, p. 105). An important factor in this respect is Ireland's very weak culture of civic leadership and community dynamism arising from the lack of local self-reliance and the highly centralised nature of the political structure; as Laffan (1996, p. 340) has observed, in Ireland a "centralised state and a dependence on government agencies for development have weakened local initiative and capacity".

To address this deficiency, the Forfás report proposed the appointment in each gateway of a high-profile Gateway Co-ordinator who, with the support of a Gateway Implementation Group drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors, would seek to mobilise and co-ordinate the various regional 'stakeholders' around an agreed gateway development plan and who would also attempt to put in place effective liaison procedures between the gateway region and the organs of central government. In furtherance of the need to enhance social capital and regional organising capacity in the gateway regions, the report proposed the establishment by the central government of a dedicated fund which would provide support for "strategy preparation, innovative local leadership and co-ordination structures … and capacity building" in the gateways and their associated regions (Forfás, 2006, p. 120). Tellingly, however, when the government did introduce a Gateway Innovation Fund as part of the National Development Plan for 2007–13 (since abandoned), it was restricted to spending on capital projects only. Clearly, strengthening

regional organising capacity was not on the government's agenda. In any case, this fund was one of the casualties of the first round of spending cutbacks imposed in the wake of the 2008 financial implosion, reflecting the common tendency for Western governments to marginalise regional issues at times of national economic crisis.

Concerns relating to the governance arrangements for the NSS were subsequently aired by two other government advisory agencies. An assessment of the NSS in a 2008 report by the National Economic and Social Council (which advises the Irish government on strategic economic development issues) concluded that

> The development of governance frameworks that will allow key actors in the gateways to take co-ordinated and effective action together is, probably, the greatest and most urgent challenge facing the implementation of the NSS (NESC, 2008, p. xix).

Noting how county loyalties can hinder the achievement of co-ordinated action on strategic regional issues, the report called for a 'recasting' of regional structures as a key ingredient in facilitating gateway development.

The following year, in a report on the role of cities in national competitiveness, the National Competitiveness Council identified governance as "*the* key issue for managing urban growth and implementing policy actions to achieve competitiveness objectives" (NCC, 2009, p. 35; emphasis added) and highlighted the importance of a co-ordinated approach to tackling issues at the level of the city-region. Expressing concern that a lack of intraregional co-operation could threaten the competitiveness of Irish cities, the Council suggested that more coherent governance might require the recasting of local authority boundaries and/or the merging of local authorities.

## Resistance to Governance Change in the Irish State Apparatus

These calls from its own advisory agencies for a radical reform of governance structures in order to facilitate the implementation of the NSS went unheeded by the Irish government. Thus, the government has failed to establish, at central level, the arrangements for embedding the NSS in departmental decision-making and for co-ordinating decision-making around the NSS objectives to which it had been committed in the NSS document. Meanwhile, the minimalist procedures for co-ordinated action at regional and local levels envisaged by the same document have proven to be woefully inadequate, but have not been addressed in any serious way.

It might seem strange that the Irish government would refuse to countenance changes to its own institutional structures, even though this refusal effectively spelled the deathknell for a development strategy in whose preparation it had invested considerable resources and whose objectives it had enthusiastically endorsed when the strategy was launched in 2002. However, it became apparent at a very early stage that the government's apparent commitment to the NSS was illusory. Within a year of the launch of the NSS, the Minister for Finance announced a very ambitious plan to relocate some 10,300 civil service jobs (including the headquarters of eight government departments and the Office of Public Works) to a total of 46 locations dispersed throughout the country. This was subsequently raised to 10,977 jobs to be moved to 59 locations which, between them, involved every county in the country outside Dublin.

Of the jobs to be relocated, only 14.2 per cent were earmarked for gateway centres. Only one of the headquarters functions (which might have appeared to be particularly suited to gateway locations) was allocated to a gateway, and even then it was one of the small towns making up the Midlands gateway. One-fifth of the jobs were to be located in the three counties adjoining Dublin, thereby making no contribution to the NSS objective of spreading growth out of the Greater Dublin Area. Of these, the great bulk (1635) were earmarked for County Kildare, the Minister for Finance's home county!

When queried about the implications of his relocation programme for the NSS, the Minister replied: "The National Spatial Strategy and decentralisation are not the same thing—it was never ever linked to the National Spatial Strategy". Not only is this patently absurd, but a direct contradiction of an express commitment in the NSS document that

> The Government will take full account of the NSS in moving forward the progressive decentralisation of Government offices and agencies (NSS, 2002, p. 120).

There is an element of déjà vu about the Irish government's response to the NSS, in that there was a remarkably similar episode in the late 1960s and early 1970s when another major government-sponsored report on regional development which advocated a similar approach to the NSS was followed by a highly dispersionist programme of new industrial employment creation (Walsh, 1976; Breathnach, 1982). This episode arose from the introduction, in the late 1950s, of a set of measures for attracting inward investment which, it was hoped, would become a key driver of national economic development. While this policy met with instant success, with a significant inflow of foreign investment appearing in the early 1960s, from an early stage concern was expressed in influential quarters about the government's preference for dispersing this investment as widely as possible throughout the country, mainly on

the grounds that it represented an inefficient use of infrastructure investment funds, that additional incentives would be required to persuade investors to locate outside the main urban centres and that targetted investment in providing infrastructure, services and skilled workers in the latter centres would have the effect of generating a greater overall inflow of investment into Ireland. Following submissions along these lines from a number of public bodies and agencies, the government, in 1966, engaged the British planning consultants, Colin Buchanan and Partners, to prepare a national planning strategy.

The resultant report (commonly known as the Buchanan Report), published in 1968 (Colin Buchanan and Partners, 1968), proposed that the government's industrial development effort should be focused on developing eight growth centres (largely the same as those—apart from Dublin—identified in the NSS). As with the NSS, this approach was advanced as the most likely to achieve both national and regional development objectives simultaneously. However, unlike the NSS, the Buchanan Report also proposed specific governance measures to progress the plan's implementation, in the form of regional planning authorities with statutory powers and development corporations responsible for overseeing expansion within the growth centres themselves.

Predictably, the Irish government baulked at the political implications of the Buchanan strategy, arising from its spatial selectivity and its proposals to create new governance structures at regional and local levels. Instead—and in total disregard of both the Buchanan proposals—the government proceeded to put in place an alternative programme designed to achieve "the maximum spread of development, through all regions" (quoting from a government statement on regional policy issued in 1972). The principal means of achieving

this was the construction of ready-built "advance" factories in a wide range of locations: between 1971 and 1982, 432 such units (amounting in total to almost 750,000 square metres of floorspace) were erected in 156 different locations.

Both of these episodes (the Buchanan Report and the National Spatial Strategy and their immediate aftermaths) represent situations where the Irish government initially appeared to bow to Brenner's (2004) 'modernising forces' seeking a restructuring of the territorial organisation of the Irish state, but, when it came to making the hard decisions required for such restructuring, opted to maintain the existing order. This reflects two key characteristics of Ireland's polity which are profoundly inimical to respatialisation—bureaucratic centralism and intense localism in electoral politics.

An explanation of the historical origin of these features of Ireland's peculiar system of government has been advanced elsewhere by the present writer (Breathnach, 2010). When it achieved political independence in 1922, the new Irish state inherited a conservative and highly centralised state bureaucracy from the colonial period, while its new parliament was largely populated by adherents of one or other of the two populist political parties which emerged from the post-independence split in the Sinn Féin party which had led the independence movement. Given that most public services and regulatory systems in the new state were administered from the centre, parliamentarians came to see it as their main function to act as intermediaries between their local constituents and the central state bureaucracy, a function which acquired increasing importance with the expansion of public services and regulatory mechanisms as the 20th century progressed.

Irish parliamentarians, therefore, are mainly judged by voters in terms of how effective they are at 'delivering' for their

local constituencies. This places a premium on immediate electoral advantage in terms of political decision-making, while national legislation is primarily evaluated by parliamentarians in terms of its likely repercussions at local level. This makes it very difficult to implement policies which are spatially selective in their immediate impact, even though they may bring longer-term benefits which are more widely spread.

An inevitable consequence of this political order is a very weak system of sub-national government which is mainly administered through the 30 county and five city councils. As noted previously, these have a very limited range of functions which are largely funded through the central government rather than via local taxation. Indeed, the number of functions performed by local councils has been progressively reduced over time by the centralisation of functions previously administered at local level such as hospital and agricultural extension services and responsibility for national roads. In this, Ireland has run counter to the normal pattern in other countries where the growth in public services was accompanied by a tendency to transfer delivery to sub-national levels (OECD, 2008). Furthermore, whereas most other European countries have recast the territorial structure of sub-national administration at least once over the past 100 years, this has never happened in Ireland, leaving a system which has become increasingly dysfunctional in spatial terms, with its medieval boundaries having little concordance with the socioeconomic geography of the modern urban-regional system.

Ireland's parliamentary representatives, therefore, are inherently antagonistic to central measures which are spatially selective in their impact while, at the same time, being profoundly opposed to the devolution of responsibility for public service delivery to regional and local levels, as this would undermine their essential role as intermediaries between centralised public service agencies and local constituents. In this, they are joined by the central state bureaucracy which is equally profoundly opposed to decentralisation proposals which would weaken their control over the administrative system. With these two powerful components of the Irish polity acting as Lipietz's (1994) "conservative defenders of the old spaces", there is little prospect of serious reform of the present system of sub-national government in Ireland.

## The National Spatial Strategy: Current Situation

The National Spatial Strategy is now, in effect, moribund, as reflected in the fact that its website has not been updated since 2007. It would be too easy to suggest that the NSS has been a casualty of the current economic crisis which has left the Irish public finances in disarray, in that even prior to 2008 there was little evidence of real progress towards the achievement of the NSS objectives. In particular, as already noted, the National Development Plan—through which virtually all state capital funding is channelled—was not delivering the kinds of co-ordinated and targetted investments in the gateways and their regions required by these objectives. The lack of impact of the NSS is reflected in the Gateway Development Index developed by Fitzpatrick Associates (2009) for the purpose of monitoring NSS progress. This comprises a composite index derived from a range of socioeconomic indicators considered to be relevant for measuring the progress of the gateways in relation to the NSS objectives. In the absence of specific targets in the NSS against which this Index could be benchmarked, the approach used was to compare the performance of individual gateways compared with their overall combined performance, over the period 2002–07.

**Table 2.**   Trends in employment in foreign-firm employment in gateways, 2001–11

| Gateway | Percentage of foreign firm employment 2001 | Percentage of employment created in new foreign firms 2001-2011 | Percentage of employment lost in existing foreign firms | Percentage of foreign firm employment 2011 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dublin | 34.9 | 53.3 | 32.2 | 38.9 |
| Cork | 9.1 | 17.3 | 3.9 | 11.9 |
| Galway | 5.4 | 7.7 | 0.7 | 7.0 |
| Sub-total | 49.4 | 78.3 | 36.8 | 57.8 |
| Other six gateways | 15.8 | 7.0 | 23.9 | 12.1 |
| Rest of country | 34.8 | 14.7 | 39.3 | 30.1 |

*Source*: Forfás annual survey of agency-assisted firms.

The report found that most of the NSS gateways either failed to make any ground, or lost ground, relative to the national average over the period 2002–07. Dublin's position in relation to the national average remained unchanged, while both Cork and Galway performed well relative to the overall average. These findings are in accordance with recent trends regarding foreign investment, which account for over 90 per cent of total Irish exports. One of the key objectives of the NSS was to expand the base of exporting activities (which in effect means the activities of foreign firms) outside Dublin at a faster pace than in the Dublin region itself. Table 2 shows, for Dublin, Cork, Galway and the other six gateways combined, the proportion of foreign-firm employment in 2001, the proportion of employment in new foreign firms established between 2001 and 2011 (and still in operation in 2011), the proportion of jobs lost through subsequent contractions and closures of foreign firms in operation in 2001 and the proportion of foreign-firm employment in 2011.

Clearly, the NSS objective of achieving a relative shift of foreign investment (at least as measured in employment terms) away from the Dublin region was not realised, with Dublin dominating employment creation in new foreign firms and significantly increasing its share of total foreign-firm employment. As with the Gateway Development Index, both Cork (especially) and Galway did relatively well, while the other six gateways (all of which lost share), between them attracted a very low share of new firm employment while also accounting for a disproportionately high share of job losses in existing firms, leading to a very substantial relative fall in their combined share of foreign-firm employment. It would be erroneous to attribute the superior performance of Dublin, Cork and Galway to any particular measures associated with the NSS; rather, the key factor here is the established reputation of these three centres with respect to high-growth sectors (international services, pharmaceuticals/IT and medical devices respectively).

## Conclusion

The widespread trend towards the devolution from national to sub-national levels of jurisdictional competences and associated capacities for socioeconomic planning, combined with the fashioning of new forms of governance designed to mobilise interest-groups around commonly agreed objectives, has been widely

promoted as providing sub-national regions with exciting new prospects for economic self-advancement, particularly through direct engagement with international markets in an increasingly globalised world. These potentialities are likely to be maximised where governance systems are aligned with the territorial compass of city-regions, where these offer functional coherence and a basis for common identity among the regions' inhabitants.

The configuration and effectiveness of these regional governance systems will be highly variable between regions, given the varying terms under which they acquire their devolved functions and powers, their different geographical and environmental characteristics, variegations in their pre-existing arrays of organisational and institutional capacities and productive assets, and the balance between those social forces, both external and internal, seeking to promote and resist change in existing sociospatial arrangements.

Ireland comprises what is perhaps an exceptional case where a unique combination of powerful forces resistant to change, in conjunction with a dysfunctional inherited system of civil jurisdiction, acted to thwart the National Spatial Strategy's ambitious proposal to create a polycentric system of dynamic city-regions through inhibiting the creation of the governance structures required in order to put this proposal into effect.

It could be that the current economic crisis will provide the springboard for profound reform of Ireland's sclerotic political system. As Brenner has suggested

> During periods of sustained economic crisis, extant frameworks of urban governance may be viewed as ineffectual, and powerful social forces may promote the reorganization of inherited local and/or regional state structures (Brenner, 2004, p. 457).

However, in the Irish case, it is not obvious whence these "powerful social forces" will emanate. Widespread concern has been expressed, at least in elite circles, at the calibre of government being produced by the Irish political system. As O'Brien (2011) has observed: "The electoral system produces a political class that 'delivers' for individual constituencies but provides almost no incentive to govern well nationally". However, the citizenry appear not to have made the connection between the structure of the political system and governmental mismanagement of the economy, as a major recent opinion poll indicated that Irish votes, on balance, want their parliamentary representatives to focus more on local than national issues (Collins, 2011).

Thus, while the electorate wreaked vengeance on the outgoing government in the 2011 general election, the replacement administration has shown little interest in political reform, despite pre-election commitments (O'Toole, 2011, 2012). Thus, while its Programme for Government included a commitment to "a fundamental reorganisation of local governance structures to allow for devolution of much greater decision-making to local people", with local communities to be given control over a wide range of activities, since coming to office the present government has moved in the opposite direction in this respect, with responsibility for the public water supply being transferred from local government to a central state agency and a proposed new household charge—designed to pay for local government services—to be collected centrally. It would appear that the political culture which has reduced Ireland to its current sorry state is all-pervasive.

## Funding

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