

Revisiting the National Spatial Strategy ten years on

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International experience suggests that strategic spatial planning has the potential to underpin the delivery of effective public services and enhance the capacity for economic growth at national, regional and subregional levels (Albrechts, 2010). Strategic spatial planning, over the course of the past twenty years, has become increasingly central to social and economic development in many European countries and indeed the EU. Influenced by these developments, the publication of the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002–2020* (NSS) in 2002 provided a response to the growing imbalances in socio-economic development that became increasingly evident during the Celtic tiger period in the late 1990s. The strategy represented a departure from conventional planning in Ireland by taking a more holistic perspective of changing geographies of population, settlement patterns and the distribution of employment opportunities. The implications of these changes led to the proposition of a socio-economic planning model that recognised the importance of the spatial dimension.

With a limited number of exceptions, most notably the Buchanan report (Colin Buchanan & Partners, 1968), spatial planning has been largely limited to demand-driven or ‘developer-led’ land-use zoning. The Buchanan report advocated the concentration of industrial development within ‘growth centres’ comprising, in addition to Dublin, two national growth centres in Cork and Limerick–Shannon; six regional growth centres in Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Galway, Sligo and Waterford; and a further four local growth centres in Castlebar, Cavan, Letterkenny and Tralee. This proposal proved

highly controversial in, what was at that time, a largely rural country. Such was the backlash to it that alternative measures were introduced, actively discouraging concentration and emphasising dispersion of industrial investment (Laffen, 1996).

The *National Development Plan 2000–2006* called for the publication of a spatial strategy delivering more regionally balanced social and economic development. The NSS proposed the classification of eighteen cities and towns, and their associated hinterlands, as ‘gateways’ and ‘hubs’. While this is somewhat similar to the approach advocated in the Buchanan report, the NSS differs in that it encompassed a greater number of places and conceptualised spatial development within a hierarchical framework of networked places, including the gateways and hubs, as well as ‘other towns’, ‘other places’ and ‘rural areas’. These places were conceptualised as interlinked by social, cultural and, above all, economic activity patterns, e.g. commuting. While the strategy emphasised the need for future development to be linked to, or concentrated within, primarily the gateways and hubs, it was not given a legislative basis. The strategy was therefore viewed as merely a framework document that offered guidance to planners and policymakers. This proved to be a fundamental weakness.

In the immediate aftermath of the publication of the strategy, a debate concerning this model of hierarchical networked places, and how it was to be implemented, took place. Much of the discourse centred on the selection, or lack of selection, of particular places as either gateways or hubs and on the implications of the model for the construction of residential housing in small towns and the open countryside. In many respects this debate reflected the one that had followed the publication of the Buchanan report. Key policy and political stakeholders rejected the concept of gateways and hubs as urban-centric and detrimental to the development of rural areas. In this instance the concept of rural development was largely limited to enabling residential housing construction in rural areas rather than a broader conceptualisation encompassing social or economic dimensions.

It is fair to state that the critical reception the strategy received conditioned the (un)willingness of policymakers to support or implement it. Ultimately, however, it was the government’s Decentralisation Programme for the Civil Service, announced shortly after the publication of the NSS, that fatally undermined any commitment to the NSS and strategic spatial planning. In its original

form the programme was to involve over 10,000 civil servants and eight government departments moving from Dublin to fifty-three centres in twenty-five counties. Scott (2006, p. 825), in an assessment of strategic spatial planning in Ireland, concluded that:

Although 'decentralization' is cloaked in the rhetoric of balanced regional development, the programme appears less than consistent with the Government's spatial strategy. The NSS is based on selecting a number of gateways to act as key development nodes capable of counterbalancing the GDA [Greater Dublin Area]. However, rather than selecting centres for civil servant relocation on the basis of gateways and hubs designated in the NSS, a policy of dispersal has emerged, which includes small rural towns, underpinned by political realities and pragmatism.

Some of these realities took the form of intensive lobbying on the part of rural communities and property-owners seeking that sections associated with the eight departments be decentralised to their locality.

Given this lack of commitment to the NSS it is unsurprising to find that analyses of population and settlement trends over the past decade establish that the NSS failed to deliver on its key objectives, with settlement patterns continuing to become increasingly diffuse. This has had the effect of consolidating a trend towards increasing numbers of unsustainable commutes within extended local labour market areas. It is now apparent that, in conjunction with a range of governance and market failures, this failure has proven to be enormously costly to the state.

The implosion of Ireland's property bubble and subsequent impacts on the wider domestic economy and public finances have fundamentally altered national development processes. The impacts of these developments are socially and hence spatially uneven. Many households and places have experienced a significant reversal of fortunes as a consequence of unemployment or reductions in income. Other households and places have not experienced the same degree of change. Overlying these developments, as evidenced by the Census of Population 2011, are longer-term development processes driven by complex patterns of population change associated with the interplay between natural increase, immigration and emigration. Resulting from the intersection between the ongoing evolution of Ireland's population and settlement structure, and a radically altered economic landscape,

are a myriad of challenges. Many of these can be linked to the failure to implement a strategic national spatial plan. More importantly, they highlight the need for spatial planning if Ireland is to successfully overcome the challenges facing the country with the limited public and private resources that are available.

It was this perspective of the need for spatial planning that prompted the Regional Studies Association (RSA) – Irish Branch to organise a conference reflecting on the issue. In many respects it was appropriate that the RSA would engage in the organisation of this event given their advocacy of the need for a national spatial strategy in advance of the *National Development Plan 2000–2006*. The aim of the conference was to explore the background to the current NSS (which runs to 2020), evaluate socio-economic developments in the ten years since the introduction of this strategy and identify the implications of contemporary population, settlement and economic trends that might be best addressed through spatial planning. Held on 5 June 2012, the conference, which was hosted by the Economic and Social Research Institute, brought together key individuals, including Niall Cussen from the Department of the Environment's Spatial Planning Unit; Peter Mehlbye, Director of the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network and a member of the expert advisory committee that was established to support the work of the Spatial Planning Unit in developing the NSS; and Professor Jim Walsh, another member of the expert advisory committee. These individuals were closely involved in the drafting of the NSS and are therefore well placed to reflect on its development and potential relevance to contemporary challenges. Complementing these contributions were papers presented by researchers who have evaluated the strategy and spatial developments that have taken place in the ten years since the publication of the NSS. These papers provide much of the content of this special edition of *Administration*.

The first paper, by Walsh, contextualises the development of the NSS through an initial consideration of regional development initiatives implemented in Ireland since the 1960s and, subsequently, a review of the process by which the strategy was produced and of its content. There are a number of overlaps between this paper and Meredith et al.'s, which explores and evaluates the evolving conceptualisation of space and place that took place during the drafting of the NSS. Walsh goes on to reflect on the process, content and implementation of the NSS, and to consider a number of questions, not least 'does Ireland still need a National Spatial

Strategy?'. The answer to this question in our view is a qualified 'yes', one that is dependent on a real and lasting state-level commitment to strategic spatial planning.

Morgenroth's paper highlights an important and significant gap that persisted throughout the development of the NSS, namely the general absence of economic analysis of critical issues that remain central to public and policy discourses – e.g. location decisions of firms and households. This paper considers some of the key lessons from the economics literature, from both theoretical advances and related empirical research, in the two decades preceding the drawing up of the NSS. Morgenroth's analysis demonstrates that, while much of this body of research was absent from the design of the NSS, the centre-based approach adopted in the strategy is reflective of extant literature. But he concludes that the NSS could have been significantly improved if key insights from economics had been incorporated.

The research presented by Daly & Kitchin provides an invaluable insight into the changes to Ireland's population trends that have taken place since the publication of the NSS. Daly & Kitchin highlight, much like in Meredith et al.'s paper, the political sensitivities associated with selecting a limited number of places as gateways or hubs. Their analysis draws attention to the radically changed reality confronting planning practitioners and policymakers. Since the onset of the economic downturn the media and political commentators have highlighted the impact of migration trends, particularly emigration of Irish nationals. However, this is only one part of a much larger and complex picture. In addition to populations decreasing in places, there are a limited number of places that continue to experience population expansion, resulting in growing pressure on resources. Any new spatial strategy will need to give due consideration to meeting the different challenges of providing access to public services and infrastructure in areas where the population is increasing and those areas that are facing population decreases.

Meredith et al.'s paper builds on some of the content presented by Walsh regarding the political sensitivities associated with conceptualising places and spaces within the NSS. It traces the evolution of the conceptualisations used to describe Ireland's spatial structure during the development of the NSS. These developments are linked to successive rounds of public consultation, which saw substantial resistance to early drafts of the strategy. An evaluation of the two primary perspectives, functional areas and polycentricity, finds that the functional areas perspective was flawed. The analysis

underpinning this assessment also finds that the evidence supporting the Midlands gateway is tenuous.

Linked to the Meredith et al. paper, by way of a focus on the spatial structures proposed in the NSS, van Egeraat et al. evaluate whether, ten years on from the introduction of the NSS, any progress has been made in concentrating more employment in the regional gateways and hubs and fostering the development of specialised industrial clusters. Overall, they find that, though two regional gateways experienced a rise of their share of national employment, the NSS has had limited discernible impact on the distribution of economic activities. Nor has there been much progress in terms of the cultivation of regional specialisations.

Complementing this research is a paper by McCafferty et al. that measures the level of economic specialisation and potential complementarity of urban centres on an all-Ireland basis. This work evaluates a key component of polycentricity, namely the development of complementary spatial divisions of labour between neighbouring places. Their analysis finds that many neighbouring regional centres are largely similar in terms of their economic structure. On the basis of their analysis, the authors call for a clearer conceptualisation of complementarity in a future revision of the NSS.

The final paper by O'Riordáin tackles the issue of governance. The critical challenges that confronted the NSS on its publication and that persist to this day are related to governance issues. This paper relates either directly or indirectly to all of the preceding papers and explores a key issue, namely the willingness of key stakeholders in the national development process to proactively engage with a spatial strategy that is both hierarchical and cross-sectoral. O'Riordáin concludes that while this was understood by those driving the development of the NSS, it was not appreciated by the wider body of policy stakeholders, who were strongly fixated on local or place issues, with the result that the potential of the NSS in policy terms was lost.

None of the contributors to this special edition contend that we should do away with the NSS. All argue that the strategy needs extensive revision to reflect what we as a society have learned are the substantial social, economic and financial consequences of lax planning, and to deal with the contemporary challenges facing the country. Collectively, the papers point out that the current crisis has not ameliorated those spatial imbalances that led to calls for a national spatial strategy in the first place. Rather, the complexity of current patterns of development is highlighted.

The research presented emphasises that there is no single initiative that will meet the needs of all of the people of Ireland. This stems from the nature of those processes shaping the structure of the economy and hence the quantity and quality of employment and the distribution of jobs. These are largely bound up with wider national and international trends and processes, i.e. they are not amenable to local control or influence. What is amenable to change is the relative attractiveness of places in terms of investment. 'Place' remains one of the fundamental factors in the calculus of profitability and is central to the location decisions of domestic and foreign enterprises. Failure on the part of researchers to explain the implications of these issues to policymakers – whether local, regional or national – or failure on the part of policymakers to consider the spatial challenges confronting the state in light of international market forces will further undermine the potential for a sustainable recovery. At one level this necessitates making Ireland more attractive than other places around the world to those seeking to establish a business. At another level it means that additional places in Ireland should be, if not equally attractive, as attractive as possible to ensure that investment is dispersed outside two or three city regions. Strategic spatial planning seeks to achieve these objectives by creating the conditions for sustainable development. Spatially targeted measures supported by appropriate and robust governance systems are required if Ireland is going to position itself for national recovery. A key question that has to be addressed is whether the governance system, which is a reflection of society as a whole, is capable of resolving the inevitable conflicts that will arise between places.

References

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