

New regional governance in Ireland: Perspectives and challenges

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Public management in Ireland is generally seen as very centralised, with local government having limited local discretion. This is underpinned by generally poor levels of electoral representation and limited functions and financial discretion relative to other members of the OECD. However, to paint a picture of an overbearing state, supervising all aspects of local communities and local government, is not entirely correct. Over the past two decades the country has seen the development of a relatively vibrant local and regional institutional environment, which includes local initiatives such as the local development companies delivering LEADER and other programmes, county and city enterprise boards supporting local microenterprise, expansion of local government in the areas of social inclusion and economic development, as well as regional authorities and regional assemblies.

Nonetheless, the country’s system of local government still has a largely nineteenth-century configuration. Some eighty towns are operating within limited boundaries that in no way reflect twenty-first-century function and citizenship. Thirty-four county and city councils reflect a history of ongoing central government mistrust. The fragmented and disaggregated approaches to spatial development and public service organisation are increasingly unsuitable for coping with the challenges of urban society, international competition and the need for public sector expenditure which underpins the country’s capacity to sustain itself within a hugely unstable international arena.

Notwithstanding the reform efforts of the past decades, the current institutional setting in Ireland – of sectoral government departments operating within their silos, limited local government and a largely underdeveloped regional layer consisting of eight regional authorities and two regional assemblies – is no longer fit for purpose. The problems of reform efforts to date include a failure to embed quality service standards over much of the public service, ad hoc and informal evaluation and appraisal of policies and programmes, an absence of national service standards (with the exception of EU-driven requirements) and ad hoc service output determination. In the case of the local institutional setting these problems are further exacerbated by local actors having to function within overly broad national guidance, often resulting in considerable differences in local interpretation, with local decisions at times seeming to conflict with the original national policy expectation. Ad hoc resourcing and cost shifting can further cause wide differences in local service delivery, with limited transparency in the allocation of resources from national to local levels resulting in ongoing accusations of political favouritism and inadequate prioritisation of public spending. The overall lack of clarity in the elected participatory institutional setting at local and national level has also become a huge challenge, resulting in the delimitation of local democracy.

In an examination of the local government system and the need for reform, the Regional Studies Association – Irish Branch organised a symposium to address the need for a renewed local/regional institutional framework.¹ This took place against the backdrop of, potentially, the most radical reforms of any part of the Irish public sector since the foundation of the state. The reform proposals, published by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012), set out a reform process which arguably includes:

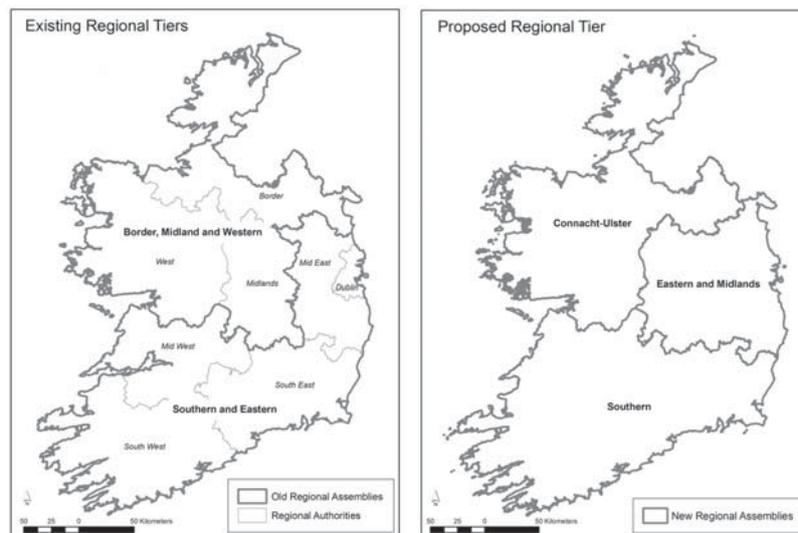
- a clear political vision and objectives;
- a restructuring of the current inadequate sub-national levels;
- criteria for the transfer of functions and responsibilities;
- new municipal and regional models;
- performance measures and standards in line with OECD members;
- clarity in responsibilities across the tiers of public administration in the state;

¹ 'New Regional Governance in Ireland: Perspectives and Challenges', NUI Maynooth, 21 January 2013.

- a significant reorientation of services towards a more municipal-focused model of governance.

In relation to regional governance, the existing eight regional authorities and two regional assemblies will disappear and be replaced by three new regional assemblies (van Egeraat & Foley, 2012). The Eastern and Midlands Region will cover Leinster (excluding Counties Carlow, Kilkenny and Wexford). The extensive Southern Region will include Munster (including Carlow, Kilkenny and Wexford) and the remainder of the country will make up the third region (see Figure 1). The proposal document makes no reference to the logic behind this new division.

Figure 1: Existing and proposed regional administrative tiers



Source: van Egeraat & Foley (2012).

The reforms suggest a clear understanding of an ongoing history of ignoring local urban government; the limited levels of trust between the local and the centre; the unequal manager–councillor relationship; the lack of a voice for local government at national level; the failure to address long-standing issues such as boundaries, towns without municipal status, multiplicity of policies and plans, duplication across layers of government; the limited revenue role of local and regional government; and their restricted role in economic development.

This local/regional institutional setting and the minister's reforms were the focus for the papers presented to the symposium, and printed in this issue. How do the reforms reflect an understanding of the challenges of local and regional government in Ireland? Are there lessons from overseas that might point towards particular outcomes which might provide some scope for optimism over the immediate future?

The papers suggest a healthy scepticism while broadly welcoming the reform proposals. The papers address challenges confronting the reform process around a number of strategic issues:

- integration of the spatial perspective with institutional reform;
- implementation processes which move past simple hierarchical and horizontal policy development to include diagonal integration, and thus reflecting the increasing need for joined-up policy;
- the need to shift organisational and political cultures and perspectives within local, regional and national tiers;
- the need for greater national leadership and an appreciation of local and regional realities;
- the need for an institutional setting which allows for negotiation between the centre and the local and regional levels;
- the need for performance and evaluation based on shared policy expectations.

In the first paper, Tomaney et al. analyse the experience of regional-level institutional reform in England. Regional inequalities and regional policy, they argue, are long-standing political issues in the UK, a country marked by persistent spatial inequalities that are exceptionally large by international standards. Given these challenges, England specifically has had a long-standing love affair with centralised government, where Whitehall plays the lead role in most aspects of local policy. As a result, having many parallels to the Irish case, the local government system has become subject to national regulation and policy direction. In turn, the system has largely depended on national finances and decisions which impact on the local capacity to self-finance innovation and new economic initiatives. While the New Labour policies of Tony Blair acknowledged, and actively sought to address, regional and local inequality, if anything, greater centralisation took place. In the end the establishment of regional government agencies (RDAs) was about as far as the Blair Government could go.

Incoming Conservative ministers presented RDAs as emblematic of Labour's profligacy and swiftly abolished same, along with government offices for the regions. Alongside this, regional spatial planning was also abolished. The distribution of austerity involved profoundly political choices about the future character of the state, with uneven implications for regions. The 'New Localism', introduced by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government under the guise of enhancing local democracy, is now increasingly seen as a loincloth for what is in fact greater levels of centralisation – 'guided localism'.

Tomaney et al. argue that there are lessons for Ireland in the UK experience. Is Ireland to see a move from a focus on localism to one on guided localism, underpinning greater centralisation, or will Ireland see a genuine implementation of processes to underpin the minister's vision? One thing is for certain: building the required institutions will be difficult, long-term and time-consuming. The challenge of building successful regional governance doubtless needs to be a bottom-up exercise, but central governments play a critical role in creating the conditions for its success.

In the second paper, de Vries & Sobis address the issue of increasing the scale of local government and moving towards reduced numbers of local authorities, a feature of public service reform across the OECD since the end of the Second World War. Ireland comes relatively late to this upscaling game. The reforms in Ireland involve, depending on how they are interpreted, a reduction of local authorities from 114 to 31. Alternatively, it might be argued that, with the proposals in the Local Government Bill to establish municipal districts to replace current town councils, the minister is actually increasing numbers to around 130.

The authors outline the challenges involved in a transition to bigger authorities. The arguments for upscaling are common across all local government systems, and are certainly arguments which sound familiar in the context of the proposals in Ireland: efficiency, rationalisation, improved service delivery, an administration becoming friendlier to the inhabitants and able to cope with new tasks, promoting local development and offering modern social services.

Increasingly, however, there are some sceptical voices in regard to a bigger-is-better model. Even in circumstances where greater efficiencies can be identified, there is the need to underpin local identities. The clash between perceived efficiency and the ability of the citizen to interact directly with decision-makers further undermines the upscaling argument. The experience to date across the OECD is

that savings are questionable and growth in democracy limited. Will the Irish Government's move towards a more localised service-delivery model through the proposed municipal districts bridge the gap between citizen, councillor and the need for efficiencies?

Clearly there are many challenges confronting the reform process. Papers produced from an Irish perspective suggest wide variance in opinions. In a hard-hitting perspective, Breathnach argues that Irish regional policy has paid little attention to a vibrant local government system. He links the limited progress with implementing the now defunct *National Spatial Strategy* to the lack of appropriate governance structures. The primary problems lie in the fact that regional governance institutions in Ireland are virtually non-existent and in the limited range of local and regional government functions.

In light of the proposed reforms, Breathnach questions the capacity of local government to address local economic and social development, and challenges the organisation of the proposed regional assemblies, holding that they will have little or no capacity to confront national departments and agencies. Given that this is a central pillar of the proposed reforms, he cannot be optimistic about any substantive change, thus replicating the past policy failures.

He further argues for the utilisation of city-regions as the basic building block for regional development. This involves considerably strengthened links between the Irish cities and their hinterlands via the medium of a shared and integrated development strategy. In order for this to work effectively, local and regional government requires appropriate authority and status.

Shannon & van Egeraat, in their contribution, provide empirical substance to these ideas in the form of a detailed case study of regional governance in the Border Region and County Cavan. Successful bottom-up regional development approaches require a shift from central government to regional and local governance. Governance is about managing networks, and managing multilevel governance networks requires strong levels of horizontal, vertical and diagonal coordination across the various scales. The authors present evidence of vertical coordination along traditional hierarchical lines in the preparation and implementation of regional planning guidelines and county-level plans/strategies. However, horizontal and diagonal coordination remain problematic.

They argue that the new structures proposed by the government further reduce the level of genuine devolution of functions to the regional level. What is left is a, potentially enhanced, coordination and

oversight role for the new assemblies. This in itself would be a huge improvement on the current situation. But the effectiveness of the reform will strongly depend on the detail of the statutory and non-statutory provisions, notably whether they will secure genuine diagonal coordination with the relevant government departments and state agencies.

Brady & O'Neill take a more sanguine view of the reforms. They argue that, viewed from an urban policy perspective, the reforms bring a clear appreciation of urban Ireland and the need to explore the potential for reconfiguration of the city governance of Dublin and the lower-tier cities. In particular they focus on the Cork city-region, noting that the proposed restructuring suggests the capacity to move towards a more integrated planning framework that would allow for complementary development of the city region, which now expands well beyond the boundaries of the city council into large parts of the county council's functional area. They see this as critical not just to Cork but generally to the second-tier urban centres in Ireland since competitiveness becomes an intrinsic part of the urban development and spatial planning agenda as urban leaders realise that they can no longer depend on traditional political-economic structures.

They hold that the proposed reforms are significant in that they represent a formal acknowledgement on behalf of government that the design and operation of local government in Ireland's cities is problematic and, more importantly, that these governing arrangements need to be redefined in order to achieve a better fit between administrative and functional urban fields. According to Brady & O'Neill, the reforms challenge the view that Ireland can only work within a centralised model and will move the Irish system towards European norms in public management. Doing so would clearly fit with the minister's vision of local government.

Walsh & Williams, in providing a review of the current regional authority structures, make similar suggestions, noting that, to date, reform has lacked long-term strategic perspective and has been largely a discontinuous process, where plans are made at regular intervals, rather than a continuous process of review and evaluation where the potential for synchronisation would be increased.

Critical, in their view, is the overall need to move towards systems of local and regional development based on a local-to-national model which allows for not just horizontal or vertical integration but also diagonal integration to reflect the cross-sectoral impact of local government and regional planning.

References

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