

The changing map of subnational governance in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

The evolution of the territorial structure of Ireland's system of local government during the period of colonial rule by England is outlined. The independence period saw little change in this structure until the abolition of municipal-level government in 2014, reflecting the very marginal role of devolved administration in Ireland's political system. The creation and functioning of regional-level administrative systems, mainly related to the management of EU Structural Fund expenditure, are reviewed. Regional assemblies, established in 2015, have the role of preparing regional strategies under the 2018 *National Planning Framework*. Ongoing problems arising from a mismatch between subnational governance systems and underlying socio-spatial structures are discussed.

Keywords: Ireland, subnational governance, territorial structures, counties, regional planning

Introduction

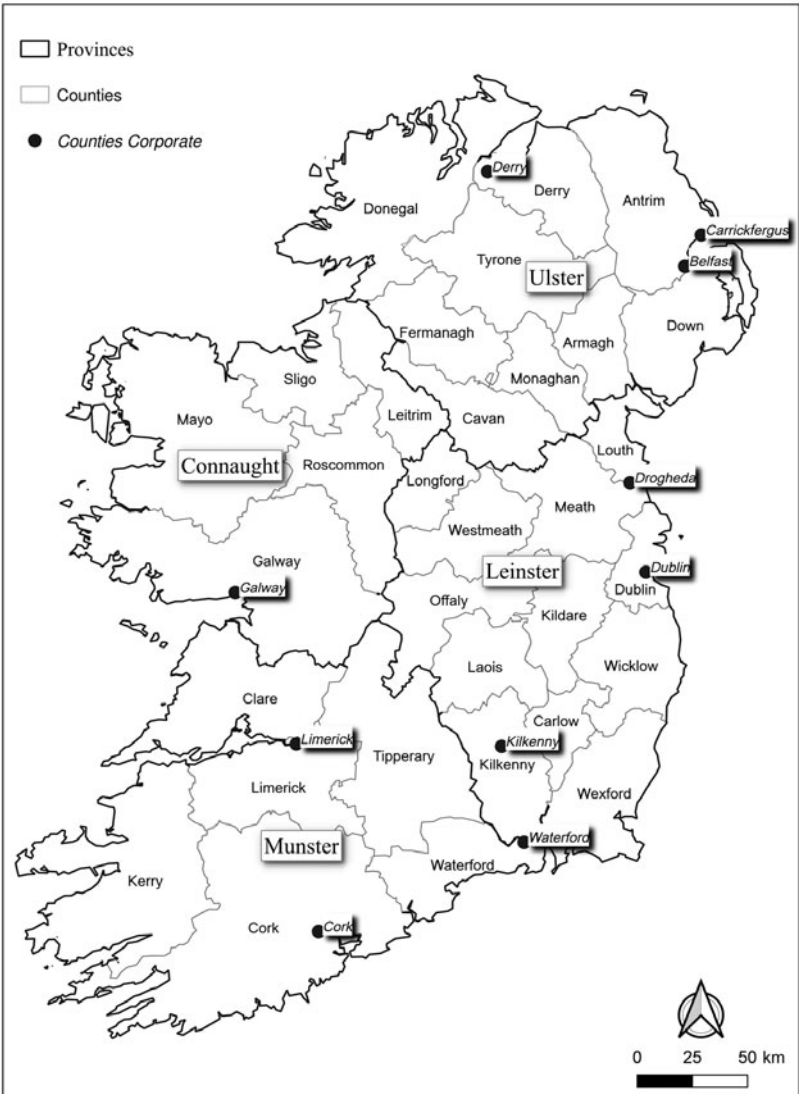
This paper traces how the spatial configuration of subnational governance in what is now the Republic of Ireland evolved from historic times to the present day. Following this introduction, the paper is divided into five sections. The first provides a brief outline of the evolution of subnational governance in Ireland prior to the nineteenth century. The second section focuses on the nineteenth century, and deals in particular with the poor law unions (PLUs) introduced in the early part of the century and the landmark Local Government Act of 1898, which created a two-tier system of county councils and subcounty urban and rural district councils. The third section addresses how this system was modified in what became the Irish Free State in 1922 and, subsequently, the Republic of Ireland in 1949. The fourth section deals specifically with the creation, over the last thirty years, of regional forms of governance whose basic function relates to the administration of EU Structural Fund expenditure in Ireland, but which have also been given significant roles in the *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS) and the *National Planning Framework* (NPF) (currently in the process of being implemented). The paper ends with a brief concluding section.

Historical background

A coherent all-island polity first emerged in Gaelic Ireland in the early centuries BC (Richter, 2005). In territorial terms, this involved a two-tier governance system, with the local *tuath* (of which there were roughly 150), representing territories controlled by particular families under the Gaelic clan system, at the base. Above these there was a tier of regional kingdoms which varied over time but eventually crystallised in a set of five provincial kingdoms (*cúigí*): Connacht, Leinster, Meath, Munster and Ulster (Mallory, 2013). There was also an overarching high kingship, claimed from time to time by particular individuals and families, which was largely titular and ephemeral.

Following the initial Anglo-Norman incursion in 1169, the English monarchy gradually extended its authority over Ireland, a process which was essentially completed by 1600. The key territorial unit in the system of local government introduced by the English administration was the county, whose main functions were tax collection, the administration of justice, policing and defence, and some public works. Each county was controlled by a sheriff, appointed by the

Map 1: Provinces, counties and counties corporate, 1700



monarchy, assisted by a ‘grand jury’ consisting of appointed members of the local nobility, landholders and merchants. By 1600 the entire island had been divided into the set of thirty-two counties which

remain in place today (Map 1)¹ (Daly, 2001). The provinces (reduced to four with the incorporation of Meath into Leinster in the late Middle Ages) were retained (and given formal boundaries) by the English administration, mainly as regional divisions for the organisation and coordination of administrative functions.

The eight largest urban centres were given special charters, termed 'counties corporate', which endowed them with the same status as counties (Map 1). Most other towns were awarded charters which gave them the status of self-governing municipal boroughs. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the counties and counties corporate accrued a range of additional functions, including building and maintenance of roads and bridges; operation of hospitals, lunatic asylums and medical dispensaries; and liability to pay compensation for malicious damage.

In the seventeenth century the large-scale transfer of land ownership to British landlords and the introduction of tens of thousands of Protestant settlers into the province of Ulster provided the impetus for the extensive commercialisation of Irish agricultural production. This, with the attendant creation of manufacturing units for processing of agricultural products, prompted the emergence, mainly in the eighteenth century, of a new system of regional and local urban centres to service the needs of rural commerce. This had the effect of extending what had previously been a limited and mainly coastal-based urban system to most of rural Ireland and creating further municipal boroughs, with 117 in all in existence by 1800 (Potter, 2011).

Local government in nineteenth century Ireland

The early nineteenth century saw a substantial growth in the range of public services provided by the British government. These included education (the national school system), public sanitation (public water supply and street cleaning) and public health (lunatic asylums, infirmaries and fever hospitals). While many of these services were administered through the county system, some were centrally controlled while new administrative systems were created for others. There was also growing concern with the need for major reform of a subnational administrative system which had grown in a piecemeal

¹ Copies (in JPEG format) of the maps included in this paper may be downloaded from the following website: <http://rsa-ireland.weebly.com/vanegeraatmaps.html>. Where these are used in publications and public presentations, this paper should be cited.

way over the centuries, and which was characterised by widespread inefficiency, redundancy and corruption (Roche, 1982).

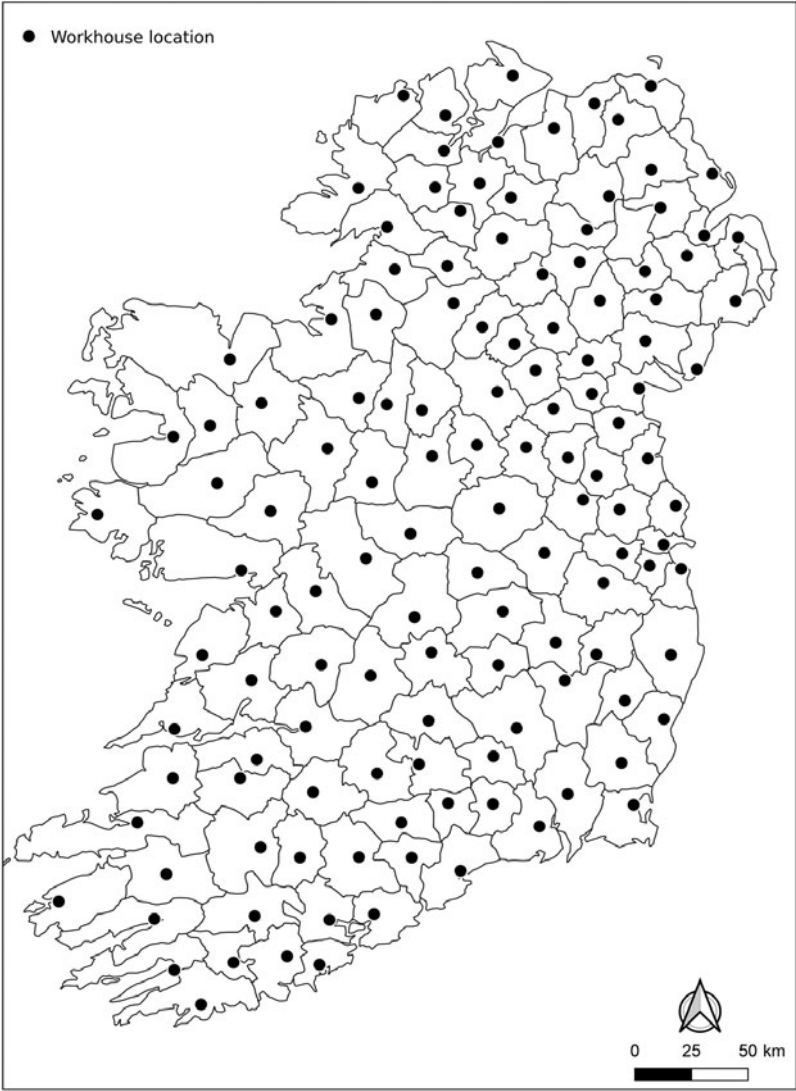
A key development shaping the changes in subnational administration which occurred in the nineteenth century was the incorporation, in 1801, of Ireland into the UK. This meant that legislation in relation to local government which was initially designed to apply to Great Britain was almost invariably applied also to Ireland, albeit usually with a time lag and some adjustment to Irish conditions. In this section of the paper, the focus is on the two major innovations introduced into the system of subnational administration in Ireland in the nineteenth century, viz. the PLUs and the 1898 Local Government Act.

Poor law unions

The 1838 Poor Relief (Ireland) Act, based on similar legislation enacted in 1834 with respect to England, sought to provide public assistance to the population of poor people in Ireland, which had grown rapidly in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This Act led to the construction throughout Ireland of 130 workhouses, large institutional buildings where food and accommodation were provided to the destitute poor, in return for work such as sewing canvas bags, spinning wool and breaking stones for road metal. Each workhouse served a surrounding area of approximately 15km radius. These areas were termed PLUs (Map 2). Each PLU was administered by a board of guardians, partly appointed and partly elected by those householders who were required to pay a special tax to finance the operation of the workhouses.

The primary criterion in the definition of PLU territories was accessibility to the workhouse centres for inhabitants of their rural hinterlands. The emphasis was on selecting market towns upon which the surrounding districts' road systems converged (Overton, 1975). This territorial system ran counter to the established system of local government in two key dimensions. Firstly, it involved the combination of urban centres and their rural hinterlands into a single governance unit, whereas under the existing system, urban municipalities were strictly separated from adjoining rural areas. Secondly, the PLU territories routinely transcended county boundaries, reflecting the extent to which the medieval county system had become asynchronous with the Irish urban system by the early nineteenth century. As Roche (1982, p. 39) observed, the PLUs were 'the first and, as it turned out, the last attempt to settle local government areas on some rational basis'.

Map 2: Poor law unions, 1840



Once in place, the PLUs began to be assigned additional functions, a process which continued for the next thirty years, during which period they became serious rivals of the counties as platforms for the delivery of public services. These extra functions mainly related to

public health and sanitation. Hospitals were attached to the workhouses while a network of local dispensaries, staffed by full-time doctors, was established. The PLUs were also given responsibility for rural cemeteries and for administering the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Acts. In 1874 they became rural sanitary districts with responsibility for implementing the provision of the Public Health Act of that year. Apart from health-related functions, the PLUs were further given responsibility for the provision of housing for farm labourers and for the registration of births, deaths and marriages. There was also some adjustment of the PLU territorial system, mainly involving the subdivision of larger PLUs into smaller units, so that their total number eventually rose to 163.

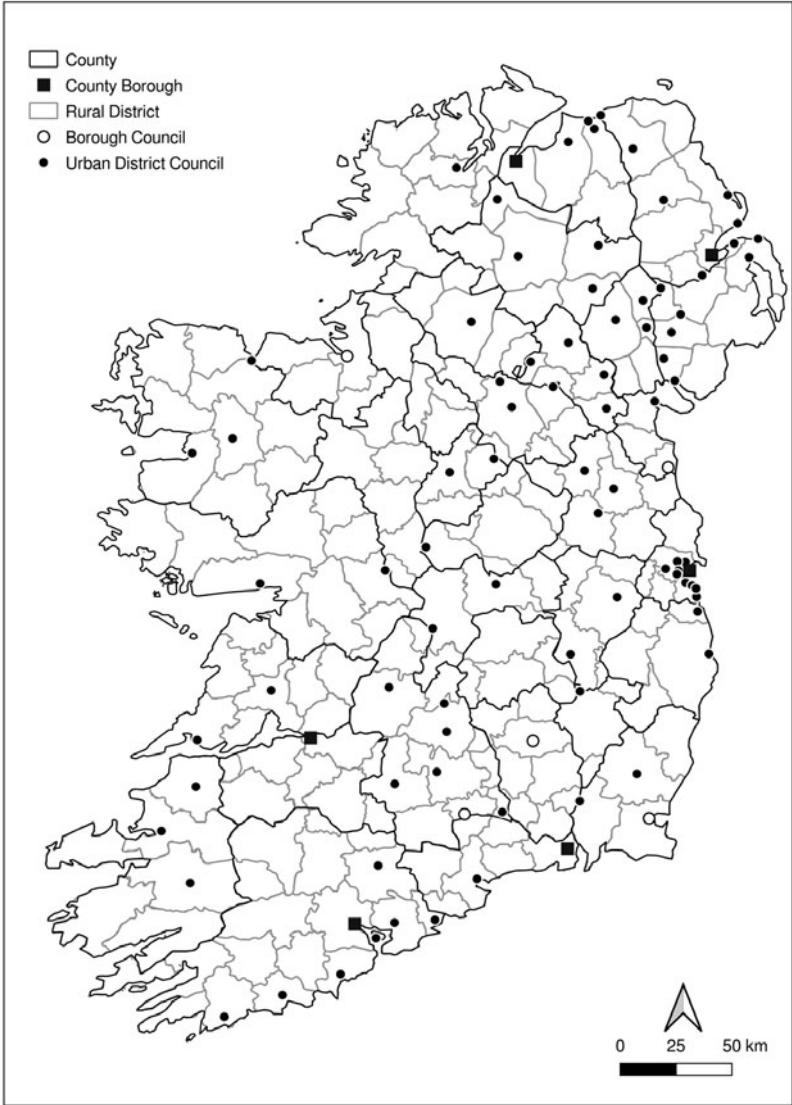
The 1898 Local Government Act

The 1898 Local Government (Ireland) Act, involving the extension to Ireland of the 1888 Local Government Act which applied to England and Wales, ushered in a profound restructuring of subnational government in Ireland. The Act's main objective was to consolidate the wide range of different local government functions being administered by a variety of bodies which had been created piecemeal over several centuries. In territorial terms, the key feature of the Act was the identification of the counties as the primary units for the administration of local government functions. New county councils, elected by popular suffrage (but with representation initially confined to men), were instituted in place of the old appointed grand juries, which were mainly comprised of large landholders and businessmen.

The 1898 Act signalled the death knell for the PLUs, which, as suggested above, appeared to offer a more appropriate spatial structure for the administration of local government functions. In addition to the retention of the county system, the Act divided the counties into separate sets of rural districts and urban districts, governed by their own popularly elected councils, whose main responsibilities were in the areas of public sanitation, environmental maintenance and social housing (Map 3).

The rural districts had the same boundaries as the former PLUs, except in the (many) cases where PLU territories extended across county boundaries. In these cases, the separate portions (sometimes three) were constituted as separate rural districts, despite the fact that they were generally much smaller than those rural districts made up of entire former PLUs (Crampsie, 2014).

Map 3: Local Government Act 1898 – Main territorial elements



The urban districts constituted the middle tier of a new hierarchy of municipal authorities created by the 1898 Act, with a view to bringing order to the jumble of such authorities which had been created by a series of legislative measures enacted earlier in the nineteenth century

(Roche, 1982). The new urban district councils were, for the most part, the same as the urban sanitary authorities (involving towns with populations in excess of 6,000) established under the 1874 Public Health (Ireland) Act, although they also included nine suburbs of Dublin City. A total of 72 such councils were created under the Act (Map 3), with some smaller towns subsequently being conferred with the same status.

In addition to the urban districts was a set of smaller towns governed by boards of commissioners (created under earlier legislation) which had very limited functions, while the Act rendered the six largest urban centres on the island (Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Limerick, Derry, and Waterford) as county boroughs, with the same status as the county councils (Map 3). The Act also identified a small group of borough councils (Clonmel, Drogheda, Kilkenny, Sligo and Wexford), the only survivors (apart from the cities which became county boroughs) of the mass abolition of old municipal boroughs effected by the 1840 Municipal Corporations (Ireland) Act (Map 3). Apart from the entitlement to elect a mayor, these essentially had the same functions and powers as urban district councils.

Local government in independent Ireland

One might have expected the establishment of popularly elected county and local district councils in 1898 to provide a strong impetus for the promotion of a culture of local democracy in Ireland. However, Travers (2001) has argued that, from the outset, the new local government bodies were highly politicised, with a focus on the objective of national independence. As a result, rather than becoming champions of local democracy, they paved the way for central dominance of the local government system, via the national political parties. This tendency was reinforced by the 1922–3 Civil War, which followed the establishment of the Irish Free State and which required strong central measures to establish the legitimacy of the new state. A further factor here was the fact that the highly centralised colonial bureaucracy which had, from the mid nineteenth century, exerted increasing control over Ireland's local government institutions (Daly, 1997) was converted, virtually overnight, into the new state's central civil service. This led, inevitably, to the entrenchment of 'the colonial legacy of unusually highly centralised government' (Travers, 2001, p. 20).

It is not surprising, therefore, that since the establishment, in 1922, of the Irish Free State (and, subsequently, the Republic of Ireland), the local government system has been the subject of an ongoing process of emasculation, in terms of functions, powers and capacity for self-funding. The first major manifestation of what Crampsie (2014, p. 44) has termed 'the centralising zeal of the new nation state' was the abolition, in 1925, of the rural district councils (with their functions being transferred to the county councils), despite the very effective work they had performed in improving living conditions in rural Ireland during their brief period of existence (Crampsie, 2014).

The autonomy of county councils was greatly circumscribed by the 1940 County Management Act, whereby the administration of county councils was placed in the hands of centrally appointed county managers, who, in turn, had responsibility for appointing other council officials. Local government autonomy was further undermined in 1978 when the national government replaced the local household tax (known as 'rates'), the main source of funding for local councils, with a direct government subvention. The central government also had powers to dissolve local councils deemed not to be effectively discharging their duties or complying with court judgements, powers which were used frequently during the early decades of the state.

Local government in Ireland was further dismantled throughout the post-independence period via the relocation to the centre of functions previously performed by local councils. Among the key functions lost were responsibility for hospitals and the health service, the public water supply and sewerage, building and maintenance of main roads, and the farm advisory service. The provision of public housing, which was a major function of local government from the 1930s to the 1970s, has since been greatly reduced by government spending cutbacks, while most of the existing public housing stock has been sold off.

Meanwhile, as the twentieth century progressed, and especially with the rise of the welfare state after the Second World War, the range and depth of publicly provided services in such areas as health, education and social welfare grew considerably. In most other countries the provision of these services was typically delegated to local government, whose capacity and status rose accordingly (Sharpe, 1988). In Ireland, by contrast, these services have almost invariably been delivered via central agencies based in Dublin (Potter, 2011).

A further indicator of the low status accorded by the Irish state to local representation and administration was the failure to accord

municipal status to the large number of urban centres which experienced substantial population growth, particularly from the 1960s onwards. Thus, whereas the great bulk of towns with a population in excess of 1,500 enjoyed some form of municipal status at the time of independence, by 2006 this applied to just 50 per cent of such towns (Potter, 2011). Furthermore, those towns which did possess municipal status experienced widespread population overspill beyond their official boundaries without any extension of these boundaries.

Meanwhile, despite profound changes in the size and distribution of the population, living standards, the structure of the national economy and the workforce, and transportation and movement patterns, the spatial structure of the county system has remained largely unchanged apart from minor adjustments. The most important of these were the splitting of Dublin County Council into three new county councils in 1994 and the merger, in 2014, of Waterford and Limerick City Councils (formerly county boroughs) with their adjoining respective county councils (for various reasons the other three city councils have retained their independent status). In the same year, the previously separate North and South Tipperary County Councils were also merged. This contrasts sharply with the experience of most other European countries, where there has been widespread recasting of the territorial structure of subnational government in response to societal changes (Dente & Kjellberg, 1988). It also contrasts with the situation in Northern Ireland where, in 1973, the six county councils, two county boroughs and subcounty units were replaced by twenty-six 'unitary' district councils (focused, for the most part, on particular urban centres). These have since been reduced to just eleven district councils.

One recent measure which has impacted profoundly on the territorial structure of Irish local government was the elimination, in 2014, of all forms of elected municipal government (apart from the three surviving city councils). This measure came in the wake of two government-commissioned reports which proposed cuts in local government staffing (Local Government Efficiency Review Group, 2010) and, in particular, a radical reduction in the number of local authorities (McCarthy, 2009), but derived directly from a new policy framework, entitled *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government*, published in 2012 by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.

This framework proposed a range of major changes in the territorial structures, institutional arrangements, level of legislative autonomy and planning functions of subnational local government at the sub-county, county and regional levels (O'Riordáin & van Egeraat, 2013), many of which were duly put into effect through the 2014 Local Government Reform Act.

The most radical of these reforms was the abolition of all 80 town councils (i.e. the former urban district councils and town commissions) and their absorption into the new municipal districts into which all county council areas were subdivided. There are no separate elections to these districts; instead, each district is represented by the county councillors elected for that district. The effect of this reform was to reduce the total number of local authorities from 114 to 31 (26 county councils, 2 city and county councils, and 3 city councils) in a single local government tier, a unique situation among developed countries.

Given the narrow range of functions already exercised by the remaining county and city councils, this has left Ireland with a local government system which is extraordinarily weak by comparison with most other European countries (Callanan, 2018). According to the Local Autonomy Index prepared by Ladner et al. (2015), based on a range of indicators including functional responsibilities, financial powers, level of local government discretion, extent of central government supervision and the extent to which local government is consulted regarding central government decisions, Ireland came second-last (after Moldova) out of thirty-nine European countries in 2014, even below Liechtenstein and Malta.

Regional governance structures, 1964–2015²

The 1964 planning regions

Apart from the weakness of government at the county and municipal level, Ireland has also been unusual among European countries in its lack of meaningful governance structures at the regional level (i.e. at a spatial scale intermediate between the counties and the central government). Interest in such structures at this level first emerged in the early 1960s, when Ireland began to experience strong economic and population growth for the first time since independence. This

² This section focuses on nationwide regional governance structures and does not deal with specific regional or local agencies such as *Údarás na Gaeltachta* or local enterprise offices. For a brief review of the latter agencies, see Shannon (2016).

prompted demands for a planning framework to facilitate and regulate development at both local and regional levels, a demand which was partly met by the passage in 1963 of the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act.

While mainly focused on physical planning at the local and county level, this Act also provided for the coordination of the development plans of neighbouring planning authorities. On foot of this, shortly after the Act came into force in 1964, the Minister for Local Government divided the country into a set of nine planning regions, consisting of groups of adjoining counties (Map 4). Consultants were appointed to prepare strategic plans for each of the regions, which would provide frameworks to guide the preparation of local plans within each region (Bartley & Waddington, 2001). It was further envisaged that a coordinating body would be appointed for each region, whose main function would be to coordinate, in each region, the development plans being prepared by the counties making up that region (Roche, 1982).

While the objective of coordinating the development plans of neighbouring counties did make sense, the use of counties to define the planning regions meant that they were poorly related to the underlying spatial structure of the Irish economy. As Sister Mary Annette (1970, pp. 311–12) argued, the planning regions ‘were simply *ad hoc* groupings of existing counties – administratively convenient, no doubt, but scarcely a useful framework for social and economic planning at a regional scale’.

Having initially appointed consultants to prepare regional reports for Dublin and the Mid-West (Limerick) regions, the government then appointed the British consultancy firm Colin Buchanan and Partners to prepare reports for the other seven planning regions. The latter commission was then changed to preparing a regional planning framework to encompass the entire state. This was published in 1969 and proposed a planning strategy designed to counteract the powerful polarising effect of the Dublin Metropolitan Region in terms of attracting development. The main thrust of this strategy was the creation of two major growth centres in Cork and Limerick, the country’s second- and third-largest cities, and six secondary growth centres in the other regions (Breathnach, 2019). The strategy also proposed the establishment of a set of powerful planning authorities to oversee the implementation of the plan at regional level.

The Buchanan strategy was rejected outright by the government, at least in part due to opposition within the governing party’s strongly

Map 4: Planning regions, 1964



rural base to the strategy's plan to locate the bulk of new manufacturing employment in the proposed urban growth centres. Instead, the Industrial Development Authority (IDA), the government agency which was already achieving considerable success

in attracting inward investment, was also entrusted with promoting regional industrial development. When the IDA published its own regional industrial plans in 1972, they were much more dispersionist than the concentrated approach favoured by Buchanan.

The government did establish, also in 1969, a set of regional development organisations, with the remit of preparing coordinated regional development programmes for each of the planning regions. Comprised of representatives of county councils and state agencies which had economic development functions, these were restricted to an advisory and research role with no executive function. They were abolished in 1987.

In utilising the 1964 planning regions as the basis for its regional industrial plans, the IDA was almost unique in adopting an existing regional structure for their own regional organisation. In the 1960s and 1970s a number of central government departments and state agencies created regional administrative structures in such areas as healthcare, higher-level technical education and tourism development, but each structure was designed without reference to any other, thus producing a general lack of uniformity in these regional systems. Numerous reports have recommended uniformity in the interest of facilitating coordination of state functions at subnational level, but while governments have, on several occasions, made a commitment to achieving such uniformity, none has followed through on this. This reflects a general problem of lack of coordination between state departments at both national and subnational level, which was identified as a key weakness of the Irish public service by the OECD (2008).

Regional authorities

The issue of regional governance disappeared from the Irish public policy discourse for almost twenty years following the government's rejection of the 1969 Buchanan proposals. It reappeared again when, after the Single European Act came into effect in 1987, the EU embarked on a major expansion of financial assistance to its weaker regions to help offset what was expected to be, for them, the adverse effects of the completion of the Single European Market. This expansion of the so-called Structural Funds (relating to industrial and infrastructural investment, agricultural restructuring and workforce skills enhancement) was accompanied by the introduction of measures designed to achieve more effective use of the funds. These included a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to fund expenditure,

in the form of five-year operational programmes, a more rigorous approach to ongoing monitoring and post-hoc evaluation of the effectiveness of programme performance, and the involvement of subnational levels of government in the design and implementation of the programmes.

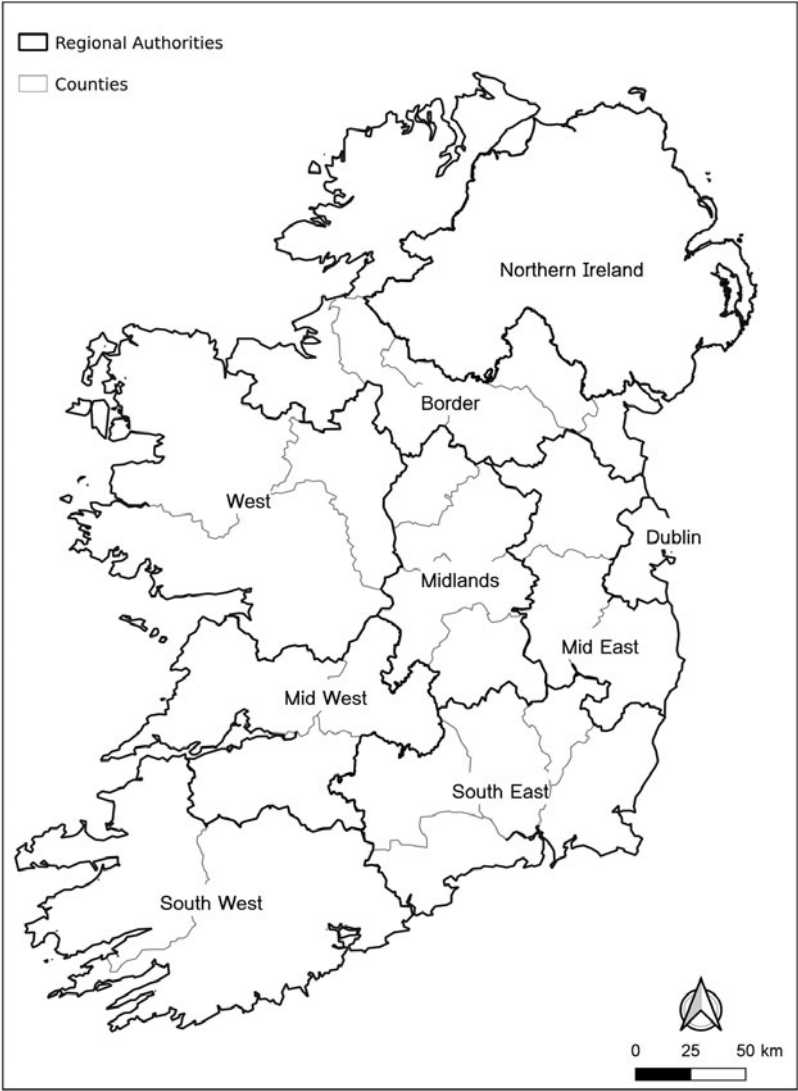
In the late 1980s, when the first round of enhanced Structural Funding was being prepared, Ireland's per capita GDP stood at just two-thirds of the EU average, which meant the entire country qualified as an Objective 1 region under the Structural Funding provisions. This meant that Ireland would receive the highest level of assistance available under the scheme. However, a problem for Ireland was the lack of a regional administrative structure, which was a requirement of the funding provisions.

For the first round of Structural Funding (1989–93), an ad-hoc arrangement was agreed whereby, for each of seven regions, a working group was set up (comprising officials from government departments, state agencies, and county managers along with a representative of the European Commission) to draft a development programme for that region. This group, expanded to include representatives of non-governmental organisations such as trade unions and farming groups, then became a review committee for the purpose of monitoring the progress of the regional programme (Callanan, 2018).

For the second funding round (1994–9), the European Commission insisted on the establishment of a formal regional structure to perform these functions. Given its deep-seated resistance to devolution, the Irish government's response was predictably minimalist, but nevertheless was accepted by the Commission. This involved the establishment of so-called regional authorities for each of eight regions (Map 5). These were largely similar to the 1964 planning regions, apart from the separation of Dublin from its adjoining counties, the transfer of Roscommon County from the Midlands to the West region, and the combination of the three smallest planning regions into a single Border region.

The regional authorities were formally assigned three main functions: to monitor Structural Fund spending in the respective regions; to promote coordination of public service provision in the regions; and to review each region's development needs. The second of these functions arose from the Advisory Expert Committee, whose report on local government reorganisation (1991) had recommended the establishment of the regional authorities. This report also proposed that all public sector agencies should use the same regional

Map 5: Regional authorities, 1994



structure as the regional authorities and suggested that the authorities be directly elected and be assigned responsibility for the provision of services which required a regional scale of operations for effective delivery.

None of the latter recommendations was implemented by the government. Membership of the authorities comprised county councillors nominated by the county councils which made up the regions served by each authority. The lack of a direct electoral base and of executive functions, allied to minimal resourcing (the typical secretariat comprised four to five persons), meant that the authorities had little status (Fitzpatrick Associates, 1997). What was supposed to be their primary function – that of monitoring Structural Funding in their regions – was largely tokenistic and was not taken seriously by central government officials. As MacFeeley (2016, p. 383) has observed: ‘regionalization in Ireland was a pragmatic response to optimize EU funding rather than any real commitment to the creation of meaningful regional structures or to democratic regionalization’.

Regional assemblies, 1999

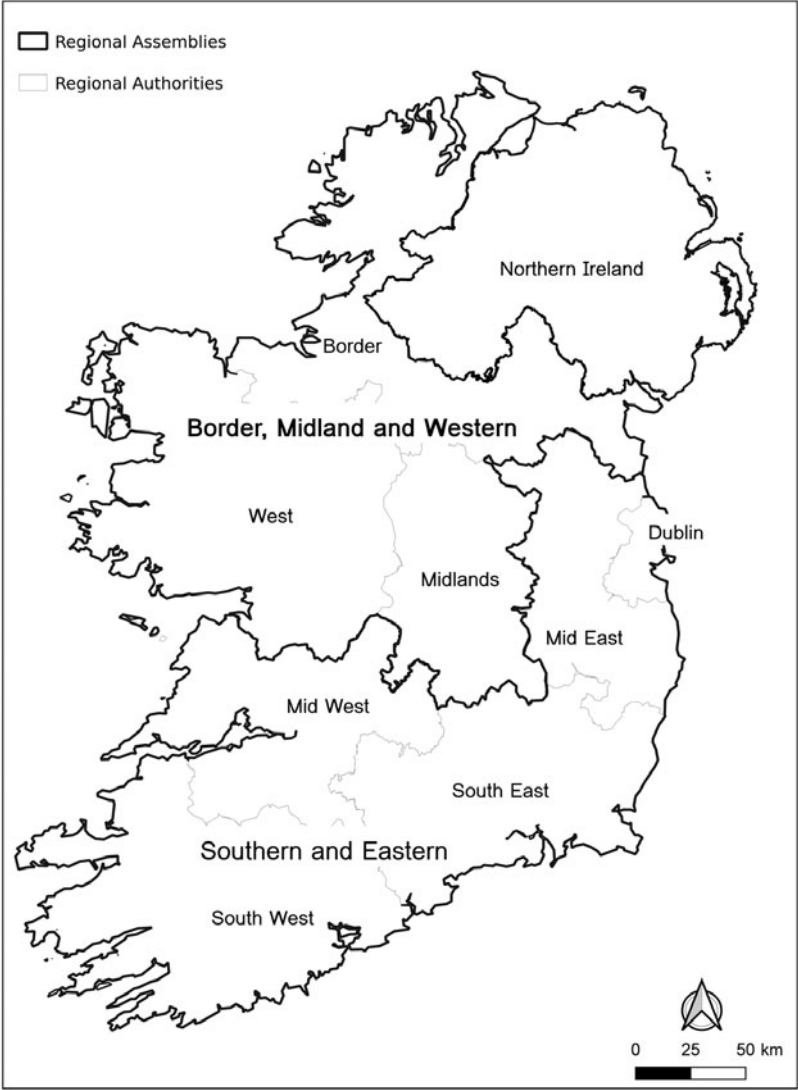
From 1993 on, Ireland embarked on the phase of rapid and sustained economic growth which became known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ phenomenon. This was associated with strong growth in inward investment in high-skill manufacturing and service industries, including pharmaceuticals, medical devices, financial services, software and Internet services. As a result, by 1998 Ireland’s per capita GDP had surpassed the EU average, which meant that, nationally, it was no longer eligible for Objective 1 status under the Structural Funding provisions.

However, the Celtic Tiger growth had predominantly been concentrated in the east and south of the country, and the Irish government persuaded the European Commission to allow Ireland to be divided into two NUTS II regions for the third round of Structural Funding (2000–6), with the north and west remaining an Objective 1 region while the south and east comprised an ‘Objective 1 in Transition region’. The latter was the term used to denote regions which had moved out of Objective 1 status and which remained eligible for some assistance, albeit at a much lower level. Previously, the whole country had comprised a single NUTS II region under the Structural Funding nomenclature.

As each of the new regions required a separate operational programme for Structural Funding, a further tier of subnational administration was required to take charge of the financial management and control of these programmes. Accordingly, regional assemblies were created in 1999 to perform these functions, one for the Southern and Eastern region and one for the Border, Midland and

Western region (Map 6). Each of these was an amalgam of existing regional authorities, which continued as NUTS III regions under the Structural Funding arrangements.

Map 6: Regional assemblies and regional authorities, 1999



Each of the regional assemblies comprised delegates from their constituent regional authorities (these already being delegates from their parent county councils). The assemblies were assigned the task of monitoring the implementation of the operational programmes within their constituent regional authorities and, as with the latter, promoting coordination in the provision of public services within their regions.

This combination of regional authorities and regional assemblies, along with their complex compositions, meant that, in Hayward's (2006, p. 10) words, 'Ireland's regions have among the most convoluted and inscrutable structures of governance in Europe'. Furthermore, according to Rees & Farrows (1999), quoted in Callanan (2018, p. 276), 'it is difficult to conceive of these structures having much political or regional significance, beyond being administrative entities for the national government'. Even in this role, the regional assemblies have been of little relevance. As with the regional authorities, they have been poorly funded with a small secretariat. Reviewing evaluations of their performance, Hayward (2006) concluded that their performance was 'poor' and suggested that their role was little more than 'symbolic'. For example, what was supposed to be the key Operational Committee of the Southern and Eastern Regional Assembly met just once in 2005.

The National Spatial Strategy

The inadequacy of Ireland's regional governance institutions was shown up in sharp relief with the failure of the NSS, an ambitious national plan for regional development launched in 2002 (Government of Ireland, 2002). The main aim of the NSS was to put in place a national planning framework to manage the rapid economic and demographic growth which Ireland was experiencing at the time. In particular, the NSS sought to counteract the increasing concentration of economic activity and population in the Dublin region.

The NSS was strongly influenced by 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). Thus, with echoes of the Buchanan growth centre strategy, the NSS proposed to base development in the Irish regions around a set of regional 'gateway' cities. It was envisaged that each of these cities would cultivate a specialised, export-oriented enterprise base which would drive broadly spread development within their respective hinterland regions.

While by no means the only problem which served to undermine the NSS, a major weakness of the strategy was the absence of, and failure to develop, a powerful regional governance tier to drive the development process within the respective regions (Breathnach, 2013, 2014). The NSS's strategy for each region was to be encapsulated in a set of regional planning guidelines for that region, to be drawn up by that region's regional authority. The region's county and city councils were expected to act in compliance with these guidelines in their own planning policies. However, the regional authorities had no powers to enforce compliance and, even if they had, the local councils in turn lacked the key functions, especially in the areas of infrastructural and economic development, required to achieve the form of regionally specific development which the NSS sought to bring about. The NSS therefore had made little progress when it was effectively brought to a halt by the 2008 financial crisis which undermined the Irish government's finances, although its abandonment was not officially signalled by the government until early 2013.

New regional assemblies, 2015

The government's 2012 policy framework for local government raised questions regarding the efficacy of the existing regional structures and, indeed, whether the retention of regional bodies as independent corporate entities was warranted at all. However, it was accepted that a regional dimension to public administration *was* required, mainly to support regional planning and for the purposes of functions relating to EU funding. Therefore, a relaunch of the regional element of local government was proposed, in order to create what was presented as being a rationalised and more coherent structure. In particular, it was felt that there was too much similarity, and overlap, between the regional authorities and the regional assemblies. Accordingly, it was announced that the authorities would be abolished entirely. At the same time, it was announced that a third regional assembly would be created.

These decisions were put into effect in 2014 when the regional authorities were abolished and three newly configured regional assemblies – Northern and Western (NWRA), Eastern and Midland (EMRA) and Southern (SRA) – were established one year later (Map 7). These three regions vary considerably in population size, ranging from 2.33 million persons for the EMRA region through 1.59 million for the SRA region to 0.85 million for the NWRA region (2016 population census). No explanation was given in the policy framework

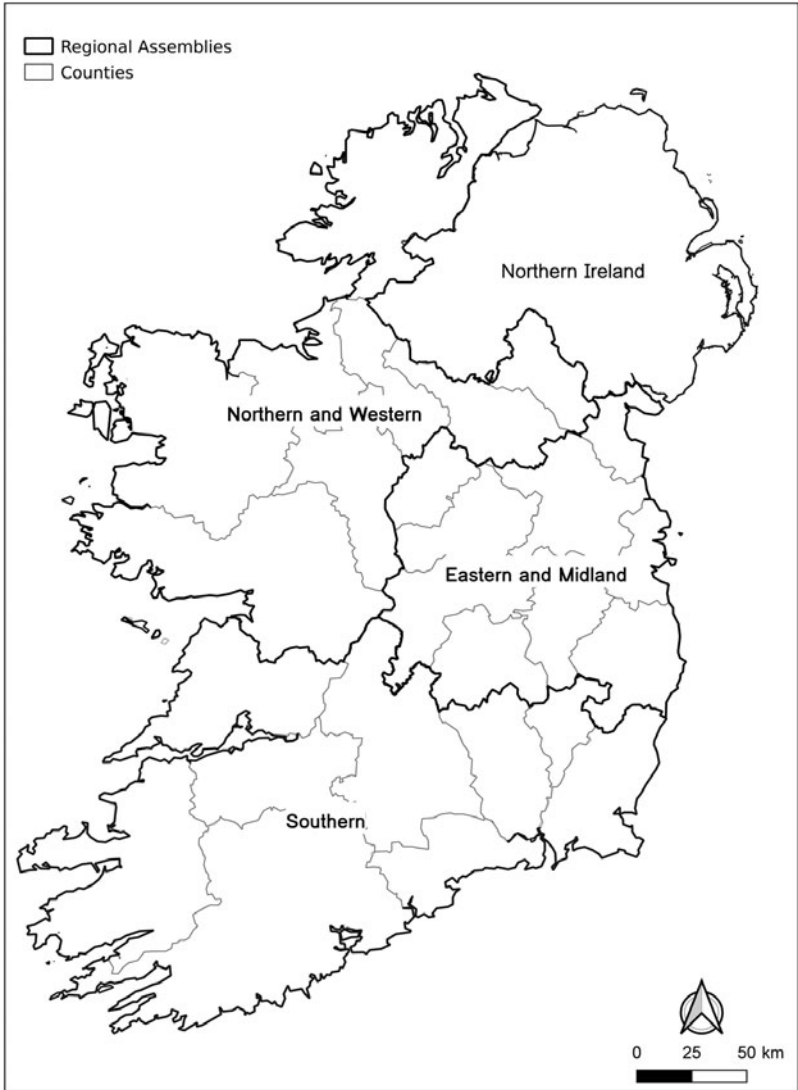
document for the creation of a third regional assembly, apart from a reference with respect to the EMRA that 'it is felt that the [constituent] counties are sufficiently intertwined as a region, for example in terms of economic linkage and communications, to justify this grouping' (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012, p. 97).

The policy framework document states that the new territorial structures would not affect the existing NUTS II and NUTS III classifications for EU funding purposes. It is difficult to see how this could be the case, unless the EU had discarded its previous insistence that there be appropriate administrative structures for managing funding at the regional level. The regional authorities, which were (at least in name) managing funding at the NUTS III level, have been abolished entirely while the EMRA region combines former regional authorities which were in the Objective 1 and Objective 1 in Transition NUTS II regions. In addition, the former Border Regional Authority is now split between the EMRA and NWRA regions, while there is no longer any clear border between the Mid West and South East Regional Authority territories following the merger (in 2014) of North and South Tipperary County Councils, which were previously divided between these territories.

The geography of the new territorial structures has been criticised on several grounds. The proposed new regions mark an abandonment of any pretence of replicating the city-region structures (comprising a focal city and its functional hinterland) which lie at the heart of the ESPD. While some of the abolished regional authorities had at least some semblance of correspondence to existing city-region structures (Breathnach, 2013; O'Riordáin & van Egeraat, 2016), the new territorial structures bear no such relationship. A possible exception here is the EMRA region, which combines metropolitan Dublin with its wider commuting belt, including County Louth, which was previously in the Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly (Van Egeraat & Foley, 2012). However, the other two regional assemblies are not characterised by functional integration and all three regions are too large to function as units for integrated socio-economic and environmental planning and bottom-up regional development.

As before, the new regional assemblies are responsible for the management of the EU regional operational programmes and other EU funding within their regions. They have also been given a role of monitoring the financial and administrative performance of the county

Map 7: Regional assemblies, 2015



and city councils within their regions, in conjunction with the National Oversight and Audit Commission, established in 2014. A third, and potentially more important, role is the preparation of regional spatial and economic strategies (RSESs) for the NPF.

The National Planning Framework

The NPF, launched by the Irish government in 2018, is a further ambitious plan for pursuing regional development in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2018). The general thrust of the NPF is similar to that of the NSS, in that its primary aim is to achieve stronger growth in the other regions relative to the Dublin Metropolitan Region, and the principal method to be employed for achieving this is via concentrated development in the four main regional cities (Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford). This represents a degree of spatial concentration even more pronounced than that envisaged for the NSS, which had identified eight gateway centres for special development.

The NPF requires each regional assembly to prepare an RSES which should be aligned with the broad overall objectives of the NPF. Each county and city council, in turn, is required to align its local plans and policies with the regional RSES. These councils are accountable to the regional assemblies through a biennial reporting arrangement in relation to progress towards achievement of the RSES objectives. Acknowledging that the regional assemblies (especially the SRA and NWRA) have too broad a spatial extent to facilitate a concentrated focus on the five target city-regions (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford), the NPF provides for the preparation of coordinated metropolitan area strategic plans for these cities.

Achievement of the NPF objectives is strongly reliant on willing participation by the various organs of state in, and compliance with, the RSESs and the broader NPF process. However, the regional assemblies have no power to enforce this compliance. Furthermore, they continue to be under-resourced in terms of the functions which they are expected to perform: in 2016 their combined support staff amounted to just fifty-five (Callanan, 2018), which is miniscule for organisations operating at this level.

An Office of the Planning Regulator has been established to evaluate local and regional plans and the performance of planning bodies at local and regional levels. However, it remains to be seen how effective this office will be in terms of enforcing compliance where plans or planning bodies are found to be at odds with RSES or NPF objectives. Furthermore, the Planning Regulator does not appear to have any role in supervising compliance of government departments and state agencies with these objectives. The NPF states that such bodies are required to contribute, and adhere, to the RSESs. The NSS contained a similar statement, and set out governance arrangements designed to achieve the involvement of the bodies in question, but this involvement did not materialise subsequently (Breathnach, 2014).

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the spatial arrangements for the administration of government at subnational level in Ireland, both historically and in the period since the achievement of political independence in 1922. The effectiveness of subnational governance structures depends on the range of functions devolved to the subnational level and the appropriateness of the spatial structure of subnational governance for the performance of these functions. A distinguishing feature of subnational government in Ireland is the paucity of functions devolved to the regional and local levels compared with the norm in other European countries. Furthermore, international experience indicates that functions such as spatial planning and the delivery of public services are best served where administrative structures are closely attuned to underlying socio-spatial structures. In modern advanced economies such structures are typified by a hierarchical system of focal nodes and their surrounding hinterlands, and in most European countries subnational governance structures are so aligned (Breathnach, 2013, 2014).

A recurring theme of this paper has been the ongoing mismatch, in Ireland, between the territorial structure of subnational administration and the spatial patterns of the everyday lives of the general population. While the problems arising from this mismatch have been regularly articulated by individuals, organisations and official reports, and while there have been occasional commitments by political figures to address the issue, the problems persist. Particular attention has been drawn to the continuing centrality of the long-outdated counties to Ireland's system of subnational government. Irish politicians have been resistant to any tampering with an entity which has acquired an almost mystical status among a large portion of Irish society, linked mainly to sporting considerations. The prospects of significant reform in this respect therefore appear to be very slight.

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