Achieving Regional Equality

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List of acronyms

EMRA   Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly

GDP   Gross Domestic Product

IDA   Industrial Authority of Ireland

IRC   Irish Research Council

MASP   Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan

NPF   National Planning Framework

NWRA   Northern and Western Regional Assembly

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation
        and Development

RSES   Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies

SRA   Southern Regional Assembly

UCD   University College Dublin

Foreword by the Southern Regional Assembly

The Southern Region Assembly (SRA) are very pleased to be associated with this report and the research undertaken by Dr. Carla Maria Kayanan as part of the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the SRA project to observe and document the relatively new process of 'metropolitanisation' in Ireland to offer insight into implementation. The report shines a light on the effectiveness and capacity of the democratic process and governance structures at the regional level in Ireland to effect change.

The SRA is responsible for the formulation, adoption, and implementation of the statutory Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), which translate the ambitions of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Government's economic policies to regional level. A core component of the RSES strategy are the statutory Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASPs) for the cities of Cork, Limerick and Waterford, which are meant to grow by over 50% by 2040 as part of a structural realignment in Ireland's population, homes, and jobs away from the Greater Dublin Area. These are extremely ambitious targets which have never been accomplished in the State's history. The extent of the challenge is underlined by recent census results and studies showing that while our three cities are undergoing significant growth, the overwhelming growth of the Greater Dublin Area shows no signs of abating.

The responsibility of agreeing the RSES is with the 33 Regional Assembly members nominated to the assembly from their constituent local authorities. This can be a challenging role as they are faced with the dual task of representing their local area, while also delivering the statutory strategic role of the Regional Assembly. This regional role may clash with their role, for which they have been elected as local representatives. This sometimes-contradictory position can be unfair and unreasonable on the members and can hinder the development of a regional approach, particularly where the local view runs counter to the regional.

The fundamentals of the NPF are considered sound as a future basis for Ireland's development and the development of our cities. Nonetheless, very significant concerns remain regarding the capacity to achieve the transformative change required given structural challenges, including limitations on the democratic process, the highly centralised nature of governance in Ireland, the need for infrastructural investment to underpin the change required and the ability to resist continuous pressure for growth around the capital. Delivering on compact growth/place making requires new ways of thinking and new skills. It is unlikely that managing this level of change—if we are serious about achieving it—can be achieved by current organisational mechanisms. New approaches and ways of working are required.

We are still at the early stages of implementation of a long-term strategy. The NPF review is timely and provides an opportunity to refocus with an emphasis on improving the mechanisms for achieving the NPF, RSES and MASP ambitions for our regional cities. This report, together with other recent initiatives, will assist in influencing the structural change necessary to deliver on the promise of the NPF.

Kevin Lynch, Assistant Director & Senior Planner, Southern Regional Assembly
February 2024

Executive summary

Governing from the metropolitan scale is not a concept that is widely comprehended in Ireland. And yet, the 2018 National Planning Framework (NPF) statutorily mandates Ireland's three regional assemblies to develop what they term Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASP) for each of their respective regional cities. This is a challenge for the three regional assemblies because the purpose and power of the metropolitan scale and its designation is little understood amongst planners, policymakers and the general public. Additionally in a staunchly centralised Ireland, the regional assemblies as governance bodies are under-recognised and under-appreciated.

When done correctly, various opportunities can stem from city-regional governance. Amongst development scholars, strengthening lower tiers of governance is beneficial particularly to identify places in need of policy attention. However, in order to effectively legitimise meso-level governance and to successfully implement the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) and MASPs, people's awareness of how the city-regional scale can benefit them and their locality must first be addressed.

This policy report is based on research that took place between September 2021 – December 2022. Funded jointly by the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA), the research focuses on Ireland's Southern Region, its Assembly (SRA) and its executive (SRA Executive) as a case study to observe and document the relatively new process of 'metropolitanisation' in Ireland in order to offer insight into implementation.

The first phase of research began with an examination of the current spatial policies in the NPF, the SRA's RSES and the MASPs for Cork, Limerick-Shannon and Waterford. These statutory, long-term documents will guide future development through to 2040[1] and require new governance approaches. Because the process of instituting new scales of governance is inherently messy and incremental, but necessary to address spatial inequality in Ireland, the aim of this report is to support the implementation of the new spatial arrangements, however contentious they may be in terms of their questionable growth projections or hierarchical rankings. Making the NPF relevant necessitates interrogating how the current framework can support local authorities in meeting the needs of their constituents across a wide-variety of settlement types and understanding why resistance to spatial plans occurs.

The second phase of the research

involved understanding perceptions of inequality. This follows McCann's (1) concept of how people's perception of prosperity and quality of life depends on the productivity of their region in addition to their awareness of the experience of other regions. The report looks beyond the economic dimensions of spatial planning to focus instead on territorial inequalities and spatial justice. This was done through place-based qualitative methods that sought to understand local stakeholder's perceptions through dialogue and with a normative dimension.[2] This meant making attempts to meet interview respondents in proximity to their home or area of representation and, when possible, touring their constituencies to collectively discuss developmental problems and challenges in the context of the ambitions contained within the NPF.

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1   The SRA's initial RSES is detailed through 2026 and 2031. Meaning, there exist opportunities to redirect policies so long as they remain within the overarching scope of the NPF.

2   This research methodology is borrowed from the EU's Horizon 2020 programme *IMAJINE: Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe*: http://imajine-project.eu

To counter sentiments of inequality, push past resistances to the new spatial arrangements, strengthen city-regional governance and spatial planning in Ireland and successfully implement the MAPSs, four key findings emerged from the research:

- Existing local area social capital and community capacity must be assessed, acknowledged and supported;

- Accessibility to social infrastructure that allows people to have a higher quality of life must be prioritised;

- Education on the intentions and content of the spatial strategies, clarity around decisions made and a greater awareness of achievements by the SRA are necessary to enhance the perception and functioning of the regional scale;

- The SRA needs to identify and align with regional champions to pressure central government and its departments to better acknowledge the latent capacities of sub-national government and empower and finance them appropriately.

This policy paper also calls for the SRA Executive to continue to closely engage with local authorities to provide clarity and keep them abreast of policy changes that will impact their mode of operation. Finally, maintaining tight connections with EU authorities as supporters for decentralisation will assist in the successful implementation of the regional spatial strategies.

This report champions spatial planning in Ireland and argues for the stronger recognition and support of the metropolitan scale. Doing so will bring the added benefit of assuaging the concerns local councillors feel about being left behind by the new policy framework. While the case study area was the Southern Region, findings are applicable across the three regions, their assemblies and their executives. It is imperative that the three assemblies continue to work together closely to realise the potential of regional governance in Ireland. The same applies to MASPs stakeholders, once they are fully identified. At the time of writing, multiple individuals have moved on from key positions within Ireland's three regional assembly executives and there is real concern that the regional assemblies are failing to receive the support to maintain their existence. In the summer of 2023, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) representatives met with regional stakeholders across Ireland to analyse the potential of the regional tier. This indicates that, at least at the supranational level and within some pockets of central government, commitment to developing the city-regional scale remains intact. However, more research, funding, policy attention and awareness –and ultimately devolution of power—is essential for Ireland's regions and their metropolitan areas to become meaningful administrative and institutional actors in the future or Ireland's development to address regional inequalities.

Introduction

Amongst the OECD countries, Ireland represents one of the most centralised government systems (2–4). With Dublin's Gross Domestic Product and difference in disposable income outpacing the national average, the European Commission's decision to downgrade the Northern and Western Region from 'More Developed Region' to 'Transition Region', and population decline in the border region, midlands and island populations, Ireland exhibits high levels of interregional inequality. The persistence of entrenched centralisation and interregional inequality contribute to feelings of discontent across populations who feel the government and its policies no longer represents or serves them and their communities.

From as far back as the 1968 Buchanan Report, the Irish government has experimented with new towns, decentralisation and designated growth poles to address interregional inequalities and effect more balanced regional development. These efforts have had limited success, due in part to a lack of joined up thinking across critical stakeholders, failed decentralisation and a development culture of cronyism (5). The introduction of the NPF, a hierarchical framework introduced in 2018 with statutory footing, devolves responsibility to lower tiers of government. The designation of three regional assemblies and their corresponding regional cities are meant to drive spatial and economic development away from Dublin. Each regional assembly is tasked with developing and monitoring their respective RSES and MASPs for each of their regional cities.

Figure 1. Ireland's three regions and their respective regional cities

The NPF is purposely designed as a 'tiered' framework: the NPF lists the overarching strategic objectives for Ireland, the RSES sits below the NPF and is written by each regional assembly through their interpretation of the NPF objectives, and the MASPs (as well as Local Area Plans) are guided by the higher order objectives in the NPF and the RSES but with granular specificities on planning and development informed by local 'on the ground' stakeholders.

The tiered spatial planning framework has confronted a variety of implementation obstacles. First, the tiered-approach to plan implementation and funding distribution–from central government (NPF) to regional government (RSES) to metro government (MASP)—automatically creates concerns that cities are prioritised at the expense of Ireland's smaller towns and villages. This has meant that from the outset, the plans have received pushback from some councillors, particularly from more rural areas, and resulted in a degree of delegitimisation of the plans. Second, in Ireland there is a limited history of thinking about the 'urban' as an identity or policy domain, much less using cities and their metropolitan areas as "pillars on which to base the RSES settlement and economic strategy" (SRA,

RSES pg.22) (6,7). Therefore, advancing on a policy tailored to a form of spatial planning that forefronts the hierarchical ordering of cities is an uphill battle, particularly in a country with strong urban-rural cultural underpinnings. Third, and similar to the point above, in Ireland governing from the regional tier is hampered by low institutional operating knowledge, lack of visibility, legitimacy, decision-making responsibility and voice. This translates to regional assemblies struggling with the process of where they fit in the policy system and how they justify their relevance, never mind implementing novel metropolitan area plans.

To add to the complications, a further impediment of a new spatial agenda that focuses its attention on city-regions is that Ireland is one of the few EU countries with projected growth in places outside of the dominant metropolitan areas (8). So while the overall urban population in Ireland is projected to increase by +29.2% (the second highest rate in the EU after Malta at +35.4), the overall rural population in Ireland is projected to increase by +24.5% (9).[3] These projections present an opening to rethink and improve upon the current approach to spatial planning in Ireland.

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3   Prior to joining the EU, Finland had a practice of limiting the growth of cities and providing allocations to worse-off regions (20).

Regional development and inequality in the scholarly literature

Urbanisation of the population has meant that as cities grow and expand, smaller towns, villages and rural settlements empty out. The expansion of cities also has also meant that locations recently considered 'outside' of the city, are now consumed by the city. They might be consumed by a new political boundary that specifies they belong to the city or they might be consumed in terms of creating more direct flows between the city and back again. New patterns emerge comprised of co-existing social, cultural, economic and environmental multidirectional flows. With these multiplex networks come a period of growing pains around governance. Principally, who is in charge and where are the boundaries of their jurisdiction?

Questions around the optimal form of development and scale of governance have been around for decades, as have debates questioning the possibility of balanced development. Whereas the literature on achieving spatial equality is inconclusive, what is certain is that specific places require and benefit from policy. Left unchecked, growth or lack of it can be disastrous in some cases. The work that needs to be done, then, is to identify the spaces that can be helped through policy interventions.

In some countries with weak units of local government, centralisation is best. In other countries with historically local autonomy, centralisation creates obstacles. One line of argument is that initiatives designed by central government are often too far removed from on-the-ground realities. Furthermore, national policies might be more sectoral and growth focused. At the same time, if local authorities do not have adequate resources or are under-staffed, as is the case for many local authorities in Ireland, concentrating administrative power at higher scales of governance might be more appropriate. As Steiner et al (10) ask, "Is local always better?" In Ireland, a meso-scale of governance might best be situated to strike a balance between central and local tiers of government.

Particularly, when considering the regional scale, scholars have argued that regional governance creates a core-periphery binary (11). But to use the term binary is to obfuscate the continuum. In reality, places are always in flux, challenging the logic of assigning towns and villages into a neat hierarchy (12). Regions, as Paasit and Metzger (13) argue, are always becoming rather than being. The goal for policy is to ensure that the 'becoming' is in the right direction and, if so, to support it.

What is clear from the literature is that context and culture matter. In addition, as the quick adaptation of everyday spaces during Covid demonstrated, planning challenges constantly emerge and, as demonstrated by the political debates around planning for just climate futures, considerations of a changing environment are essential. As such, one key take-away from the more contemporary development literature is the emphasis on well-being and sustainability outcomes (8). By gaining a better understanding of the perceptions and lived realities of spatial/territorial inequalities of settlements from cities to remote peripheries, more efficient sectoral policies can be deployed at the right scale.

The Southern Regional Assembly:
Governing Ireland's most disparate region

Unlike the Eastern & Midlands Region and the Northern & Western Region that only have one metropolitan area (Dublin and Galway respectively) the SRA has three metropolitan areas spread across the largest region in terms of land mass (see Table 1).

Table 1. SRA profile at a glance

Counties	9
Local authorities	10
Metropolitan areas	3 (Cork, Limerick, Waterford)
Sub-regions	3
Land area	29,590 (42% of Ireland's state territory
Population	1.7 million (2022)
Population growth projections	340,000-380,000

Further, Ireland's SRA has the challenge of implementing spatial and economic strategies across the widest variety of settlement types (see Table 2).[4]

Table 2: Breakdown of settlements in the Southern Regional Assembly

Settlement type	Population figures	Total
Regional cities and suburbs	50,000+	3 (22% of the Region's total population)
Big Towns	10,000+	13
Small Towns	5000-9999	15
Settlements	1,500 – 5,000	45

Additionally complicating the governance challenge is electoral representation. The SRA is dominantly comprised of rural-based elected representatives, but they are responsible for developing and overseeing the implementation of metropolitan plans (see Table 3).

Table 3. Southern Regional Assembly governance structure

	Elected members
Regional Assembly elected members	33 (27 nominated + 6 members of the European Committee of the Regions)
County representatives	22
City and County representatives[5]	6
City representatives	5
Assembly Executive	27 staff members

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4   To use the terminology of the SRA RSES, this means regional cities and suburbs, big towns (more than 10,000 people), small towns (between 5000-10000) and settlements (less than 500 - 5000).

5   City and county representatives include those from Limerick City and County Council and Waterford City and County Council.

Governance over such a disparate region entails working on actions with an extensive network of cross sectoral stakeholders and raises complex scalar issues that reveal tensions in relation to territorial cooperation/competition.

A total of 12 semi-structured interviews and walk/talks with past and present elected members of the SRA from across the Southern Region were conducted.[6] Three questions guided the research:

1. What have been the historic barriers to effective implementation of regional and national plans in Ireland?

2. What institutions, experts and perspectives are required to support the realisation of ambitious territorial agendas?

3. How do variations in the discourse and policy intervention around cities and metropolitan areas outside of the capital impact spatial development and policy?

Discussions and walk/talks with respondents revealed that territorial inequality exists in Ireland in part due to the perception that metropolitan areas are privileged while other areas are relegated as 'places that don't matter'. This strongly contributes to an overarching 'Dublin versus the rest' political culture. The next section, which is organised into three thematic sub-sections, emerged from the discussions.

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6   To ensure impact across stakeholders, the interview guide used in interviews was co-created by the researcher, UCD academic mentor and the Southern Regional Assembly mentors.

Insights from lived experiences of people across the Southern Region

Part 1: What is the intra-regional capacity for organisation in the Southern Regional Assembly?

Interviewees feel that the new spatial arrangements exacerbate inequality by choking the capacity for places outside of cities to thrive and will diminish local resources.[7] The NPF and RSES, through their prioritisation of population growth, cities as economic bases, and associated funds following that logic, are perceived as neglecting the quality-of-life benefits that can be found in smaller settlements across the region.

"I think we are so focused on kind of this idea that economic development is only driven by large population clusters and often miss the economy that is going on outside of all of that" (respondent 5).

Localities want to feel empowered to drive growth rather than being positioned to derive benefits from the city. Revisiting hierarchical funding distributions and population growth projections, while an extremely challenging endeavour at this stage of implementation, may help support some of the qualities of life and attachment to place elements that are simply not quantifiable, nor replicable, but are highly valued:

"I suppose people's personal geography is a defining factor that they don't maybe think about" (respondent 5).

Kerry Writer's Museum in Listowel is a long-standing community endeavour that has been pivotal in securing the Heritage Town designation from Fáilte Ireland and the 2011 Historic Town initiative. Board membership extends beyond Listowel to include stakeholders in North Kerry. The museum also plays an education and training role for the museum sector. In many respects, this non-for-profit community organisation serves as a regional anchor for North Kerry.

"I feel that a lot of times like closing any services around here, somebody from the top says, 'Ok, we have to arrive at this figure, do what you have to do to get to this figure,' and they chop chop chop and like, no one looks at the consequences of it" (respondent 8).

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7   See Hickson's (22) case study exploration of Seacombe (UK) as a precarious settlement where individuals with a shared prosperity, community stability, and local autonomy have felt their livelihoods become fragile and insecure as a result of top-down redistributive interventions that have removed control from local people.

Currently, though respondents believe that rural living provides a higher quality of life than what is offered in larger more expensive and congested cities, maintaining this quality of life feels increasingly challenging. Housing issues are particularly salient with respondents citing the following frustrations:

- Few houses exist for purchase;

- Local authorities are unable to build new housing in villages due to population caps based on questionable growth projections, as well as infrastructural constraints (see below);

- Waste treatment plants are at capacity;

- In some instances one-off housing is the only development option but regulations around one-off housing prevent development;

- Rural housing regulations that require the owner to be from a rural area constrains diversity and the flow of money into villages.

Beyond housing, respondents are concerned that the new spatial arrangements may negate strides made across time to maintain families and attract newcomers and fear that the overarching outcome will be a displacement of local opportunities and capacity. Respondents demonstrate anxiety that not being favoured for larger population growth projections will have a trickle-down effect of diminished public services, including school buses, autism services in schools, community centres and senior services, to list a few examples. The pressure to compete with other towns targeted for development is acutely felt.

"...that tier of towns of about 20,000 or so people, they are the people I think that are most concerned about the dominance of cities to their town" (respondent 5)

A hierarchical ordering of Ireland's settlements is, in effect, creating competition for resources rather than fostering collaboration. It is helpful to recognise that the challenges the SRA and SRA Executive face with central government can sometimes be the same challenges that local authorities face with the Regional Assemblies.

For example, in the same way that the regional cities (Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford) are positioned to redirect development away from Dublin, the smaller towns and villages see themselves as needing to pull development attention and resources away from their closest regional city. This speaks to a very immature multi-level governance structure in Ireland.

"They compete. Like Tralee would be the capital of a county and they'd be awful jealous of Killarney. What Killarney would have in terms of activities, in terms of tourism attractions, in terms of the growth of Killarney and its development. They would you know. So, Council Chambers would find that between Councils in Killarney and Tralee, there'd be friction all the time if Killarney got 10k, Tralee would say why?" (respondent 1).

In effect, the outcome is an increase in two forms of competition:

1. To attract resources away from regional cities and

2. To compete against each other, leading to arguments around hierarchical rankings (i.e. key town versus town versus small town, etc.).

Inter-regional competition amongst smaller towns and villages is frequently raised by respondents as a form of unequal treatment. Whereas the status of the regional cities is accepted (with the exception of Waterford in some instances), the smaller towns recognise the threat to being ranked hierarchically. This creates tension.

There is scope to recognise the strengths of amenities offered in each of the settlements and to position their strengths in this manner. Recognising and highlighting the strength of each locality will ensure towns and villages are gateways and not gatekeepers competing with each other for resources. This requires:

- Identifying local strengths and assigning roles

- Contextualising bias and empowering localities

Identifying strengths and assigning roles

Undoubtedly, there exists variety across places. This is particularly true in the SRA with its disparate array of settlement types. Implementing a city-regional approach for the regional cities is challenging when: 1) the regional cities are not necessarily accepted as cities and 2) when a commuter culture around the regional cities is not well established. Two sentiments exemplify this well:

"…in Dublin, not so much in Cork or Limerick but Dublin was always recognised as urbanised but up to very lately like Cork City or Limerick City would have been, in the European context, they would only be rural towns, rural big towns, do you know what I mean? And the link to the rural areas is basically part of our identity to a certain extent" (respondent 9).

"…if you are driving from one village to another village in the direction of a regional city, you may as well drive all the way to the city" (resondent 10)

However, rather than looking at how to compete against the regional cities or across the region, settlements proximate to each other could determine their strengths and capacities so that instead of commuting to the regional city, individuals can commute to points that meet their social requirements. This opens the opportunity to make the connection between climate change and public transportation infrastructure. It can also and facilitate the ability to access a higher quality of life:

"… I think they are coming at it from the wrong mindset, they are trying to compete directly with the city, they are putting everything in there. Stop looking at the city, look at what you have and look at how you can make it better. So they need to focus on their own particular area, I think villages do it quite well, towns get lost in the middle." (respondent 5)

The St. Michael's Day Care Centre in Cappamore, which caters to an elderly population, is a source of pride for the community. A door-to-door transport service allows a wider regional-access to their services. Home cooked food, hair services, feet services and showers, in addition to social opportunities, are all provided in the centre.

"…you will come across regions within the region who have similarities so you can emphasise the needs in those type of communities. Kerry and West Cork we are very similar, parts of Kerry particularly. West Cork and the tourist area of Kerry would have very similar needs. So, you can examine and associate yourself with those." (respondent 9)

The SRA RSES acknowledges strategic attributes of the key towns but the focus is more economic than social (i.e. tourism, transport hub, significant employment role/potential, etc.). Instead, interview questions around the theme of urban proximity provide insights on the amenities considered necessary from the city versus those that could be obtained from their nearest towns and villages. As this respondent states, traveling to different locations to acquire needs and services already happens:

"So Listowel always had a cinema therefore Abbeyfield didn't because as its 15 minutes away, people were going to go into the cinema in Listowel. You know, different things like that, only one of those size towns would have swimming pool typically and the swimming pool in this area is actually in a small town called Askeaton and people will travel from Newcastle West and Rathkeel to Askeaton for that particular facility and that town has an awful lot of industry so people are travelling, a lot of people are going to work in different factories around that town as well so I think towns do it without realizing, it's not necessarily very well thought out but it happens anyway" (respondent 5).

Developing a 'social infrastructure mind map' with respondents discussing their commuting patterns to access goods and services would strongly inform spatial plans. Desirable amenities currently lacking from smaller towns and villages include:

- Swimming pool
- Cinema
- Theatre
- Hospital
- Late night dining
- Ability to pay tax on car, pay insurance

Better broadband to increase remote working and circumvent long commutes and traffic congestion and easier access to hospitals and health care are also highlighted as important amenities to preserve the high quality of life offered outside of the city.

Additionally, below are elements that the city offers that are not stated as considered necessary to spread across the region:

- Specialised services (medical courses, pharmacy degree, etc.)
- 3rd level institutions
- Concerts, large cultural events
- Specialty shopping

Using social need as the basis to determine development patterns could play an important role in balancing regional development.

Countering bias and empowering localities

The perceived benefits of living away from more dense settlements needs to be weighed against elements of nostalgia and sentimental attachment that is associated with life in the countryside and the need to preserve it:

"If you were working in the White House, top job, you will still come back to your roots because whatever is in the country, no matter where you are, if the US, if you're in Europe, if you're in Ireland, whatever is in the country, it will draw you back, it will suck you back home. So it is a beautiful way of living - my happiest memories of my life was when I was born in the country" (respondent 1).

"So, yeah, that's what I would say about that, that there are places that have been left behind, to some degree, and where they have, often it has been the communities that has brought them up, rather than the state and the big megabucks, you know, they've had to work very hard from the ground-up rather than be helped from the institutions of the state" (respondent 10).

The second quote resonates strongly with respondents who discussed how people in rural places take matters into their own hands and do not rely on the government to service them. In fact, the state plays a large role in helping to balance interregional inequality through funding and social

A school building from 1935 is now home to the sustainably built and operated Cappamore Library and Arts Studios. Hi-tech touch-screen technology allows users to perform library transactions online, as well as to access a range of Council services. Four art studios and workspaces provide year-long, affordable residencies for artists, thus rooting them in a rural setting. A librarian is on-hand to assist patrons, but the technology also means that the library can remain in operation and provide value to the community without heavy resourcing.

welfare schemes (14). Rather than buy-into these rural-urban biases and perceptions of distributional unfairness, there are opportunities that can be harnessed from existing strengths displayed in tight-knit communities.

"Country living means having to be proactive to get anything done, requires strong community, and strong community stakeholders" (respondent 2).

The sentiment expressed in this quote emerged often. Evidence of capacity that emerges from strong community bonds is visible across the region. The task is to identify where it is occurring and to support it. Bin collection services are one such example. As one respondent highlighted, in city centres public resources are more plentiful, but outside of the city centres it comes down to community associations or Tidy Towns to organise bin collection. This attitude of self-provisioning can be tapped into and fortified.
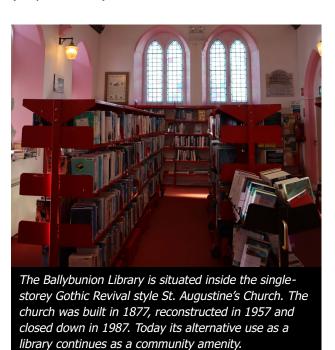
"Listowel Town would be quite similar to Newcastle West in that it is, I suppose it is a focal point for area, it is would be less than 5,000 people but Listowel had its own Town Council previously and certainly that seems to make a big difference in not just identity, but I would say confidence of towns that had a Town Council. There was that sense of autonomy there, there was a sense of driving their own fortunes and certainly living in towns and in counties where they didn't have a network of Town Councils previous to their abolition, it certainly seems that there is less direction within that urban core" (respondent 5).

Importantly, it is worth noting that a lack of capacity might not actually be a lack of willingness or desire, but an inability to execute, as this respondent demonstrates:

"I think they have the capacity, I just don't think they're necessarily let do what they can do" (respondent 6).

Smaller towns and villages may lack the in-house expertise to secure funding:

"…if you don't have the plan when a tranche of funding comes up from the Department of Affairs or whatever it is, then you don't have a document with which to apply for it" (respondent 5).

The Ballybunion Library is situated inside the single-storey Gothic Revival style St. Augustine's Church. The church was built in 1877, reconstructed in 1957 and closed down in 1987. Today its alternative use as a library continues as a community amenity.

This points to a need to deeply rethink how to strengthen the capacity in settlements wherever it is occurring regardless of scale. First, competition, or a fear of having to compete for resources is a scary reality for some local authorities who recognise that:

- Some localities have the capacity to manage resources but others cannot and require a lot more resources and support;

- Local authorities with resources and a plan in place will receive funding from the EU, those who do not have this, will lose out;

- Speed of attaining policy attention that directs resources happens faster where there is a critical mass (i.e. town centres) but constituents in rural spaces are challenged to demonstrate the same level of need.

Ongoing quantitative and embedded work is necessary to determine where community richness and capacity continues to exist and flourish, as well as where it is diminishing and disappearing. Walk/talks demonstrated that communities with limited resources have come together to address their respective challenges. The work that needs to be done is to valorise, prioritise and maintain these hard-fought services. When individuals fight for their towns, they automatically create strong community bonds. It is critical to maintain these bonds to preserve these towns, their social capital and their community capacity. In cases such as these, the regional scale is critical to leverage their battery of expertise and to drive policy into these spaces. This requires developing a process to identify differential capacity.

Part 2: Do people know enough about the new regional planning architecture?

Imposing a new territorial scale of governance and administration is not an easy endeavour. In a country with fierce county boundaries, recalibrating social, economic and administrative boundaries to the city-regional scale might appear meaningless and artificial. However, strong city-regions that bring governance closer to the localities they are meant to serve is necessary to break Ireland's historic pattern of centralised control and effectively address some of the significant negative agglomeration effects of recent growth. Educating local authorities and elected regional assembly representatives on the definition and value of this scale is imperative. And yet, amongst respondents, there exists confusion around what constitutes as metropolitan. In some instances, this might be a result of a limited awareness of a definition, a lack of vocabulary and implies the unfamiliarity with this scale. For example, in the following quote the respondent is defining metropolitan without recognising it:

"It [Dublin] sucks up the majority of the brains from the rural parts. I wouldn't say Dublin anymore now. I'd say, 'you're talking now about urbanising the likes of Kildare, Laois, all around there'. They're Dublin now. Because if you're working in Dublin now, you're living in Laois and getting the train up. Now those counties, urbanisation of Dublin has spread downward. It has spread into most parts of Leinster now. Dublin is only an icon in the middle of a very large complex. Probably you have the counties of Meath, Westmeath, you have Kildare, you have Laois, you have all of those now as part of Dublin. Part of Dublin suburbs now. They don't like it, but they are" (respondent 1).

The misunderstanding of the metropolitan scale might also be hindered by a frustration that boundaries and catchment areas within the NPF do not accurately reflect the imaginary or operated understanding of what constitutes as metropolitan:

"In my view, the name metropolitan is a misnomer because metropolitan in the earlier days, in former days, referred to a city. Whereas if you look at Shannon airport, it is some 11-15 miles from Limerick. There is a huge amount of farming land in between which is not metropolitan, it is a cattle raising area and so on. So, again, it is very difficult to call or to accept what the modern definition of metropolitan is. If you go to Europe, metropolitan is strictly city, but in Ireland, we have been a small little bit adventurous with words" (respondent 3).

This confusion demonstrates the importance of developing clarity around the term and educating local authorities and elected regional assembly representatives so to circumvent definitional issues.

More generally, clarity is needed on the precise factors that led to the new spatial boundaries. A failed understanding of how boundaries were drawn and how regional/key towns were selected only stymies implementation efforts:

"So, again, I would actually question the wisdom of the division the way it was done" (respondent 3)

"… Clonakilty is a key town. Who said? Who said Clonakilty is a key town? You know, I accept Clonakilty is a great town, model town, really excellent as regards tourism and whatever. But key to what? I have a fundamental problem with that. I think that all of the towns of County Cork should be on a level par and they can be certainly categorised as regards key for x, key for y, but all key for something. So, sorry you stoked the fire there now. I mean who actually designated that?" (respondent 10).

Killeedy Eco Park is an example of an informal intervention built on the back of community efforts to meet the needs of residents and support economic development potential. Over the last 50 years, Killeedy has experienced population decline. The closing of the Kantoher Creamery in 2005 exacerbated population decline and threatened job prospects. Killeedy EcoPark is meant to serve as an eco-friendly wetland reedbed system to support the lack of sewage treatment infrastructure in the adjacent Kantoher Enterprise Park, which supports more than 200 jobs across 14 companies, and allow additional housing provisions for the nearby villages of Ashford and Raneenagh. In addition, it provides green/blue recreational amenities, an amphitheatre, wildlife preserve and raised vegetable beds for nearby residents to grow produce. The multiple uses of this area has created a buzz of activity and it has become a source of pride amongst residents, the community of volunteers the park brings together to carry out maintenance and the wider West Limerick area.

To raise awareness on the metropolitan and city-regional scale, there is a need for clear definitions of what metropolitan, is as well as an overall understanding of what a region is to move it beyond being an artificial construct. This type of awareness might help assuage feelings that the selection of boundaries and key towns lacked a democratic process. As this respondent later states, preferential treatment of one locality locks in a path dependence. Elected members need to clearly understand the

factors that contributed to the current rankings, especially those who were not around when the designations were determined. Though details guiding the selection process are included in the RSES, the wording is confusing. Clarity would prove valuable to curtail confusion around boundary-making and the concern that decisions that factored into the hierarchy of settlement types feels arbitrary. Training for elected regional assembly members covering these issues would be an important first step.

Flexibility in what is metropolitan

More recently, scholarship and policy practice has turned its attention to the metropolitan scale. As evident in Ireland, this scale has also stirred debate. What defines a metropolitan area is contested in academic literature, as well as in practice. Some of the more common metrics include:

- Population density

- Historical context

- Geographical divisions

- Economic flows

While definitions aim to demonstrate a place with comparative processes and forms, in practice there can be fuzziness and distinction, blurs and overlaps. Therefore, rather than coming up with a fixed and agreed-upon definition, what is important is developing a definition that works for the MASPs working groups.

Beyond debates around measurement, there are concerns around the purpose of prioritising this scale. Harrison and Growe (18) argue that metropolitan thinking is a tool to advance elite interests. However, from a more positive perspective, because the metropolitan concept in the EU remains relatively weak in comparison to the city and regional scale, the vagueness can allow for a formulation that can be assigned different definitions based on stakeholder priorities.

However contested, the NPF has a clear definition and scope for the metropolitan areas. Boundaries include the city and its immediately adjoining suburbs. The aim heavily acknowledges cities as drivers of economic growth pivotal to compete internationally, attract talent and secure investment. Writing on Dehli's metropolitan development in India, Tawa Lama-Rewal (19) actively pushes against the definition of metropolitan as competition across various scales of legitimacy, preferring instead to consider the idea of 'metropolitan democracy'. The term metropolitan recognises the diversity of scales and variety of flows that exist from the centre to the ever-changing and expanding periphery. Coupling the term with democracy is deliberately done to recognise the 'multiplicity of scales, legitimacies and actors'. Tawa Lama-Rewal goes further to argue that the metropolitan scale becomes the privileged standpoint to analyse competition and cooperation between the scales, legitimacies and actors. Furthermore, Adersson, Sjoblom, Granberg, Ehrstrom and Marsden (20) research on a wide variety of cities reveals the importance of metropolitanisation to protect the rural sphere. Seeing the metropolitan as a bulwark against development and toward ecological and resilient purposes. This is done by using metropolitan to create governance around ecological catchment areas (21)

Reformulating the metropolitan scale to suit the needs of the various scales, legitimacies and actors is something that MASPs working groups can develop.

Despite the lack of understanding of the metropolitan, respondents recognise strengths of thinking, seeing and acting at the regional scale:

"But I think the regional thing is useful in the sense, I'll give a perfect example: The new motorway that is going to be built. There was a question mark whether it would go towards Mallow or cut across from Tipperary straight to Rosslare….it would have isolated west Limerick, north west Cork and Kerry totally. You would have no motorway and you would have cut off that entire section. From a regional point of view, this assembly was valuable to make that argument and get it across that you are going to isolate an entire part of the country if you are going to opt to cut it in half and run it across the middle. It worked, we got the commitment now that the M20 will go straight into Cork, which makes sense, so there are issues like that from a regional point of view" (respondent 9).

The SRA has an opportunity to take advantage of these positive sentiments and the individuals who express them to build their stakeholder and champion base. Additionally, it is important for the SRA to robustly consider the role they have played in these (and any other) wins, and to make them visible. As a way to both restore rural communities and to give legitimacy to the regional tier, it is helpful to recognise the individuals who contributed to creating change and their affiliation with the SRA. For example, the SRA website could feature tables or infographics on what has been funded to date. Or, as one respondent suggested, placards across the region to showcase that a particular project was funded through SRA efforts would increase their visibility. Displayed successes need not only be a material outcomes. All efforts to fortify the regional-scale are worth noting and promoting:

"..looking for examples of that collaboration between the regional cities and the regions themselves, to say, 'Right, ok, what's different now that there is a RSES compared to before where there wasn't necessarily that impetus for that cooperation?' So we'll be able to say in five or ten years down the line, 'This is something that happened as a result of the RSES and it was something beneficial'" (respondent 6).

Part 3: Are regional governance structures fit for purpose in Ireland?

Field research positively demonstrated that, for the most part, respondents support and recognise the importance of the regional scale and the SRA as an administrative governance boundary. Even though all respondents are not fully in agreement with, and remain confused by, some of the specificities of the RSES, they acknowledge the collective effort and dialogue that brought the document to fruition. Problematically though, there exists an overarching concern that central government only pays lip service to decentralisation and has no real interest, will, or desire to actualise it. This is made evident in various ways.

First, elected assembly members feel they have a limited role when it comes to making large decisions about spatial plans:

"We often make our own plans, our plans go to the departments and the Assembly, we often dictate or speak for days on end about different plans, and we debate plans, and we construct plans, but sure they go off to the Department and you never even see them" (respondent 1).

Part of the frustration with centralisation comes from a perceived lack of flexibility in the new spatial arrangements, which are often seen as templated, overly prescriptive and predetermined with little input from local authorities. There is frustration with the inability to interpret national plans to suit local levels, which goes precisely against the idea of a place-based framework. Rather than feeling the sense of autonomy to provide the more granular, local-level details, there is a feeling that Irish central government bodies are not risk takers, fear forms of experimentation and are overly controlling:

"In other words: thou shall not do this, thou shall not do that. Instead of: you may do this, you may do that. It is a controlling document" (respondent 3).

"I think the same thing happens with the National Planning Framework, there is a bit for everybody in the audience, but yet nobody is happy. I think that is because we are writing down way too much. It is the over prescriptiveness again" (respondent 5).

"…to my mind, too many requirements to go back and get every decision almost ticked, or rubber stamped or checked by somebody higher up" (respondent 6).

There exists a sense that local plans are riddled with tiers of bureaucracy -- from the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) to state departments. Councillors feel they are only signing off on plans. This, coupled with an inability to venture too far off the plan, prevents a feeling of ownership for the plan. In the cases where a plan feels well thought out, there exists a feeling that the plans go off to the departments never to be seen again.

Budgeting is also a source of frustration. Respondents feel that the budget comes directly from Dublin, that local level councillors have no money, as well as that much of it goes up to central and when it comes back little is left. In short, local authorities desire more decision-making and budgetary power.

In terms of representative responsibilities, respondents acknowledged that councillors are pulled in various directions, that they do not always come prepared to meetings and that county functions are not always communicated to the constituents of the area. Respondents also recognise the importance of their local knowledge (e.g. awareness of sites of land for sale), but admit to an inability to be more actively engaged due to being bogged down with everyday routine. These are the very individuals who could be champions for regional development but are not supported enough to evolve into this role.

On top of this, development politics are inherently political. Respondents expressed concern that the process of determining a hierarchy of resources was political:

"As far as I'm aware, the last time I would have checked, the stats would have indicated that regional development, or the claims towards trying to strive for it, aren't being matched by investment of funds. I know here in the southeast, in Waterford in particular, I think many of us would say that we struggle to get funding. Whereas the likes of Cork seem to be able to get whatever they want, when they want it, as soon as they want it, without having to jump through hurdles, or having procedural obstacles, like the requirement for reports and working groups and committees put in the way…they've [Cork] got so many government TDs, including a Minister for Public Expenditure, and of course Taoiseach. So, it's very political, as far as I'm concerned, and very unbalanced, unfairly so" (respondent 6).

If this is factual, this needs to be addressed moving forward. If these sentiments are based on perception, then clear facts need to be presented to explain the rationale for funding decisions.

Making something political is distinguished from having champions fight for resources. To feel something as being political is to feel that people in the know are given favours:

"Yeah, it's that in the background, because they're the people with the power to do it, so it's not even a case of, 'Well, it's being given under a particular grant, or scheme, or application.' It's kind of, 'Ok, get it in and I'll sign off on it the same day, and then I'll change the, shift the goalposts afterwards.' Well, there wasn't a precedent there, and now that that's done, we'll distinguish other things from that, you know. So… political expediency. And when you're in power you can do that" (respondent 6).

Leadership is critical here. One respondent highlighted the importance of ensuring a diversity of voices at the planning and decision-making table:

"Regular meetings. And I suppose people with very different backgrounds so that everybody is not thinking the same way. I suppose you need strong guidelines to encourage people to think bigger, not to think too colloquially. I suppose, you know, anybody that is in agriculture will think more agriculturally, anybody that is into business and industry will think along their own lines, so you need a very good mix of people to have a broader view and a broader outlook. And you need people as well with knowledge on how best to put forward projects that they would be successful for funding, and that it would encourage funding, and that people would see the bigger picture, and just not plan for here and now, to take future developments into consideration" (respondent 4).

It is already recognised that the ratio between men and women amongst the elected members is dismal, as is the ratio between urban and rural representation. This means that rural issues dominate the conversation:

"…so I'd say a good percentage of our time range at various meetings would have been taken up with something like consideration of one-off rural housing, and it's not necessarily to the detriment of urban or city issues, but this, kind of, crowding out, not necessarily deliberately as I say, but crowding out discussions of things that might be more relevant to cities" (respondent 6).

Addressing issues of representational imbalance is necessary to ensure marginal voices are not left unheard or unevenly unrepresented. Also highlighted have been the importance of more strategic meetings:

"… we haven't really ever met, I think maybe once procedurally, as sub-regions with the Southern Region, so I'd like to be able to kind of get to know my southeast colleagues a bit better, and say, 'Right, ok, within the Southern Region, can we even make sure that there is intraregional, or internal regional balanced development'. If we had the chance to kind of coalesce and meet more often, and just focus on the southeast within the Southern Region, and the southeast within the country, then we could say, 'Right, ok, how are we actually doing, and what can we as assembly members, do differently?'" (respondent 6).

Admittedly, unfortunately representatives from each of the sub-regions do not know their colleagues from other sub-regions within the SRA:

"I mean, there's no fellow feeling with Wexford or with Wicklow in County Cork. There's no animosity, but there's no commonality, you know?" (respondent 10)

This lack of connection and familiarity is unhelpful for thinking about a region cohesively and then garnering and generating the support necessary to implement ambitious agendas. Periodic strategic meetings would assist members across the region to find shared challenges and coalesce around issues. Further, developing the region and its roles will generate interest in the position of elected representative and attract a wider base of applicants.

Jonas et al (15) and Harrison (16) argue that there are two governance processes that lead to the creation of new scales of government: 1) regionally orchestrated centralism – urban and regional coalitions lobby the state for additional powers, resources and expenditures and 2) centrally orchestrated regionalism – the state reconfigures its territory in order to stimulate urban and regional development. Ireland falls into the latter. However, through periodic and more strategic meetings, through closer engagement with local authorities and their inclusion in decisions, the SRA can grow their base of champions who will then be willing to exert pressure on central government and its departments to better acknowledge the capacities of sub-national government and to finance them appropriately. A lack of willingness to strongly push against central government might cause local authorities to perceive the SRA as more of an agent of central government, rather than an independent, organisational body in need of greater autonomy (17).

Key messages

Metropolitanisation is neither simple nor straightforward. Spatial and governance restructuring is an incremental, messy process. This research uncovers the types of resistances in how metropolitanisation unfolds in order to support regional assemblies and their executives in the difficult process of instituting meso-scales of governance.

The higher-order takeaways from the research are that:

- Existing local area social capital and community capacity must be assessed, acknowledged and supported;

- Accessibility to social infrastructure that allow people to have a higher quality of life must be prioritised;

- Education on the intentions and content of the spatial strategies, clarity around decisions made and a greater awareness of achievements by the SRA are necessary to enhance the perception and functioning of the regional scale;

- The SRA needs to identify and align with regional champions to pressure central government and its departments to better acknowledge the latent capacities of sub-national government and empower and finance them appropriately.

Feelings of policy neglect are felt in cities, as well as in towns, villages and rural localities. Beyond creating awareness, the report concludes that regional assemblies and their executives must be aware of the perceptions of spatial inequality acutely felt by local authorities across all settlement types. Importantly, recognising and addressing perceptions of inequality provides an opportunity to debunk, contextualise and factor root causes for (in)accurate perceptions.

Community centres are an important gathering point. The Cappamore community centre used for meetings as well as for their highly regarded bingo nights. Efforts to extend WIFI access demonstrate the importance of these spaces serve as anchors for more dispersed populations.

Supporting smaller communities who feel the threat of being left behind in the NPF will demonstrate the role that the city-region as a governance actor can play in providing more attuned observation and representation than what is possible by the central scale. However, this does require the acceptance that plans need to move beyond a collection of parochial interests and that the focus needed is one of long-term secondary change (greater awareness of regional issues, stronger consensus on goals, changes in the perceptions of regional planning and growth management) to address the perceived future of urbanisation challenges.

Finally, while there exists frustrations with the NPF, it is a policy document that is here to stay. Too often, the sentiment that plans are created in Ireland but are never implemented is used to dismiss the planning practice is Ireland. This has become an unhelpful trope, particularly when there is an opportunity to use the NPF as a way to strengthen the city-regional scale and bring decision-making power down closer to the scale of the people. Perhaps with a strong regional assembly as a perceptive representative of the diverse needs in settlements across its jurisdiction, local authorities will be less likely to reject the new planning framework wholesale and will instead find a willingness and spirit to collectively determine how to best make the NPF work for them and their constituents.

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Disclaimer

Interview respondents are not listed by name to protect their identity. Images are taken by the author based on points of importance highlighted by respondents during walk/talks. Policy recommendations and any errors in the document are attributed to the author alone.

Afterword by Niamh Moore-Cherry

The idea of the metropolitan region is a relatively new one in an Irish context although the 'problem of the region' is a longstanding one in Irish planning and public policy. How we define regions, the extent of our city-regions and the mechanisms through which they can be most appropriately structured and governed, is part of a much wider debate on the changing nature of local, urban and regional development in Ireland. But it is particularly pressing in the context of a climate and biodiversity emergency, as well as increasing social-spatial inequalities, that we address and respond to the need for new approaches to public policy and planning.

The increased focus brought by the National Planning Framework (2018) to the regional scale and, in particular to the importance of thinking strategically at the metropolitan scale, is to be welcomed. It represents an attempt to think beyond traditional, administrative boundaries to understand relationships and needs at the scale at which our city-regions functionally operate. Searching for synergy and avenues of cooperation beyond traditional local authority boundaries allows us to identify strategic opportunities to enhance quality of life and ultimately opportunity for all, in the service of better wellbeing. However, this is not without its challenges in a policy and political system that is paradoxically both highly centralised and fragmented.

This report by Dr Carla Maria Kayanan outlines the lived experience of trying to shift thinking and ways of working, and is an important input into current debates about how metropolitanisation can be achieved in practice. The potential barriers to achieving the ambition of the National Planning Framework, and its attendant documents, in practice are clearly articulated with pathways to action identified. This report is timely and comes at a time of reflection within national and regional government on the optimum structures required to deliver change, but also at a time of inflection as government grapples with demographic and geopolitical changes that were unanticipated in the original projections underpinning the new architecture and also the demands of citizens through the citizens assembly on the future of Dublin for real and meaningful political and financial devolution.

Ireland is at a pivotal moment in its development, a moment when courageous policymaking leading to the emergence of effective multi-level governance will either be realised or stifled for another generation. It is a potential opportunity to simultaneously and strategically tackle multiple crises – climate, biodiversity, housing and socio-spatial inequalities – by privileging a long-term view of benefits rather than short-term politically motivated decision-making. It is a time when the quality of life and wellbeing of all our citizens can become the driving force for public policy, planning and development decisions, but only if we embrace the advice and cautionary lessons of reports such as this to chart a clear and effective pathway for the future.

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