

# **Regional governance and bottom-up regional development in the Border Region and County Cavan**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the link between regional governance and bottom-up regional development in Ireland. Ireland's approach to regional development has attempted to mirror international best practice, but with little success. Extant literature suggests that the inadequate statutory regional governance provisions and the fragmentation of regional structures of government, semi-state agencies and other institutions will frustrate horizontal, vertical and diagonal coordination between actors and, as a result, impede effective bottom-up regional development. The case study of the Border Region and County Cavan provides an in-depth analysis of the levels of horizontal, vertical and diagonal coordination between local, regional and national stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of specific development plans and strategies. The analysis shows that the statutory provisions have strengthened considerably over the years, having a general positive effect on coordination. However, horizontal and diagonal coordination remain weak, impeding the prospects of bottom-up regional development.

*Keywords:* Regional development, governance, coordination, Border Region

## **Introduction**

This paper investigates regional governance and bottom-up regional development in Ireland. Recent international trends have seen a shift from 'top-down' to 'bottom-up' approaches alongside a move from government to governance and devolution of powers to the sub-national level (Pike et al., 2006).

The international trends and theoretical approaches are, to some extent, mirrored in regional development thinking and policy in

Ireland. The bottom-up approach received a major impulse with the launch of *The National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002–2020* (NSS). In aiming for each region to reach its full potential, the NSS made allowances for the different circumstances of different regions and promoted the use of regional resources. Local and regional actors were accorded a greater role in the development and implementation of regional strategies and initiatives. It was acknowledged that the new approach required a supporting system of local and regional governance, and a set of provisions were included.

The potential of the NSS was never realised, however, and its failure has been widely discussed by academics and others (Breathnach, 2013). The lack of regional governance has been suggested as one of the main reasons for this failure. Observers have commented that the implementation of the NSS and other related plans and policies has not resulted in a truly meaningful level of regional governance which can facilitate bottom-up regional development (Meredith & van Egeraat, 2013; O’Riordain, 2012a). Although much has been written on the problems with regional governance in Ireland, there are few detailed empirical analyses of the actual level of, and problems with, horizontal, vertical and diagonal coordination at the local, regional and national level.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to increase our understanding of the link between regional governance and bottom-up regional development by providing a detailed case study of regional governance in the Border Region of Ireland. It identifies the statutory and non-statutory provisions for bottom-up regional development, and how these emerge in practice through the preparation and implementation of a set of local and regional development plans and strategies. The case study investigates actual practices of local, regional and national government and governance in the Border Region and County Cavan. It focuses on the vertical, horizontal and diagonal coordination between (and within) the various levels of government, as well as other relevant actors in local and regional development such as government departments, state and semi-state agencies and institutions, the voluntary sector and the private sector.

The aims and objectives of the underlying research project have obtained additional relevance in the context of the recently launched *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government* (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012) and the review of the current NSS (O’Brien, 2013).

The underlying project was guided by a multilevel case study design involving the Border Region and County Cavan. This facilitated an assessment of the nature of Ireland's system of multilevel governance and the impact on bottom-up regional development. Studying both scales of government facilitates an understanding of how local-level actors influence the regional and national plans, and vice versa.

To give the project a clear focus, research concentrated on the preparation and implementation of a specific set of development plans/strategies from within the Border Region and County Cavan. These plans and strategies cover a broad spectrum of areas so, in order to give the research even greater focus, the research was primarily concerned with the economic aspects of these plans. The research investigated the preparation and implementation of economic elements of the following three documents: The Border Regional Authority's (BRA) *Regional Planning Guidelines 2010–2022* (Border Regional Authority, 2010); the *Cavan County Development Plan 2008–2014, Variation No. 2* (CCDP; Cavan County Council Planning Department, 2010); and the Cavan County Development Board's *A Strategy for the Economic, Social and Cultural Development of County Cavan 2002–2012* (CCDBS; 2002). It was considered important to examine the coordination of plans and actors outside of the planning structure in order to gain a broader perspective.

The main research tools were document analysis and interviews. The research involved interviews with actors at different levels of governance and in a range of institutions, including the public, semi-state and private sectors. In all, thirteen interviews were conducted. Four interviews were conducted with national-scale actors (IDA Ireland, FÁS, Fáilte Ireland and Ibec), three interviews were conducted with both elected and non-elected members of the BRA, and five interviews were conducted with county-level stakeholders (two planners, a staff member of the Community and Enterprise Section, a former staff member of the Community and Enterprise Section and a staff member of the County Development Board Sub-group for Economic Development).<sup>1</sup> The research team also interviewed a member of the Cavan Community and Voluntary Forum. The semi-structured interviews typically lasted about one hour. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

<sup>1</sup> References to functions of interviewees in this text are kept deliberately vague in order to secure confidentiality.

This paper begins with a conceptualisation of bottom-up regional development and governance. This is followed by an analysis of the provisions for bottom-up regional development, including the level of concordance between the boundaries of the various regional institutions. The paper then proceeds with an analysis of the actual level of vertical, horizontal and diagonal coordination involved in the preparation and implementation of the planning and strategy documents in the case-study region. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key findings, against the background of recent policy decisions.

### **Bottom-up regional development and governance**

This section introduces the shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches to regional development, the concomitant shift from government to governance, and the related issue of vertical, horizontal and diagonal coordination.

Early approaches to regional development were characterised by the central state delivering development to lagging regions through injection of resources from the outside on standardised, one-size-fits-all lines. Regions were often assumed to be devoid of entrepreneurial or other resources and had little input in the formation or implementation of the policies (Keating, 1997). These top-down approaches to regional development were considered unsustainable during the oil crisis and recessions of the 1970s and 1980s as governments had to cut spending and unemployment hit even the most prosperous of regions (Keating et al., 2003). Alongside an ever-increasing, globalised, neo-liberal agenda, bottom-up approaches to local and regional development were increasingly favoured, with the idea that regions compete in a global capitalist market. These endogenous approaches make allowances for the different circumstances of individual regions by promoting local enterprise and the use of regional advantages and resources. Ideas and initiatives are formulated and driven by regional actors. Table 1 summarises the main differences between the two approaches.

Successful bottom-up regional development approaches are believed to require a concomitant shift from central government to regional and local governance. There are two elements to this shift: devolution and a shift from government to governance. Devolution involves the decentralisation of powers and responsibilities from the national to the sub-national scale (Pike et al., 2006). Many services and

**Table 1: Top-down and bottom-up approaches to regional development**

<i>Traditional top-down development policies</i>	<i>Local and regional (or bottom-up) development policies</i>
1. Top-down approach in which decisions about the areas where intervention is needed are made centrally	1. Promotion of development in all territories with the initiative often coming from below
2. Managed by the central administration	2. Decentralised, vertical cooperation between different tiers of government and horizontal cooperation between public, private and voluntary bodies
3. Sectoral approach to development	3. Territorial approach to development (locality, milieu)
4. Development of large industrial projects, that will foster other economic activity	4. Use of the development potential of each area, in order to stimulate a progressive adjustment of the local economic system to the changing economic environment
5. Financial support, incentives and subsidies as the main factor of attraction of economic activity	5. Provision of key conditions for development of economic activity

*Source:* Adapted from Pike et al. (2006).

functions, previously carried out directly by the central state, have been transferred vertically to the sub-national level. Devolution has occurred at different rates (Loughlin, 2001) and has taken different forms in different countries, ranging from the decentralisation of power and legislation to a mere delegation of responsibilities and financial duties (Rodríguez-Posé & Gill, 2004). In addition, not all power is being devolved. Some powers have moved down, to the regional and local levels, while other powers, including those related to monetary management, have moved up, to the supra-regional scale, giving rise to complex systems of multilevel government.

While some have seen devolution as a potential for creating public policy that is tailored to the particular needs of local and regional

circumstances, others have questioned the efficiency and effectiveness of the process (Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2005). This is due to many factors, including mistrust of public institutions, additional cost and bureaucracy associated with devolution, as well as the continued questioning of the relevance of a regional level of government/governance (Pike & Tomaney, 2004).

Governance refers to development away from a system where the government does everything to a system of institutional interdependence (Rhodes, 1996). The shift from government to governance intensified during the 1990s when, faced with a fiscal crisis, governments needed to find new forms of intervention and control, which materialised as the creation of a range of new agencies and institutions (Goodwin, 2009).

Governance involves an increasing emphasis on partnerships between governmental, quasi-governmental and non-governmental (private and voluntary) organisations, with government seen as a steering agency (Pike et al., 2006). In this system the provision of public services is no longer the sole responsibility of central and local government but instead involves a wide range of actors drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors (Goodwin, 2009). This has resulted in the blurring of boundaries between and within public and private sectors (Stoker, 1998).

Rhodes stresses that governance is not a synonym for government, but signifies a change in the meaning of government, 'referring to a *new* process of governing; or a *changed* condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed' (Rhodes, 1996, p. 652). His definition of governance as 'self-organizing, inter-organizational networks' is particularly interesting in the study of local and regional development, as it refers to a shift from local government to local governance involving 'complex sets of organizations drawn from the public and private sectors' (Rhodes, 1996, p. 658). This shift to governance, in combination with devolution, gives rise to complex systems of institutional interdependence, wherein services are delivered by a range of independent actors at different scales. The latter is referred to as multilevel governance.

The independent actors form a 'self-organizing network', which implies a significant degree of autonomy from the state. Such networks are considered more suitable to tackle local and regional problems as they can facilitate the creation of policies by multiple stakeholders from the bottom up.

Rhodes states that ‘governance is about managing networks’ (1996, p. 658). Given the increasing number of actors involved, this can be a complex task. The complexity of governance networks raises questions about the actual operation of the new structure of governance, particularly in relation to accountability (Goodwin, 2009). In such a system it can prove very difficult to distinguish who is responsible for what, and therefore who can be held accountable.

Issues arise from the diversity of organisations and interests involved, and constructing effective regional governance structures can be problematic. Meijers & Romein (2003) identify ‘regional organising capacity’ as a key factor in this respect, referring to the extent to which regional actors perceive themselves as sharing a common interest or identity. The formation and functioning of regional-level partnerships and networks can be hampered by intra-regional fragmentation of civil jurisdictions and corresponding organisational systems in the private and voluntary sector.

Managing multilevel governance networks requires strong levels of horizontal, vertical and diagonal coordination across the various scales (O’Riordan, 2012b). Vertical coordination refers to the coordination across different levels of government; for example, the coordination between the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG), regional authorities and local government. This can take a traditional hierarchical, top-down form or a two-directional form. Horizontal coordination generally refers to the coordination between different sectoral units at the same level of governance. Here we can think of the links between various government departments or, at a lower scale, the links between the county council and other local actors, such as a local development group or the local chamber of commerce. It is also used to refer to the coordination between a set of local authorities. It is increasingly being argued that successful regional governance requires diagonal coordination – coordination between different sectoral units across different levels of governance.

Policy such as the NSS, for example, cannot possibly be expected to succeed if implementation is to be left solely to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government along with the local authorities. The NSS has application across all layers of government and not just one department. A local policy body such as a local authority, dealing with education provision, health care, housing and transporta-

tion, has to structure its policy framework to allow for cross over. (O'Riordan, 2012b, p. 1)

Successful bottom-up regional development and effective regional governance and coordination require proper statutory and non-statutory provisions, foremost a regional tier of government. Ireland's system of governance has traditionally been strongly centralised (Bannon, 1989; Breathnach, 2013). The first attempt at establishing a regional dimension to sub-national government came in 1963 with the creation of nine planning regions under the Local Government Act, 1963 (Laffan, 1996). In 1994, under pressure from the EU, Ireland established eight regional authorities, while two regional assemblies were established in 1998. However, the authorities had initially a very limited remit and the regional structures had little effect on meaningful bottom-up regional development (Boyle, 2000).

Adshead & Quinn (1998) identified the emergence of what they referred to as 'state-sponsored bottom-up development' during the 1990s. The Irish Government took responsibility for guiding and directing regional policy but left the initiative and detail to a wide range of regional development interests at local level. However, the problem was a lack of formal structures and functional/territorial divisions between different network actors (Adshead, 2003).

The bottom-up approach to regional governance received a major impulse with the launch of the NSS in 2002. It was acknowledged that the proposed bottom-up approach required a supporting system of local and regional governance, and the NSS included a set of provisions for statutory and regulatory underpinnings for regional governance. The details and impact of these provisions will be discussed further in the next section of this paper.

It has been argued that successful coordination also requires concordance between the boundaries of local and regional units of government and governance. In Ireland the lack of a meaningful tier of regional government has resulted in an extremely fragmented geography of regional structures of government and semi-state bodies. Several reports have called for the alignment of the geographical structures of state and semi-state agencies to the boundaries of the regional authorities. In 1991 the Barrington report summarised the logic as follows:

it is impossible to develop any sort of regional consciousness if the boundaries shift for different purposes. Common boundaries



are essential for collecting data; for planning and for relating the activities of different agencies. (Government of Ireland, 1991, p. 26)

The calls were repeated in the aftermath of the launch of the NSS and have remained on the agenda of regional authorities since (e.g. Dublin Regional Authority, 1995; Mid-East Regional Authority, 1996).

In summary, successful bottom-up regional development and effective regional governance and coordination depend on proper statutory and non-statutory provisions. In this we can include the level of concordance in the boundaries of local/regional units of government departments, agencies and other actors. However, provisions do not guarantee proper coordination between actors. The following sections provide a detailed case study of regional governance in the Border Region and County Cavan. The case study analyses the provisions for regional governance, the role of concordance and the actual practices of vertical, horizontal and diagonal coordination.

### **Statutory and regulatory provisions for bottom-up regional development and regional governance**

The regional authorities have a statutory basis under the Local Government Act, 1991 (Regional Authorities) (Establishment) Order, 1993. In the most general sense, the main role of the regional authorities is to promote coordination of the provision of public services in their regions. This role was strengthened, in statutory terms, through two key pieces of legislation: the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (sections 21 to 27), and the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010.

In 2000 regional authorities were given the statutory responsibility of creating strategic planning frameworks for the development of the regions under the Planning and Development Act, 2000. While this was a step towards a more substantial role for the regional authorities, one of the problems was that local authorities merely had to 'have regard to' the regional planning guidelines (RPGs) when adopting new development plans for their areas.

This issue was partly addressed in 2010 with the enactment of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010. The 2010 Act requires the RPGs to be set in the policy framework of the NSS and aligned to its population targets, thereby providing a stronger statutory link between the two documents. This was carried through to

the county and city level through the introduction of the 'Core Strategy', which ensures that local authority development plans are consistent with the RPGs and the NSS. It also gave regional authorities 'explicit' roles in the drafting and preparation of the local authority development plans, and provided a structure for reporting any variations or inconsistencies that occurred (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2010). Interviewed staff from the BRA welcomed the introduction of the 2010 Act as it gave regional documents 'a bit more teeth', although they remained concerned about the lack of sanctions imposed on local authorities for non-compliance with the RPGs (see below).

The EU Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive has been another positive development for increasing compliance of local authority plans with RPGs. The SEA Directive requires that certain plans and programmes, prepared by statutory bodies, which are likely to have a significant impact on the environment be subject to the SEA process. The regional authorities are therefore required to ensure that the RPGs are prepared in accordance with the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations, 2004 (Border Regional Authority, 2010). Likewise, local authorities must also prepare a SEA in conjunction with their development plans. BRA staff viewed SEA as a 'powerful tool' in ensuring that the local projects and initiatives complied with the RPGs (Interview, BRA staff).

The statutory provisions for regional governance in Ireland have undoubtedly improved since the establishment of the regional authorities in 1994, but the extent to which this stipulates coordination between actors involved in the preparation and implementation of local and regional development plans is questionable. A reoccurring issue that arose in the interviews was the lack of a statutory obligation for other state agencies to be involved in the process of preparing and implementing the RPGs. In relation to this, one BRA employee mentioned the following in relation to the RPG implementation committees, which involve a range of state and semi-state agencies, including Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Teagasc and so forth:

Yet again, they were under no obligation to turn up, statutory or otherwise... We are trying to make that point at the minute, that it can't be an option, that it has to be obligatory that they would attend the meetings and feed into it. (Interview, BRA staff)

The RPG implementation committees have had varied success across the eight regional authorities, and it would seem that the regional authorities' statutory powers are limited to the compliance of the local authority development plans with the RPGs through the 'Core Strategy'. In terms of implementation, therefore, the RPGs have little effect outside of the hierarchy of planning documents. And even this role is questionable, as there are no specific sanctions set out for local authorities who fail to comply with the RPGs. Where a local authority decides to vary a development plan, the regional authority prepares a submission with observations and recommendations on the proposed variation. The purpose of the submission is to ensure consistency is achieved between the plan as amended and the RPGs. Submissions by the regional authority are therefore quite detailed. The DECLG also makes submissions with observations on development plans but these tend to be strategic in nature. The DECLG may use the detail and content of the regional authority submission to inform their submission, but it is the responsibility of the minister to decide if the submissions should be upheld.

Another major problem that remains with this system is that the submissions to the local authorities have to be approved by the elected board members of the regional authorities, who are, first and foremost, members of the local authorities.

So we're basically asking members to correct themselves in what they do. That is not in my opinion a good system. It may be called democracy but it is not. It just doesn't work. And, whether we like it or not, what we write in our submissions, subconsciously we write in a way that we hope to get approval. (Interview, BRA staff)

The statutory framework governing the preparation and implementation of development plans outlined above includes a number of genuine improvements, but more needs to be done. In spite of the improvements in the system, the deficiencies in the statutory and regulatory provisions underpinning the regional tier of government remain a key problem for the implementation of the NSS and bottom-up regional development.

### **Concordance in the boundaries of local and regional units**

The lack of an effective tier of regional governance has resulted in an extremely fragmented geography of regional structures of

government, state agencies and other bodies. During the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s, a number of separate regional administrative structures and agencies were established, including regional tourism authorities, IDA regions, regional health boards and the planning regions. The boundaries of the regions were not consistent (Laffan, 1996). By way of illustration, Table 2 outlines the misalignment of the territorial boundaries of the regional authorities and the two industrial promotions agencies, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.

**Table 2: Territorial boundaries of regional authorities, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland**

	<i>Regional Authority (8)</i>	<i>IDA (8)</i>	<i>Enterprise Ireland (6)</i>
Border	Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, Louth	North-West: Donegal, Sligo Leitrim North-East: Cavan, Monaghan, Louth	Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, Louth
West	Galway, Mayo, Roscommon	Galway, Mayo	Galway, Mayo, Roscommon
Midlands	Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath	Roscommon, Longford Westmeath, Offaly, Laois	Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath
Mid-East	Kildare, Meath, Wicklow	East: Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Wicklow	Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Wicklow
Dublin	Dublin City, Fingal, South Dublin, Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown	N/A	N/A
Mid-West	Clare, Limerick, North Tipperary	Clare, Limerick, North Tipperary	Clare, Kerry, Limerick, North Tipperary
South-West	Cork, Kerry	Cork, Kerry	N/A
South-East	Kilkenny, Carlow, Wexford, Waterford City/County, South Tipperary	Kilkenny, Carlow, Wexford, Waterford City/County, South Tipperary	N/A
South	N/A	N/A	Cork, Waterford, South Tipperary, Kilkenny, Carlow, Wexford

Sources: Institutional Internet sites.

While the extant literature and reports referred to above suggest that concordance of regional boundaries should be a priority in Ireland, the analysis of interview data indicates that this is a more complex issue.

The misalignment was noted as a particular issue by staff at FÁS when compiling data for the purpose of skills and training needs. The FÁS regions do not align to the regional authorities. The disregard for the regional authority boundaries was evident with the creation of the new education and training boards (ETBs), which will integrate FÁS and the vocational education committees (VECs). FÁS made a case for the alignment of the new ETBs with the regional authority regions to facilitate labour market analysis (the CSO Quarterly National Household Survey data are provided at the NUTS3 regional authority level). The misalignment will mean that accurate and up-to-date labour market data, necessary for deciding on a portfolio of training, will not be available for the ETB regions. However, it should be noted that the main issue here is one of data collection, and not directly policy coordination at the regional level.

No other national-level actors interviewed viewed the misalignment of regional boundaries as an issue. They operate their own regional structures for management and organisation. The internal organisational and operational efficiency is paramount and the optimal regional configuration differs from organisation to organisation. This can be illustrated with reference to the IDA regional configuration. The Border Region is serviced by two separate IDA regions, the North-East and the North-West. From an investment promotion perspective, these are different regions with different requirements, requiring different strategies and interventions. 'The North-East and the North-West... they would be the operational units... they are two different sells' (Interview, IDA Ireland staff).

Similarly, the regional configuration of Fáilte Ireland is driven by internal operational considerations. The Border Region is promoted through no less than three different tourist regions: Lakelands (Cavan and Monaghan), North-West (Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo) and East (Louth). When partnerships occur between these national agencies and local and regional stakeholders, however, they operate on a place-specific basis, with little regard to the regional structures. In the view of Fáilte Ireland staff, misalignment does not appear to be an issue. 'How we are organised internally to get the job done is kind of our own business... there is no issue around it' (Interview, Fáilte Ireland staff). Surprisingly, the misalignment of boundaries and internal incoherence of the Border Region did not figure high on the agenda of the BRA

staff either. It is recognised that there are advantages to alignment: 'In an ideal world, if you could just align all regions and structures, it would be much easier' (Interview, BRA staff). However, the downsides of misalignment could be relatively easily overcome by trying to engage all actors operating in the region, regardless of their regional structures. The main issue BRA staff identified relates back to the non-statutory requirement for national or regional agencies to attend and participate in the review of RPGs. The issue is not the misalignment of boundaries, but the real value attributed to the regional tier of government.

You were never going to get, in relation to IDA for example, two actors [one from each IDA region]. There would be an agreement, through IDA national structures, that one person would attend and more or less represent both IDA regions. I don't believe that happens. I believe whoever is sitting at the table will represent their own region... I don't think you are getting the full picture. (Interview, BRA staff)

This research therefore suggests that the effectiveness of regional governance should not be hung up on the lack of concordance between regional boundaries. While the alignment of regional boundaries with the regional authorities would make data collection and policy coordination an easier task, it is not the key issue. Allmendinger & Haughton come to a similar conclusion on the basis of their recent work on administrative boundaries in the UK: 'You need frameworks that reflect the reality of how complex associational networks do not work to set boundaries. [Such frameworks] can work with and through the boundaries of different institutional geographies' (2009, p. 631).

The key issue is the continued absence of proper statutory and regulatory provisions that would underpin a regional tier of government. What this means for regional governance and bottom-up regional development in Ireland will be discussed in the following section.

### **Coordination in the preparation and implementation of the Border RPGs**

The focus now turns to the actual practices of vertical, horizontal and diagonal coordination in the Border Region and County Cavan.

Research concentrated on the preparation and implementation of three development plans/strategies from within the Border Region and County Cavan: The BRA's *Regional Planning Guidelines 2010–2022*, the CCDP and the CCDBS. The research was primarily concerned with the economic aspects of these plans.

This section will analyse the preparation and implementation of the economic aspects of the Border RPGs. The economic challenges and opportunities are addressed in 'Chapter Four – Regional Economic Strategy' of the RPGs. This strategy draws on the *Regional Competitiveness Agendas* prepared by Forfás to inform the update of RPGs (Forfás, 2010). Section 4.7 of the Border RPGs provides 'Development Plan Implications', which outline how the local authorities should incorporate the strategy into their development plans.

The BRA is extremely limited in terms of staffing and funding, making its role of promoting coordination in the provision of public services extremely difficult. The preparation of the RPGs is overseen by the RPG Implementation Officer and involves input from a steering committee comprised of relevant local, regional and national stakeholders such as county managers, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Forfás, VECs and others. A technical working group, comprised of the senior planners from each of the six local authorities in the region, assists in the preparation of the Border RPGs.

Bottom-up approaches to regional development advocate the potential for localities to be the agents of their own development by using local resources and knowledge to their advantage. For this to occur, there needs to be a system whereby local actors can influence policy and strategies at the regional scale. There is some evidence of two-way vertical coordination between the local and regional scales of government in the preparation of the Border RPGs. By including local stakeholders in the initial stages of preparing the RPGs, they are invested in the plan and more likely to carry through with its implementation. BRA staff perceived the technical working group as the most active people involved in drafting the RPGs.

Staff from the local authorities did participate in the drafting of the guidelines. For example, an officer from Cavan County Council provided key assistance in drafting the 'Economic Development' chapter. (Interview, BRA staff)

BRA staff were less positive about the involvement of the county development board (CDB) in the preparation of the RPGs.

'I personally think that those actors and stakeholders involved in the CDBs, which represented all local interests, should have been more active, and actively engaged in RPG development' (Interview, BRA staff).

One of the main issues hindering a greater level of coordination between the two scales was the lack of resources, staff and time when preparing development plans and strategies. This was a reoccurring issue in all interviews with BRA and Cavan County Council employees. One of the county council planners indicated that their involvement in the review of RPGs was satisfactory, 'but there is room for improvement' (Interview, county council staff I).

The fact that the elected members of the regional authorities are, first and foremost, local councillors was identified as an issue for vertical coordination with local authorities.<sup>2</sup> This presents a number of challenges for the BRA in trying to promote a regional perspective: 'Local authorities are still very much inward-looking and self-contained' (Interview, BRA staff). This situation was also identified as an issue in vertical coordination with national-level agencies, as councillors can be mainly concerned with what has been done for their particular county by national-level agencies such as IDA Ireland or Fáilte Ireland.

The difficulties of getting local- and national-level actors on board during the preparation of the RPGs are mirrored in their implementation. The RPGs are primarily implemented through the local authority development plans. The economic aspect of this implementation is not as strong, however, and the 'Economic Development' chapter of the CCDP does not refer to the RPGs. The RPGs, in general, currently do not appear to have sufficient status of credence for agencies when considering the developments that should take place in the region, as highlighted by a number of road projects, advocated as strategically important in the Border RPGs, which have been suspended.<sup>3</sup> This makes the implementation of the RPGs more challenging:

What's the point of having them there if they are not going to be used? But then again, a lot of it comes down to local level and local authorities vying for their roads and their own pieces of

<sup>2</sup> The making of development plans and RPGs is a 'reserved function', which means that the members are the key decision-makers in the process.

<sup>3</sup> This may be partly due to financial constraints in the current economic crisis.



infrastructure within their own administrative area rather than taking a regional perspective. (Interview, BRA staff)

In relation to horizontal coordination, some of this takes place via the RPG implementation committee, which includes a range of regional-level organisations and regional representatives of national-level agencies, including Forfás, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. The research suggests that the horizontal coordination with the enterprise agencies is far from optimal: 'Absolutely no disrespect to Forfás, but they were put centre stage and IDA, Enterprise Ireland and others just sat back, and were not centrally involved in any way' (Interview, BRA staff). The lack of a statutory requirement for these agencies to participate in the preparation and implementation of the RPGs is therefore identified as a key issue. The coordination with regional private-sector representatives was significantly reduced by Ibec's recent decision to centralise its operations: 'So instead of the regional policy feeding from the regions, from the grassroots to the centre, we've given up on that model. We're now doing it the other way around' (Interview, Ibec staff).

The research found some, but limited, evidence of coordination with adjoining regional authorities (West, Midlands and the Mid-East). The cross-border coordination, on the other hand, is better developed, and cross-border projects and activities are a central element of the 'Regional Economic Strategy' chapter of the Border RPGs. This coordination tends to be driven more by personal connections than by a statutory system of cross-border relations. These relations are also facilitated by networks such as the Irish Central Border Area Network.

Diagonal coordination between the BRA and government departments, other than the DECLG, is weak. BRA employees stated that participation with other government departments could have been better, and identified this as an issue in the RPG review process. One BRA interviewee suggested that time and effort would be better spent engaging other stakeholders rather than government departments: 'There is only so many times you will go to somebody and get nothing back, so you've got to decide what's the best use of your time in terms of engaging people in this area' (Interview, BRA staff).

The example of telecommunications projects was used to emphasise the lack of diagonal coordination between the regional authorities and government departments, in this case the Department

of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. According to BRA staff, the department could have had more input in the telecommunications section of the RPGs.

Forfás had the responsibility of producing a set of documents for the regions outlining the comparative advantages of the regions and potential for future development. The BRA used this as a baseline for the economic development aspects of the Border RPGs, and did not see the need to prepare their own stand-alone regional economic development report. There was some evidence of diagonal coordination in that Forfás made some efforts to engage with local actors during the process of drafting the documents. The BRA held two workshops engaging local actors, and there would have 'certainly been weekly communication with Forfás during that period' (Interview, BRA staff).

The levels of coordination in relation to the RPGs are therefore strongest in the traditional vertical, hierarchical structures. This is primarily due to the statutory backing of the regional authorities in this regard and the implementation of the RPGs through local authority development plans. The research identified room for improvement within the BRA in attempting to engage other actors horizontally and diagonally, especially those outside of the traditional planning hierarchy. Staff at agencies such as IDA Ireland and Fáilte Ireland supported this by suggesting that the RPGs have little effect or power outside of planning documents.

### **Coordination in the preparation and implementation of development plans and strategies of County Cavan**

This section will examine coordination in the preparation and implementation of development plans and strategies in County Cavan: the CCDP and the CCDBS. The 'Economic Development' chapter of the CCDP focuses strongly on the CCDBS and working in partnership with the Cavan CDB.

Interviews again point to vertical coordination along hierarchical lines in the preparation of the CCDP. There are clear differences of opinions between local authority staff and BRA staff as regards the effectiveness of this coordination. The interviewed County Cavan planners point out that the CCDP has to strictly comply with the Border RPGs, which in turn are written within the policy framework of the NSS. Both planners stated that they felt a very strong obligation to comply with the Border RPGs and referenced the 2010 Act as the

leading factor for that. They paint a picture of a positive relationship between the planners and the BRA employees, involving regular contact and consultation. 'I wouldn't view [the BRA staff's] comments as disagreements, more as colleagues providing advice... and since we must comply with the RPGs, that advice will always be taken on board' (Interview, county council staff I).

BRA staff, on the other hand, are less positive and point to the lack of sanctions, as discussed in the section on provisions above. If a regional authority observes that a local authority is not consistent with the RPGs, the most it can do is make a submission. 'The process and legislation is not perfect at present and procedures could be improved' (Interview, BRA staff).

Outside of this strict hierarchical structure of planning, however, there is very little coordination between the local level and the BRA. Staff at the Community and Enterprise Section of the county council (who have responsibility for the CCDBS) argued that 'the BRA isn't as relevant to [them] as it is to the planning section' (Interview, county council staff III). Both staff members of the Community and Enterprise Section and the BRA employees themselves noted the lack of coordination and communication between the CDB and the BRA. It must be noted here, however, that the original CCDBS was written in 2002, before the introduction of the RPGs and, as such, the levels of coordination between the BRA and the CDB in preparing the CCDBS were minimal. The Community and Enterprise Section noted that, if they were redrafting the CCDBS now, they would feel it important to take the RPGs into account.

As regards horizontal coordination, the CDB brings together key local stakeholders to engage in a process of long-term planning for each county. These stakeholders include local government, elected representatives, LEADER groups, county/city enterprise boards, social partners and state agencies operating locally. The CCDBS therefore focuses on the partnership model, encouraging coordination and cooperation between agencies, organisations and individuals. This strategy relied on 'lead partners' to drive implementation. The interviews did not reveal particular issues in relation to horizontal coordination at this inter-institutional level.

However, there appears to be a lack of coordination in the preparation of the CCDP and the CCDBS. These are clearly two different documents. The CCDP is a statutory document. It sets guidelines for the physical and economic development of the county, in the context of restrictions. The CCDBS is more aspirational; it is a

vision. In theory, it would be best practice that the two would be produced in close cooperation and coordination. One of the interviewed planners noted that, ideally, the CCDBS should have prepared an economic strategy for the county that could be implemented in the CCDP through policies and spatial zoning in towns and villages.

However, there was little coordination involved in the preparation of the two documents. In fact, a review of the 2006 CCDBS, with a revised strategy for 2009 to 2012, was never published. The CCDBS was not renewed in 2012, possibly in reaction to the government's announcement that CBDs are to be phased out as part of the program of local government reform.

The difficulties of diagonal coordination highlighted in the context of the preparation of the RPGs are repeated in the context of the county-level plan/strategy, particularly in relation to diagonal coordination with government departments other than the DECLG. The 2010 Act stipulates that certain government departments and other bodies must be notified prior to the preparation of a new county development plan. However, the local planners point out that time and resource constraints are a huge impediment to the level of coordination that can be achieved at this scale. Currently, consultation with other government departments and national-level bodies, in general, takes the form of written submissions. The interviewed planners argue that this is not sufficient and that there is a need for closer coordination during the preparation of the plan in the form of 'meetings with all the relevant authorities, bodies, groups and so on' (Interview, county council staff II). Some of these problems in relation to diagonal coordination, notably the lack of weighting given to CBD views by government departments and the lack of resources and personnel, were also identified in the *Indecon Review of County/City Development Board Strategic Reviews* (Indecon, 2008).

As in the context of preparation of RPGs, we find evidence of vertical coordination along traditional hierarchical lines in the preparation and implementation of county-level plans/strategies, although there are different views as to the effectiveness of this coordination. There is some evidence of a two-way coordination between these two plans, with the traditional top-down influence of national and regional levels on the local level, as well as the local level influencing the preparation of the regional-level plans. The horizontal coordination between actors involved in the preparation of the CCDP and the CCDBS could be improved. The lack of effective coordination

and integration of the CCDP and the CCDBS was a missed opportunity for integrated strategic spatial planning. There is very little evidence of diagonal coordination with government departments other than the DECLG due to a combination of a lack of statutory/regulatory provisions and time/resource constraints.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of the study was to improve our understanding of the link between regional governance and bottom-up regional development in Ireland. Although more in-depth assessment is merited, the main findings are clear.

Successful bottom-up regional development and effective regional governance and coordination depend on proper statutory and non-statutory provisions. The statutory provisions for regional government in Ireland have been considerably strengthened over the years since the establishment of the regional authorities. Without a doubt, the most significant factor in the strengthening of relationships between development plans was the amendment of the Planning and Development Act in 2010. The 2010 Act stipulates that there must be strong coordination between the regional and local level in the preparation and implementation of the county development plans and the RPGs. The research shows that things have improved post the 2010 amendment, but they could be better and there remains more work to be done in this area.

The levels of coordination in relation to the RPGs are strongest along the traditional vertical, hierarchical structures. Local government plays a significant role in the preparation of the RPGs, but issues in relation to implementation remain. The inward-looking nature of county-level stakeholders remains an issue for coordination at the regional level. The research revealed difficulties for the BRA staff in attempting to engage other actors horizontally and diagonally. Very few national government departments and state agencies are actively engaged with the BRA. Despite the improvements in the statutory provisions, it would seem that the conclusions drawn by Fitzpatrick Associates (1997) that the regional authorities are devoid of power and status are still relevant today.

Likewise, we find evidence of vertical coordination along traditional hierarchical lines in the preparation and implementation of county-level plans/strategies, although there are different views as to the effectiveness of this coordination. The horizontal coordination

between actors involved in the preparation of the CCDP and the CDB strategy was poor. This finding may support the decision included in the *Action Programme for Effective Local Government* to disband the CDBs and give more responsibility directly to the local authorities in the form of socio-economic committees (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012). The research found very little evidence of diagonal coordination with government departments due to a combination of a lack of statutory/regulatory provisions and time/resource constraints.

Extant literature suggests that effective coordination requires concordance in the boundaries of local and regional units of government and governance, and there have been repeated calls for boundaries to be aligned with those of the regional authorities. However, this research suggests that, although alignment would have some advantages, the effectiveness of regional governance should not be hung up on the lack of concordance of regional boundaries. In line with Allmendinger & Haughton (2009), we suggest that any adopted framework should be able to work with and through the boundaries of different institutional geographies. This finding would support the change of direction adopted in the *Action Programme for Effective Local Government*. This document no longer advocates regional standardisation due to practical reasons as the appropriate territorial structure tends to vary for each organisation.

This research therefore suggests that the effectiveness of regional governance should not be overly preoccupied with the lack of concordance of regional boundaries as the evidence suggests that it is not as significant a hindrance in operational terms as it was previously thought to be. While the alignment of regional boundaries with the regional authorities would make data collection and policy coordination an easier task, it is not the key issue. Allmendinger & Haughton (2009) come to a similar conclusion on the basis of their recent work on administrative boundaries in the UK.

Successive Irish Governments have repeatedly shown their lack of commitment to a regional tier of government and to bottom-up regional development in general, most recently through the reform of local government, which will see the abolition of the regional authorities and the creation of three regional assemblies in their place (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012). The *Action Programme for Effective Local Government* thankfully recognises the key role of regional planning in providing consistency among the planning hierarchy, and this was one

of the main reasons cited for maintaining a regional tier in Ireland. However, the programme further reduces the level of genuine devolution of functions to the regional level. What is left is a, potentially enhanced, coordination and oversight role for the three new assemblies. This in itself would be a huge improvement on the current situation. But the effectiveness of the reform will strongly depend on the detail of the statutory and non-statutory provisions, notably whether they will secure genuine diagonal coordination with the relevant government departments and state agencies.

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