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# Why Balanced Regional Development should be replaced by Urban Agglomeration Initiatives in Ireland's Reconfigured National Spatial and Economic Strategy

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## Why Balanced Regional Development should be replaced by Urban Agglomeration Initiatives in Ireland's Reconfigured National Spatial and Economic Strategy

In 2003, Eoin O Leary of NUIC published the first in what has since become an extensive literature criticising the 2002-2020 National Spatial Strategy's core 'distributive' strategy, that of Balanced Regional Development (BRD). It is therefore disturbing, despite the strategy's obvious failures and the government's 2013 withdrawal of this discredited NSS, that some Opposition politicians continue to persist in articulating BRD in a politically opportunistically way, such as was emphasised a number of times by Eamon O'Cuiv T.D. on the Claire Byrne TV Show on RTE 1, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> March. That programme with its Live Audience, was broadcast immediately after the similar-themed Richard Curran Documentary: '*The Battle for Rural Ireland*'.

Curran's Documentary showed a black-and-white clip of the Colin Buchanan interview of the late 1960s. Britain's pre-eminent Town Planning Consultant, Buchanan, had just then presented Ireland's first modern Spatial Strategy. It had advocated a rapid expansion of Dublin, Cork, Limerick and about nine other 'Poles of Growth' large towns. All of these 'settlements' had much smaller populations in those days – nearly fifty years ago – when national planning strategy was quite novel and the State's population was just over 60% of its current level. Nevertheless, the political system instinct for survival was, and is still the same: with its short-term and local 'mandates'. Thus the urban-centric Buchanan Plan with its city-growth focus was firmly rejected by the government of the day. A more 'populist' industrial branch plant in nearly every town-strategy was substituted in the early 1970s, including the building of advance factories, some of which were never occupied. Most such factories have long since gone.

As a result of that unsustainable, 'scattergun' approach, Irish cities did not receive the growth that would have resulted from concentrated investment and development. In the 1970s and 1980s Dublin and Cork suffered from the demise of most of their 'sunset' manufacturing industries and the provincial cities grew at a lower rate than the overall population expansion of the State. Dublin, remained at nearly six times the population of Cork and twelve times that of Limerick, continued to capture new initiatives, most notably the commencement of its International Financial Services Centre in 1987 followed by the arrival of the Knowledge 'Cloud' of Google, Facebook and other cyber activity in the 2000s onward.

However, the legacy of slow urbanisation continues and Ireland's provincial cities+environs have populations that today are still below what Buchanan had specified for their 1986 'targets'. For instance Cork and Limerick-Shannon were projected to grow to 250,000 and 175,000 respectively, by that census. Yet in 2011, Cork was still below 200,000 and Limerick was just 92,000 compared with Dublin's 1,111,000. If Irish provincial cities were now 200,000 to 600,000 in population, as propounded in George Zipf's Law of Rank Size Order, their own regions would be much wealthier, creating economic 'spillovers': ones which would have counteracted enforced emigration whilst providing many more employment opportunities locally.

Opposition Deputy O'Cuiv's quest on that Claire Byrne Show, for BRD to spread development evenly throughout the countryside, portrays a complete misunderstanding of our post-industrial era imperative with its New Economic Geography 'lumpiness' agenda for city growth: particularly so for a State whose provincial cities are of modest size. In contrast, O'Cuiv reiterated the need for BRD and 'warned' against the dangers of urban 'overconcentration' with a 'too-rapid growth of population' for a country with a near-tundra population density. Yet and throughout the western world, city located high-tech producer and information-led services has replaced the former branch plant factories. These are the creators of wealth, without which their tax-earning revenue resources would be unavailable to assist the poorer areas of Ireland. Specific industrial and services 'clusters', facilitated by large and skilled workforces are characteristic of city and large town 'growth centres'. Ireland's awaited replacement spatial strategy need to include provisions to assist the formation and implementation of such 'growth centres', especially in Ireland's lagging regions in the west and north-west of the State.

The combination of Urban Economics and the New Economic Geography research outcomes provides a rich and informative platform of facts upon which evidence-based demographic assumptions can be made relating to Ireland's regions. Accordingly, the new spatial plan should also provide for the densification of 'growth centres' so as to counteract the current escalation in long and medium-distance commuting. More of a city's increased population are likely to live in city proximities with their expanded employment opportunities.

The new co-ordinated spatial strategy should also seek to constrain the construction of one-off rural-located houses so as to cater for local employment needs. One contributor noted that the volume of one-off houses has the effect of diluting the potential growth of villages and small towns. Nevertheless, the CSO census data for 2011 confirms the proliferation, in the numbers of new villages and small towns which have resulted from the quest for that BRD strategy to achieve 'evenness'. The suite of both promised and existing Irish planning legislation, should assist implementation of the radically different strategic objective of 'lumpiness', where both Irish and EU investment resources will provide funding for major, linked, infrastructure projects. The Housing Agency's social and private residential strategies are also mandated to dovetail with this new and comprehensive approach to spatial planning and development.

Likewise, the focus on rural regeneration has traditionally been approached from a 'bottom-up' perspective. To-date, this approach through BICs and Leader initiatives has had some local but little overall State-level impact. If it is to be effective, the 'bottom-up' approach needs to be coordinated and combined with a 'top-down' selection of 'winners', centred on city and growth-town spill-overs; ones which are likely to be viable in the rural area topography. Particular consideration needs to be given to the nature of modern-day 'work' clustering and the ways it is increasingly driving urban growth. What is now required are insightful enterprise skills: ones that can accommodate modern types of 'work' with rural Ireland. High-speed Broadband, tourism potential of Quality Landscapes, Walk and Cycle Ways, Marine and Cultural Tourism are posited as examples of the way forward. However, as Dr Gavan Daly of NUI Maynooth warns: some rural locations, town and villages will succeed, but others won't.

It would be apposite for politicians of the same 'mind-set' as Eamonn O'Cuiv to remember that the 2002-2020 NSS was fatally compromised, almost from birth. This was because of his own Party's decision to decentralise a major portion of the public sector from Dublin, intended for 12,000 jobs, to have been transferred to over fifty decentralised

locations. It was totally un-coordinated with the nominated Gateway and Hub locations as 'earmarked' in that NSS with few Gateways and even fewer Hubs were selected as locations for decentralisation. That Irish government exercised a blatant act of political hypocrisy and opportunism of the "do as we say, not as we do" variety! When challenged about this 'inconsistency' at the time, the then Minister for Finance declared that "Decentralisation has nothing to do with the NSS". Further irresponsibility by the same politicians led to the Troika and Ireland's loss of economic sovereignty.

In conclusion, the last thing this State's recovering economy now needs is another opportunistic attempt to implement a latter-day form of BRD, now that the Troika has gone and some financial and fiscal stability is been restored to the economy. BRD would only continue to spread the limited 'jam' so thinly as to be totally ineffective and wasteful of the limited capital investment resources which need to be concentrated, if they are to be effective in creating economies of scale. 'Lumpiness' of urban agglomeration is the future: 'evenness' of balanced regional development is not.

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