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RURAL HOUSING: QUESTIONS OF RESILIENCE

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Abstract

This paper attempts a synthesis between housing and rural development research through the lens of resilience thinking. Drawing on Ireland as a case study characterised by a pro-development and laissez-faire ethos in housing policy, we argue that resilience thinking opens up new perspectives and provides the potential to ‘re-frame’ rural housing practices. Ireland provides an insightful case study to discuss resilience given its shifts from economic boom to crisis and austerity, inextricably linked with the housing sector. Firstly, the paper provides a conceptual understanding of rural resilience, before applying this framework to Irish rural housing issues, particularly relating to settlement form, family and tenure, cultural predispositions regarding housing construction and with reference to specific rural housing policy examples. Two key contributions of resilience are identified: firstly, resilience offers alternative analytical methods and insights for rural housing, particularly ideas of path dependencies and path creation, and identification of the role of housing supply in enhancing or undermining rural resilience. Secondly, resilience provides an alternative policy narrative for rural housing in the context of transitioning towards low carbon rural futures, ecologically sensitive rural economies and lifestyles and a just countryside. The paper concludes by identifying future research directions for rural housing through a resilience framework.

Introduction

Since 2007, Europe has experienced one of greatest periods of economic uncertainty in modern times, with the housing sector central to the European and global financial crisis. The current crisis had its origins in the US housing market (Harvey, 2011) and in the increasing financialisation and globalisation of mortgage markets prevalent since the 1990s (Aalbers, 2009). Since 2007/08, housing and financial markets have experienced one of the greatest periods of volatility in modern history, with a long period of house price growth in markets across the world ending, followed by a housing market bust and a reversing of the massive expansion in the availability of mortgage lending (Scanlon et al., 2011).

While the economic crisis facing Europe is severe, some commentators have noted that the current recession is simply the latest in a series of crises of varying depth and

temporality that have periodically afflicted the capitalist system (Hudson, 2010). Each decade, it seems, can be defined by periods of crisis and instability, such as the oil crisis in the early 1970s, recessions and rising unemployment of the early 1980s and early 1990s in the UK, or the bursting of the speculative ‘dot-com’ bubble in the US during the early 2000s. Indeed, for peripheral European countries such as Ireland (the focus of this paper), the high growth period of the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s was perhaps the exception interrupting long periods of low economic growth, high unemployment and sustained emigration. For Hudson, however, the current economic crisis is marked by one key difference from previous periods of economic volatility: i.e. “the coupling of a deep economic crisis with a perceived threat of an imminent ecological crisis, above all because of climate change” (2010, p. 12). This has potentially profound implications for rural communities across Europe, which will be increasingly characterised by the dual challenge of coping with economic instability while encouraging a transition towards a more sustainable development trajectory including low carbon rural futures and ecologically sensitive rural economies and lifestyles.

Within this context, rural resilience represents an emerging research agenda within rural studies. The overall aim of this paper is to develop and apply a resilience framework to examine rural housing and settlement systems, developing insights from Ireland, characterised by distinctive patterns of housing supply and development, pro-development political context and a highly divisive national policy arena.

Resilience: a conceptual understanding

The term ‘resilience’ was first coined within systems ecology (e.g. Holling, 1973) to evaluate ecosystem functions based on assumptions of non-linear dynamics of change in complex, linked systems (Folke, 2006; Wilkinson, 2011), whereby resilience describes the ability of a system to absorb or accommodate disturbances without experiencing changes to the system. Subsequently, resilience has also been applied to examine social-ecological systems, particularly how communities and societies cope or respond to environmental crisis and risk. Drawing on ecological approaches to resilience, Neil Adger was among the first social scientists to explore social-ecological resilience (see Adger 2000, 2003, 2006; Tompkins and Adger, 2006), examining the dependence of communities on ecosystems for their livelihoods and economic activities. In this context, Adger (2003) suggests that resilience is the ability of groups or communities to adapt in the face of external social, political or environmental stresses and disturbances, highlighting the importance of institutions, behaviour, rules and norms (e.g. property rights) that govern the use of natural resources, creating incentives for sustainable or unsustainable use. Due to this institutional context, Adger argues that social resilience is defined at the community scale rather than at an individual level: hence it is related to the social capital of societies and communities (2000, p. 349).

More recently, stimulated partly by the recent economic crisis, commentators have increasingly looked to transfer resilience thinking to the field of local and regional development (Dawley et al., 2010; Hudson, 2010; Pike et al., 2010), indicating a shift in focus within the regional development literature from economic *growth* to coping with economic *crisis* and instability reflecting the widespread vulnerability of places to global economic uncertainty. Given the heightened sense of crisis, both

economically and ecologically, it appears that resilience is fast replacing sustainability within the academic literature as the up and coming buzzword (Davoudi, 2012).

While resilience is gaining traction in academic and policy debates, the application of resilience thinking to policy arenas can vary widely. The emerging research has highlighted issues of contested discursive representations and imaginations of resilience. These for example might be associated with neoliberal tendencies of a 'self-reliance' shift within policy-making as performing resilience or with governance and institutional arrangements that favour particular elites and interests, offering little opportunities for progressive change. The remainder of this section explores these issues through the two contrasting approaches to resilience thinking to highlight divergent conceptualisations and potential application of resilience: the *equilibrium* approach and the *evolutionary* approach.

Equilibrium resilience is defined as the ability of a system to absorb or accommodate shocks and disturbances without experiencing changes to the system (Holling, 1973). In this perspective, both the *resistance* to disturbances and the *speed* by which the system returns to equilibrium is the measure of resilience (Davoudi, 2012). This approach is particularly common within disaster management, in particular managing responses to geo-environmental hazards, terrorist threats or disease outbreaks (Barr and Devine-Wright, 2012), whereby the ability to 'bounce-back' to a pre-disaster state in a rapid fashion is the preferred goal. However, the notion of a bounce-back to a steady-state has also been translated into the economic realm and financial regulation with policies such as the US 'quantitative easing' programmes since 2008 designed to deal with a shock to the financial system by rapidly returning to a perceived 'more

normal' or pre-shock state through a short term policy response. Similarly, within the housing studies literature, the equilibrium approach emphasises the ability of housing markets (particularly house prices) and construction output to recover to pre-recession levels following a market crash or contraction.

However, a number of limitations can be identified in relation to equilibrium resilience. For example, Davidson (2010) questions whether an ability to absorb or accommodate disturbances without experiencing changes to the system should be the preferred option. In this regard the so-called 'normal system' may itself produce risks (e.g. the global financial system) or may be underpinned by socio-spatial inequities, as revealed by the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans whereby vulnerability to disaster was defined on the basis of class and race (Forester, 2009; Rumbach, 2009). Fundamentally, therefore, the equilibrium approach does not allow for reform and transformation as a response to crisis, largely ignoring distributional and normative concerns in favour of aligning with or reinforcing existing power structures and relations. To further illustrate this, Porter and Davoudi (2012) provide the example of the current volatility experienced in housing markets across the globe. They question the emphasis that many commentators place on 'returning to normal', highlighting the potential of equilibrium resilience to align with neoliberalising tendencies:

'Why would we want to return to 'normal' when what has come to be normalised (over inflated housing markets, predatory lending practices, gross wealth disparities) is so absolutely dysfunctional?' (2012, p. 332).

Similarly, in the context of London's climate change and adaptation strategy Davoudi et al. (2013) observe that the London strategy reinforces particular elements of

resilience (associated with the persistence to endure physical and institutional infrastructure), whereby a normal state is achieved by ‘bouncing back’. Instead, the authors highlight the lack of conceptualising resilience that imagines a *new* equilibrium, drawing not only on institutional infrastructure responses, but also on *transformations* that will draw on people’s memories, stories, networks and cooperative relationships. These examples highlight the bias within ‘bounce back’ resilience to depoliticise, normalise or indeed naturalise economic crises (e.g. a crisis as inevitable, part of a ‘natural cycle’ or a necessary ‘market correction’) that are underpinned by human behaviour, institutions, rules and ideologies.

In contrast to equilibrium based approaches, *evolutionary* resilience rejects the notion of single-state equilibrium or a ‘return to normal’, instead highlighting ongoing evolutionary change processes and emphasising adaptive behaviour and adaptability. These themes have been particularly explored within the evolutionary economic geography literature (Martin and Sunley, 2006, 2011; Boschma and Martin, 2007; Hudson, 2010; Pendall et al., 2010; Pike, et al, 2010; Martin, 2012). As outlined by Pike et al. (2010), an evolutionary analysis emphasises the “path dependent unfolding of trajectories of change, shaped by historically inherited formal and informal institutions, whereby economic geographies are marked by diversity and variety” (p. 62). Understanding path dependencies is critical to this analysis. As outlined by Martin and Surley, 2006, p. 399), “a path dependent process or system is one whose outcome evolves as a consequence of the process’s or system’s own history”: in other words, past decisions influence subsequent choices. Therefore a key departure point in evolutionary resilience thinking is that development does not proceed along a single path, but along multiple pathways (some of which may be suboptimal). By

embracing the inevitability of evolution, resilience thinking from this perspective emphasises the role of adaptation as a response to shocks and disturbances, enabling a more optimistic and potentially more radical notion of resilience. In summary, ‘bouncing back’ to a perceived normal state following a shock need not be the only response. Instead, evolutionary resilience places significance on *transformation*, whereby social systems (through individual or collective agency) can adapt or search for and develop alternative development trajectories (Davidson, 2010). Central to this process of transformation is a need for clear understandings of pathways of ‘resilience from what, to what, and who gets to decide’ (Porter and Davoudi, 2012, p. 331), highlighting the importance of defining and performing resilience in transparent ways, drawing on models of participatory governance, employing multi-scalar approaches and framed by objectives of social justice, inclusion and fairness (Davoudi, 2012).

Rural housing and resilience perspectives

Since the mid 1990s, Irish society has been transformed by economic growth and the so-called and well-documented ‘Celtic Tiger’ phenomena. For example, between 1993 and 2001, the annual real growth rate of the economy in Ireland was more than double the average recorded over the previous three decades – 8 per cent compared with 3.5 per cent – and throughout the 1990s Ireland significantly outperformed all other European Union (EU) countries (Clinch et al., 2002). By 2000, average incomes were far higher than they had been in the 1980s; there had been significant growth in employment, and unemployment fell from 16 per cent in 1994 to 4 per cent in 2000 (Honahan, 2009). This changing economic context, along with a growing population and immigration, had also been translated to the construction sector with rapid house building activity. The period 1994 to 2004 had seen approximately a 200 per cent

increase in new house building, which has been driven almost wholly by the rise of private house building (Scott et al., 2007). As recorded by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (2004), this increase in the level of overall construction is unprecedented and is also exceptional when compared to other European Union (EU) countries, both in terms of new construction as a percentage addition to the current stock of dwellings and also when the number of new dwellings is assessed relative to the size of the population. Rapid housing construction was not only a feature of Irish urban centres, but rural areas also witnessed rapid change. For example, over one quarter of the housing units built between 1991 and 2002 were detached dwellings in the open countryside (Walsh et al., 2007). Similarly, over the last decade, rural towns and villages within commuting distance of larger urban centres have also witnessed a rapid expansion of house-building activity (Meredith, 2007).

However, following the economic/financial crisis of 2007/08, the fortunes of the national economy suffered a dramatic turnaround. As Kitchin et al. (2010) observe, a collapse in the Irish property market and a national and international banking crisis have led to a severe contraction in the national economy, with the drying up of credit, markets and tax revenue, leading to severe pressure of the public finances; an extensive bank bailout, including the establishment of the National Assets Management Authority (NAMA) that has acquired €88bn of property debt; and bank recapitalisation and nationalisation. The consequences of this collapse have further led to a joint EU/IMF bailout (2008) and the introduction of severe austerity measures across the public sector. At a household level, house prices are now 41 per cent lower than its highest level in 2007: house prices in Dublin are now 46 per cent lower (apartments are 53 per cent lower), with house prices outside of Dublin lower by 38

per cent (CSO, 2011a). Unemployment levels have risen to 14.2 per cent (CSO, 2011b), and emigration has re-emerged as a characteristic feature of Irish life; for example, between May 2009-April 2010, official estimates suggest that 65,300 people emigrated, with a further 76,400 emigrating from May 2010-April 2011 (CSO, 2011c), a return to levels of emigration last witnessed in the 1980s. The combination of falling house prices and negative equity alongside increasing employment vulnerability and decreasing income levels (from wage deflation) increases the prospects of widespread mortgage default. Indeed, figures from the Irish Central Bank (2011) highlight that by the end of June 2011 there were 777,321 private residential mortgage accounts in Ireland, with 55,763 accounts in arrears for more than 90 days. In addition, a further 69,837 mortgage accounts have been ‘restructured’ to address repayment difficulties. Together, mortgages that have been restructured or are in arrears represent 12 per cent of the total residential mortgage market.

Ireland offers an insightful case for examining the role of resilience in rural housing research and policy for various reasons. First, because of the cultural affiliations between the nation-state and ‘the rural’. Rural areas have been central to national identity since the formation of the Irish state (McDonagh, 2002) and rural communities remain a politically important constituency. Similarly, land and home ownership constitute an individual and collective priority and have shaped a public policy discourse which favours private homeownership and private housing construction. Secondly, Ireland provides a relevant case for exploring resilience due to its recent transitions from a period of economic boom, to recession and crisis, inextricably intertwined with the housing sector. The economic boom that was experienced in the country after the mid-1990s (the so-called Celtic Tiger era) is

linked with significant housing construction and supply (both speculative and for local consumption) and, paradoxically perhaps, an unprecedented house price inflation (Norris and Coates, 2013). In the wake of the global financial crisis, Ireland has experienced a severe economic recession, rising unemployment and emigration and a crash in house prices and collapse in house-building and the construction sector (see also Murphy and Scott, 2014 for a detailed review).

In an international context Ireland represents a rich case for studying rural housing policies, due to the country's relatively permissive planning policy and emphasis on housing development in rural areas as part of an informal rural development discourse which favours local housing development and views housing construction as inherently a positive development for rural communities. These tendencies in rural housing policies in Ireland are implicit, yet dominant. Gkartzios and Scott (2013) argue that they constitute a paradox, because on one hand there is very little formal connection between rural housing policies and rural development strategies (Scott and Murray, 2009). On the other hand, rural local government authorities have exhibited very pro-housing development attitudes throughout the planning history of the State. In this context, rural housing policies in Ireland are atypical in north-west Europe, but they do resemble phenomena observed in southern Europe. For example, Gallent et al. (2003) classify Irish rural planning, along with much of southern Europe, as 'laissez-faire' policy regimes. Such regimes are characterized by informal regulatory arrangements and actual contraventions of planning law; the family is prioritized over the state in welfare provision and housing production; the state is an ineffective regulator of housing produced, and private interests are emphasized. This contrasts the experience in the UK for example, whereby rural house building has been

consistently restricted by the planning regime drawing on environmental conservation rhetoric (Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2007), exacerbating social and spatial inequalities in Britain (Best and Shucksmith, 2006). Similar housing contexts of relatively unproblematic access to rural land (through family connection) and informal house building (sometimes illegal) are also found in southern Europe (Allen et al., 2004).

In the remainder of this paper, we adopt an evolutionary resilience perspective to provide a framework for analysing rural housing issues in Ireland, relating to settlement form and tenure, cultural predispositions regarding housing construction and with reference to particular rural housing policy examples. Drawing on Pike et al. (2010), Hudson (2010) and Wilson (2010, 2012), we ask four key questions to frame our analysis in exploring the role of rural housing and planning policies in strengthening or eroding the resilience of rural communities:

- What place-based characteristics contribute to or weaken rural resilience, including housing supply and access to housing markets and community resourcefulness and stocks of social capital?
- What is the role of path dependencies in shaping existing rural housing policies in the resilience, adaptation and adaptability of rural communities?
- Can sub-optimal 'locked-in' development paths be identified within rural housing policies and practices that compromise place resilience, whereby formal and informal institutional culture and relationships may inhibit adaptive behaviour and capacity? Is rural community resilience weakened by entrenched interests or institutional apathy in the rural housing arena?

- Is a process of ‘de-locking’ necessary in path creation and transition towards a more sustainable rural settlement system?

Rural Housing: Form, Tenure and the Family

Rural Ireland has witnessed vast changes over the course of the Celtic Tiger and post-Tiger eras (for a detailed assessment see McDonagh, 2002; Walsh, 2007). The demographic recovery of many rural areas following over a century of haemorrhaging population to out-migration and emigration has been well discussed in the literature. Until the early 1990s, the overriding historical pattern of population change in Ireland over the 20th Century has been one of sustained emigration, resulting in rural areas characterized by higher rates of economically-dependent population groups, gender imbalances, a loss in ability to create new employment opportunities leading to weakened rural communities (Haase, 2009). However, population growth has been experienced over recent decades and population growth has been reported into smaller towns and in the open countryside, motivated by better quality of life perceptions in the countryside and facilitated by a permissive planning policy regime (Walsh et al. 2007; Gkartzios and Scott, 2012).

A distinctive feature of rural Ireland is its highly dispersed geography of settlement, characterized by a mosaic of small towns, villages and single detached dwellings ‘scattered’ (Aalen, 1997) in the open countryside. Single houses built in the open countryside (commonly referred to as ‘one-off housing’), have been a longstanding feature of rural Ireland, and for many commentators this pattern of development represents the traditional form of Irish rural settlement (Brunt, 1998). Today, around 40 percent of the Irish population live in rural areas (defined as areas with a

population of 1,500 or less), with 70 percent of this rural population living in single, dispersed houses built in the open countryside (i.e. outside of towns and villages) (Keaveney and Walsh, 2005), often referred to as ‘one-off’ houses. Historically, single rural dwellings tended to be concentrated in peripheral rural areas; however, analysis by Keaveney (2007) suggests that since the 1990s the construction of single rural areas has become more concentrated in peri-urban or accessible rural areas and within scenic coastal locations. Moreover, as Keaveney notes, somewhat ironically, while average family size has fallen significantly in recent years, the size of new rural housing units is increasing. Although houses with five rooms account for the largest proportion of rural dwellings in 2002 at over a quarter of all housing stock, the number of dwellings with eight rooms or more had the strongest growth over the period 1991 to 2002, accounting for under a third of all new rural dwellings.

The origins of this settlement pattern initially relate to widespread and dispersed small farm holdings, encouraged through various land reforms in the late 19th and 20th centuries as part of wider political reforms in pre- and post-independence Ireland (Dooley, 2004). These reform measures laid the basis for a strong attachment to dispersed rural living as small-holdings were increasingly used to provide sites for housing for extended family members throughout much of the 20th Century. The role of family and social bonds has been historically central, and continues to be important, in housing provision in rural Ireland, as rural dwellers gain access to a site through family or social connections and develop an individual house on a self-build or self-developed basis. A direct consequence of such informal methods of housing provision is that in rural Ireland there is an almost exclusive attachment to homeownership, with few rental (private or public) options, resulting in the

vulnerability of rural dwellers to rises in property prices and possible displacement from local housing markets (Finnerty et al., 2003). Therefore, the role of family and social/community bonds have been central in housing practices in rural Ireland, particularly in relation to gaining access to land for a self-build development. Moreover, the availability of or access to land emerges as a major driver of household location decisions, rather than more conventional factors such as closeness to amenities, distance to schools and employment. Policy decisions supporting dispersed rural living in post-Independence Ireland demonstrates the importance of path dependencies in shaping contemporary rural settlement systems. In this sense, a history bound with struggle for land under British colonial rule, a celebration of a rural way of life and an emphasis on family and social bonds for housing provision is literally embodied in the present with a strong cultural attachment to dispersed rural living and dominance of self-build housing provision. As Martin and Surley (2006) contend, institutions, both formal and informal, change slowly over time and are both a product of and a key factor shaping social agency. This duality of institutions and social agency means that institutional evolution tends to exhibit path dependence.

The role of social and family networks therefore is an important aspect for conceptualising and understanding community resilience in rural housing policies and studies. The availability and access to rural land (through family networks) and opportunities for self-build housing provide a relatively easy pathway to homeownership, even for poorer households and particularly during the neoliberalisation of the housing market in Ireland. However, at the same time this creates a dual system of rural housing provision, with those with more limited social connections or without family land resources excluded from self-build practices.

Similarly, such a system excludes those who might have access to such networks but are not willing to use them motivated by a need to shape their own biographies (independent by extended family relations), a form of exclusion of young people discussed in the literature as ‘exclusion of dreams’ (Shucksmith, 2004). For example, in dealing with the economic crisis in Greece (similar to Ireland as a peripheral EU member state requiring an IMF/EU financial bailout following the economic crash), Gkartzios (2013) discusses the role of the extended family and family-owned property in the relocations of urban-based households towards the countryside. In an Irish context, it is important to explore the role of family networks, rural land ownership and self-build housing in performing resilience in times of crisis. For example, the ability of ‘locals’ to self-build resulted in many rural households accessing housing through more affordable paths, which subsequently reduced household exposure to negative equity in the context of a major property crash (Murphy and Scott, 2014). Furthermore, resilience materialised and performed in familism terms (or a ‘family-reliance’ resilience) might further undermine the role of the state in providing policy alternatives to crisis-hit households, proliferating ongoing neoliberal tendencies.

As regards the monopoly of tenure observed in rural Ireland (and rural southern Europe), it could be argued that such systems undermine the resilience of rural communities. The dominance of homeowner-occupation tends to minimise social diversity and the ‘social mix’ much discussed in relation to the sustainability of communities and their ability to respond to unexpected shocks and challenges. For example Commins (2004) argues that the ‘property-owning democracy’ in rural Ireland might mask issues of social exclusion and social pressures facing rural residents. An important aspect of resilience in rural housing policies is therefore their

ability promote alternative tenures, affordable housing schemes, mixed tenure developments and community-led initiatives and ownership.

Speculative and Local Housing

During the Celtic Tiger years, the supply of rural housing has been distinguished in the following categories (drawing on Gkartzios and Scott, 2012):

- Self-build of single rural dwellings by non-locals, with sites purchased on the open market or through direct negotiation with land-owner/farmer, often in competition with local residents.
- Developer-led speculative housing developments, generally small scale suburban style housing estates in rural towns and villages or a small cluster of houses in the open countryside.
- Developer-led speculative apartment developments in rural locations, urban style apartments involving both new build and (less commonly) through the conversion of former industrial buildings into apartments.
- Second holiday homes, particularly in rural and coastal parts of the country (Norris and Winston, 2009).

The growth of housing construction in the countryside (both speculative and for local consumption) during the Celtic Tiger era led to rural housing becoming one of the most contested political, environmental and planning issues in the country, with regular coverage in national media and the press (see also McDonald and Nix, 2005). Scott (2007) argues that the rural housing debate is characterized by conflicting constructions of rurality: on the one hand conservation interests and many planning officials favor restrictive policies in order to, inter alia, address the impact on the

landscape and groundwater pollution (due to septic tanks), reduce car dependency, contain ribbon development and urban sprawl, address the decline of smaller towns and clustered villages and manage public spending on providing infrastructure in rural areas. On the other side of the rural housing debate, are community development interests and many elected local councilors who favor more lax policies to enable greater social vitality, economic activity (based on the construction industry) and to protect the further loss of rural services.

Despite concerns over the management of rural housing, the planning policy remained largely pro-development. This pro-development has been maintained for different reasons. First, this refers to sharp increases in land values for housing, with rapid increases in land prices even in more peripheral areas less affected by surges in demand close to the main urban centers (Williams et al., 2010). So while house prices in Dublin during the peak property boom increased by 305 percent, outside of the main urban centres with less acute housing pressures, house prices rose by 254 percent over this same period (Gkartzios, 2008). While farm incomes have been decreasing, for some farmers the selling of sites or small parcels of land for new housing proved a useful source of additional income (Finnerty et al., 2003). Farmers' organizations have fiercely defended farmers' private property rights, including vocally campaigning for relaxed planning controls for new housing in the open countryside (Scott 2008). However, while providing additional farm household income, the selling of parcels of agricultural land for housing provides a 'one-off' harvest for farmers.

Secondly, the house-building sector has been facilitated by an increasingly facilitative planning system, whereby the central and local state may be viewed as an active supporter and enabler of development interests (Scott et al., 2012). At a national level, Fox-Rodgers et al. (2011) for example, have illustrated the gradual ‘entrepreneurial shift’ in the legislative framework for Irish planning, leading to an increasingly overt facilitation of development interests. Furthermore, at the local scale, a number of authors have also traced the emergence and entrenchment of an entrepreneurial approach to local planning in Ireland since the mid 1980s, especially as it relates to residential development processes (McGuirk, 1994, 2000; McGuirk and MacLaran, 2001; MacLaran and Williams, 2003). Consequently, local development plans have become more flexible and pro-development. While domestic rates (local residential taxes) have only been introduced in 2012, during the house-building boom local authorities increasingly facilitated development to lever developer contributions to generate financial revenue and additional resources for local development.

Finally, up until the 1990s, rural Ireland was characterized by sustained emigration and depopulation, which provides an important ‘collective memory’ within many rural places (Scott, 2012). In this context, house-building in rural areas provides a positive indicator of rural change and indeed a lot of research projects have demonstrated particularly pro-development attitudes to housing construction in the countryside across elected representatives and the general public, reflecting inherited and longstanding social norms and practices.

These interrelated three elements demonstrate a path dependency to regulating housing development in the countryside which is informed by a dominant discourse

whereby housing construction consists of a ‘health indicator’ for rural communities, enabling rural economies to diversify and offering an alternative to decreasing farming incomes. Past events, practices and social norms continue to act as a road map in which an established direction leads more easily one way than another, while a break or reversal of this direction are challenged by historic momentum. The most prominent policy that developed during the Celtic Tiger era as regards efforts to regulate housing development, concerned a formal policy distinction between requests for planning permission for housing construction from members of a local rural community or in-migrants. This distinction of housing need (discussed in policy documentation as ‘rural-generated housing’ and ‘urban-generated rural housing’ respectively) is evidenced in the country’s first National Spatial Strategy (DOELG, 2002; a strategic document to echo European, regionalist and participatory approaches to planning, see also Davoudi and Wishardt, 2005) and later on in the Ministerial Guidelines for Rural Housing (DEHLG, 2005). These policy documents acknowledged variation and heterogeneity within Irish rural communities (for example the National Spatial Strategy suggested five broad rural area types with different policy priorities and responses) as also discussed in academic debates (for example: Murdoch et al., 2003; Duncan, 1992). As regards housing, drawing on these documents, planning authorities supported the growth of rural generated (i.e. local) housing anywhere in the countryside, while suggesting that urban-generated housing should take place in designated areas (rather than scattered in the open countryside) or in rural areas that have exhibited prolonged periods of population decline. These policies have remained intact following the collapse of the housing market that the country experienced. However, the ability of these policies to promote the evolutionary resilience of rural communities is questioned as they place formal

distinctions (and extremely difficult to regulate in the Irish context) between who is ‘local’, ‘rural’ (or, wider, ‘authentic’) or not, ignoring opportunities for local economies from attracting external capital and resources and resulting in a ‘locked-in’ development trajectory drawing on past policies and institutional apathy.

Rural housing: From abundance to vacancy

The house-building boom led to an increasing reliance on construction related employment in the Irish economy; however, the property crash in 2007 exposed the wider weaknesses in the ‘real’ economy of many rural localities. At a national level, by 2007, construction accounted for 13.3 per cent of all employment in Ireland, the highest share in the OECD, and the Irish exchequer had become increasingly reliant on housing related tax revenues throughout the 2000s, with revenues from stamp duty and capital gains rising from 2 per cent of tax revenues in 1988 to 12 per cent in 2006 (Whelan, 2010). From a rural perspective, the construction boom had enabled rural economies to absorb the decline in the primary sectors of agriculture and fisheries (Kinsella and O’Connor, 2009) and mask a deeper readjustment of many rural economies. The over-reliance of rural economies on the housing sector has implications for the resilience of rural communities. Gkartzios and Norris (2011) for example discuss the impacts of a policy in rural Ireland, targeting depopulated areas in the north west part of the country that sponsored private house construction through tax credits, during the Celtic Tiger period (a policy initiative known as the ‘Rural Renewal Scheme’). The authors argue that the particular policy was welcomed by the local authorities, albeit these had little input in the designation of the Scheme. Employment in housing construction in the area increased, but, as the authors argue, the positive employment impacts of the scheme were only short-term. More

importantly, the Rural Renewal Scheme resulted in excess housing output, which in turn has contributed to high vacancy rates. These examples highlight the need for a diversified rural economy in ensuring the resilience of rural communities. While the Rural Renewal Scheme has now ceased to exist, it provides an important lesson for the types of policies and development narratives that became normalised during the Celtic Tiger period (paradoxically perhaps aiming to further promote housing construction during a period of significant house-building in the country). Problems of housing over-supply resulting to unfinished or vacated rural dwelling in the post Celtic Tiger era have been widely reported in the literature (for example see also Kitchin et al., 2010; Norris et al., 2013) and are commonly referred to as ‘ghost estates’. Kitchin and Gleeson (2012) report 2,846 such estates in Ireland, which contrary to the narrative of housing as a ‘health’ indicator for rural communities provide now a new and powerful symbol of the collapse of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era. We argue therefore that overreliance on single sectors (such as housing construction) can undermine rural resilience. Instead, we call for policy initiatives that view housing not as a singular sector of the rural economy, but integrated with other territorial rural development trajectory narratives.

Questions of resilience

Returning to our questions of rural housing resilience, in this section we examine the potential of the rural housing and settlement system to strengthen or erode rural and community resilience. Firstly, in relation to place-based characteristics that contribute to or weaken rural resilience, a rather contradictory picture emerges. In relation to the inherited characteristics of the Irish rural settlement system, a number of characteristic can be identified that *strengthen* place-based resilience, primarily

related to household resourcefulness based on family and social networks. In this context, resilience is often performed through familism terms, for example through gaining (affordable) access to land for self-build housing, which considerably reduces the financial costs of rural housing. Murphy and Scott (2014), for instance, highlight that many rural households were insulated from negative equity during the recent housing crash due to self-build and resultant lower mortgages, reducing the exposure of rural households to the wider economic crash. Similarly, a relatively relaxed approach to new housing development in rural areas, based on longstanding social norms and political clientelism, has resulted in a limited displacement of ‘locals’ and those on lower incomes from Irish rural housing markets. This stands in marked contrast to rural planning in England, whereby highly restrictive control of new house-building in rural localities has led to the creation of highly gentrified rural places and socio-spatial inequity and exclusion in rural housing markets (Shucksmith, 2012).

On the other hand, a number of features of the rural housing system have the potential to *erode or weaken* aspects of community resilience. These include:

- The tendency for ‘family-reliance’ resilience might undermine the role of other social actors and of the state, in supporting communities in crisis and might provide a dominant discourse for further enabling neoliberal trends (such as social welfare cutbacks, shrinkage of services and support provided to rural communities).
- The monopoly of tenure undermines rural resilience in relation to a lack of policies supporting alternative tenures, lack of rural affordable housing schemes, and lack of community ownership opportunities.

- The over-reliance on housing construction to fuel rural economic development during the Celtic Tiger era masked the long-term, ‘slow-burn’ processes of wider rural restructuring, leading to the temporary rural development fix. However, the housing crash exposed rural localities to the weakness of housing speculation as a means to sustain viable rural economies. Instead of housing as a panacea to local development (witnessed in Ireland), we propose that housing should be seen as part of rural development strategies that allows communities to grow and demographically diversify.
- The highly dispersed pattern of rural housing in the open countryside also raises questions in relation to ecological resilience, in terms of habitat fragmentation and reliance on individual wastewater treatment systems which have been identified as leading to groundwater contamination.

Secondly, path dependencies emerge as critical in shaping both rural settlement systems and also institutions (formal and informal), key factors in shaping social agency. Path dependencies, including inherited and long established institutions, cultural values and norms have been critical in shaping the current rural settlement system. Decision making regarding housing construction has been informed by narratives that saw housing construction as a ‘health’ indicator, intertwined with a strong cultural attachment to rural living and private homeownership. Public policies enabled housing construction particularly during the Celtic Tiger period for both speculative and ‘self-build’ housing for private consumption. While this path dependency eventually led to the housing crisis, the proliferation of ‘vacant estates’, and the residential immobility of Irish households (trapped in negative equity), there has been little appetite for a radical review of housing policies in the countryside and

efforts to link housing construction with questions of community and evolutionary resilience: for example, what is the role of housing supply and housing construction in dealing with unexpected crises? What actors benefit from new house-building and for whom is housing built for? How resilience might be imagined or performed through housing policies in the countryside? Essentially, how is resilience constructed in housing policy and planning practice and what actors might try to monopolise discourses of resilience? Without undermining housing needs and the contribution of housing to community development, a reform of rural housing policy would be necessary for ‘unlocking’ the existing development path. The well documented Irish rural housing questions (both pre- and post- Celtic Tiger) should centre on the role and power relations of various agents in housing construction (including: the political class; local and national lobby groups; the planning and architect elite; the construction industry; academics) in negotiating (or resisting) the regulation of the countryside, particularly in a context where regulation is often seen as either prohibiting development (unlike the experience in Scandinavian countries for example) or as a memory of British colonialism.

Thirdly, particularly from an environmental perspective and in terms of transitioning to low carbon rural places, sub-optimal development paths can be identified. While dispersed rural housing patterns, entrenched by rural interests, is a traditional feature of rural Ireland, this pattern intensified during the recent housing boom. The period from the mid-1990s until 2008 witnessed significant increases in the housing stock across rural Ireland. This raises the question whether this development pattern has now ‘locked-in’ a development trajectory that will compromise place resistance in the context of emerging rural challenges such as a transition to a low carbon rural

lifestyle, rural places as sites for renewable energy infrastructure (often resisted by new rural residents), ecological fragility, austerity finances and an ageing society. For example, Ireland now has an entrenched dispersed pattern of development and a significant legacy of housing in the open countryside. This raises challenging public policy issues concerning the longer term resilience of rural places. For example:

- As fuel costs increase in the context of diminishing oil reserves, will rural living be undermined by substantial increases in commuting costs?
- Has a dispersed settlement pattern compromised the ability to deliver renewable energy schemes (particularly wind farms) in the context of public opposition?
- How does housing demands impact on ecological fragmentation and compete with biodiversity policies?
- In the context of an ageing society (with the number of people 65+ to double in Europe over next 50 years), how will a dispersed and ageing population be best served in terms of elderly care, well-being and long term health provision? How can ageing-in-place an independent living be best facilitated? Will family networks be sufficient to cope with an ageing rural society? What are the characteristics of a well functioning rural settlement, housing and support service system?

These challenges suggest that an inherited and deeply entrenched development trajectory in rural Ireland may inhibit place resilience in the context of future economic and environmental ‘shocks and disturbances’, while institutionalised and ingrained cultural norms may undermine the ability of rural places and communities

to adapt rural settlement systems to these broader challenges – these are further discussed in the conclusion below.

Finally, is a process of ‘de-locking’ necessary in path creation and transition towards a more sustainable rural settlement system? The challenge from a sustainable rural development perspective is how to reconcile the contradictory nature of the rural settlement system, which can foster more ecologically sound places without compromising on community health. While many planners and environmental campaigners are vocal in arguing for severe restrictions on new house building in the Irish countryside (see Scott, 2012), the political apathy towards house building has fostered social and family networks, provided more affordable home-ownership paths, and led to socially equitable outcomes in relation to preventing displacement of locals due to gentrification, as evident in other northern European countries. The process of enhancing rural resilience will require a greater integration of community development concerns with housing policies, while building the capacity of rural communities to cope with both economic shocks and disturbances and environmental challenges.

Conclusion

From this review of policy and practice in a European context, does resilience thinking offer anything new for the study of rural housing? Firstly, resilience offers *alternative analytical methods and insights for rural housing studies* that can serve to undermine neoliberal tendencies, while promoting social and spatial justice. Central to this will be what narratives of resilience will materialise in research and public policy discourses and by whom. Admittedly, the quest for conceptualising and

implementing strategies of evolutionary resilience can be informed from research regarding the sustainable development of rural areas. Research on sustainable development for example has demonstrated cases where sustainability is construed and realised in certain ways that promotes particular interests and elites. In rural housing studies for example, Sturzaker and Shucksmith (2011) have demonstrated how rural elites in England frame discourses of sustainable development on their own terms, highlighting environmental sustainability, but at the same time ignoring social dimensions of sustainability, resulting in social injustice, spatial segregation and exclusion (see also Murdoch and Lowe, 2003). In Ireland, Scott (2012) highlights constructions of sustainability being attached to private property rights that promote individualism and the ability of landowners to sell land for housing development, but undermine community interests. These experiences highlight not only how diverse discursive representations of resilience might develop in different policy and political contexts, but also the need to carefully examine the role of dominant groups in policy communities in conceptualising strategies of resilience. Further research might explore the role of dominant traditional institutions, structures and agents in various societies (such as the family in Ireland and Southern Europe; but also: voluntarism, civic engagement, clientelist relationships) in performing a ‘taken-for-granted’ resilience, which maintains existing power relationships, offering little imagination for evolutionary change.

Furthermore, drawing on the emerging regional resilience literature, applying an evolutionary analytical perspective sheds new light on exploring the role of path dependencies in place development, and also indentifying ‘locked-in’ development trajectories based on entrenched interests and institutional apathy, leading in the case

of Ireland to a pro-development policy position that celebrates physical development in rural places. The evolutionary approach draws our attention not only to sudden shocks and disturbances within localities, but also ‘slow-burn’ (Pike et al., 2010), longer term processes of change which may prove to be equally important in place-shaping. In the case of Ireland, current development trajectories of continued dispersed rural settlement may ‘lock-in’ future challenges that may erode rural resilience. For example, a highly dispersed rural community with an ageing population will raise (costly) difficulties in relation to elderly service care, while dispersed settlement geographies may undermine attempts to deploy renewable energy infrastructure due to local opposition.

In this context, the Irish case may display characteristics of what Holling (2001) refers to as *maladaptive* systems, whereby a system may be characterised by rigidity and low potential. In a rural context, this may include the rural settlement system where entrenched interests can lead to diminishing social and ecological resilience. For example, in the UK with highly restrictive rural planning policies constraining housing supply, social resilience can be eroded through the displacement of ‘locals’ and lower income groups as house prices rapidly increase (see for example, Scott et al., 2012). In contrast, more *laissez-faire* approaches to rural settlement growth (such as in Ireland or much of southern Europe) can maintain social resilience attributes (such as maintaining stocks of social capital and family and kin networks) but perhaps undermine ecological resilience through dispersed and fragmented development patterns. In both cases, the rural settlement system is underpinned by norms, rules and entrenched institutional behaviour.

A further analytical perspective provided by resilience thinking is the identification of place assets or attributes that contribute to weak or strong resilience or vulnerability, and the role of housing and housing supply as an asset for rural development. Both Wilson (2010) and Schouten et al. (2012) identify place-based characteristics associated with strong resilience, which can be further applied as a tool to assess the extent that public policies (including housing policy) enhance or erode rural resilience in the face of unpredictable events. Vulnerability perhaps represents the ‘flip-side’ of resilience, providing a useful device for assessing the exposure to risk of places due to economic and environmental disturbances, but also as a tool for assessing vulnerability trajectories based on public policy interventions (e.g. the continued roll-out of austerity measures) or economic scenarios (e.g. impacts on rural household vulnerability due to rising commuting costs associated with rising petrol prices) (see Murphy and Scott, 2014).

Secondly, resilience provides an *alternative policy narrative for rural housing policy and practice*, enabling a re-framing of contested housing debates. For instance, an evolutionary approach raises issues relating to institutions, leadership, social capital, and social innovation and learning (Davoudi, 2012) within a rural community context, implying that people act consciously when faced with a crisis, enabling opportunities for performing ‘bounce-forward’ resilience through individual, collective and institutional action. Through adopting deliberative approaches involving networks of stakeholders, rural development practice can embrace the ‘politics of resilience’ to explore and ‘work through’ the central challenge of addressing *the resilience of what, to what and for whom?* Therefore, resilience provides a ‘strategic lynchpin’ (Shaw, 2012) as collaborative networks explore new and alternative trajectories and path

creation. A second lesson for rural housing from applying a resilience framework is to more fully embed environmental and ecological considerations into rural housing, practices and behaviour to encouraging a shift towards environmentally sensitive rural lifestyles and consumption patterns. Examples in this regard may include transitioning towards a less carbon intensive lifestyle – perhaps a particular challenge in the context of dispersed geographies of rural settlement and reliance on private transport, but with possibilities relating to localised food hubs (as outlined by Franklin et al., 2011) and local energy provision (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010).

While resilience offers a potential re-framing of rural housing debates, its adoption within policy discourses should also be treated with caution. This is particularly the case when the rhetoric of resilience is translated to a social context with overtones of self-reliance (Davoudi, 2012). As Pike et al. (2010) highlight, examining the ideological and political content and discourse of resilience debates is crucial, providing the example of the US where resilience narratives are associated with representations of individualism, self-reliance and distrust in government. Similarly, resilience can be mobilised within debates concerning austerity politics and the ongoing cuts to public services leading to a ‘sink or swim’ stance towards rural communities facing neoliberalising agendas, rather than a wider questioning of neoliberal policy fixes. In the UK for example, the current back-to-localism policy discourse highlights opportunities for local communities to guide and stir their own development trajectories, but these approaches have also been criticised for increasing inequality amongst communities (Coote, 2010) and for proliferating neoliberalism (Featherstone et al., 2012). What representations and actions of resilience in policy terms can be seen as genuine alternatives to neoliberalism and what as further

deepening neoliberalism? These questions serve to re-emphasise the rationale for a more radical or progressive ‘bounce forward’ resilience approach, based on adaptability and transformation while deliberating alternative transitions towards sustainable ruralities.

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