
Introduction

While Polycentricity as an analytical tool has a long history, its popularity as a normative concept is a relatively recent phenomenon; one which has been given a growing salience since the publication of the ESDP¹ (CEC, 1999). Despite the continuing ambiguities about its different interpretations at different spatial scales and the validity of its universal adoption as a panacea for resolving regional problems (Davoudi, 1999 & 2003), the concept has found its way into spatial planning literature and policy documents in many EU member states. However, as with other ESDP’s key principles the application of polycentricity and the meanings given to it vary substantially in different regions of Europe, ranging from a superficial reiteration of the terminology to using the concept to frame and inform policy debates (Faludi 2001; Shaw and Sykes, 2003).

This paper aims to examine the way in which the concept of polycentricity is applied in Ireland with particular focus on its application in the Irish National Spatial Strategy (NSS). Ireland’s current interest in polycentricity is primarily a response to the countries mono-centric structure, which has been accentuated by its recent rapid economic growth. Following a brief review of the recent social and economic developments in Ireland, the paper will examine the spatial policy responses to these developments within the context of the wider debates about the changing Irish regional policy. We will turn our attention to more detailed analyses of the application of polycentricity in the NSS. In conclusion, the paper will raise a number of critical questions about the implementation of the strategy and its core objective of achieving a more balanced regional development across Ireland.

Irish economy: the ‘Celtic Tiger’

Ireland has become known for its rapid economic growth which in a time span of about ten years turned the country from one of Europe’s underachievers to a ‘tiger economy’ with a per capita GDP² level standing at second highest in the EU in 2001 (CEC, 2004). Its ‘Celtic Tiger’ boom gathered pace during the late 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s in such a way that by 2000 unemployment fell from a 1994 level of 14% to less than 4% (DELG, 2002, p. 14). The average annual economic growth rates of 7 to 8% have been coupled with increased spending power, rising manufacturing outputs and service provision, improving educational standards and new infrastructure. Amongst multiple underlying factors, those mentioned frequently in the literature include: the availability of a low corporation tax rate attracting foreign direct investment, membership of the EU and access to the key European markets, the availability of an educated, young, flexible and English speaking workforce, the close ties between Ireland and the United States and the high quality of telecommunication infrastructure (Bradley, et al, 1997; Walsh, 2000; O’Leary, 2003).

The economic boom has also led to an unprecedented population growth. Decades of emigration have been replaced by net migration of people into the country. In 2001, the population of Ireland reached its highest level in 120 years

¹ European Spatial Development Perspective
² Gross Domestic Product
at 3.9 million with immigration at 46000 per annum (CSO, 2002). 58% of population live in urban areas of more than 1500 inhabitants and 42% live in rural areas. These figures which are based on 1996 Census (DELG, 2002, p. 20), have since changed further in favour of urbanisation. Population density in Ireland is amongst the lowest in Europe, with 54.8 persons per square kilometre in 2001, compared with an EU average of 114.2 (CEC, 2004).

This growing economic prosperity, however, has led to the emergence of a new socio-economic geography where investment and population have gravitated towards the eastern part of the country leading to further regional divergence, with Dublin / Mid-East and South West Regions pulling away from the rest of the country and demonstrating a high concentration of population and economic activity particularly in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA)\(^3\).

**Ireland: a monocentric structure**

Although Dublin City, with an estimated population of about one million in 2002 (DELG, 2002, p. 20), is considered as medium-sized in European terms and small in global terms, it dominates Ireland to such an extent that it is classified as ‘primate city’, similar to Paris and London and their relation with France and UK respectively. The population of the Dublin FUR\(^4\) is 1.3 million which accounts for 40% of Ireland’s population. The population of the GDA is even higher and was 1.5 million in 2002 (CSO, 2002). This represents a greater proportion of a country’s total population than any other city in Northwest Europe apart from the Randstat in the Netherlands, which in fact consists of separate smaller cities. The rate of increase in Dublin’s population is almost twice that of Ireland as a whole. Whilst Dublin FUR grew by 8.2% between 1996 and 2001, the rest of Ireland grew by only 4.4% (Williams and Shiels, 2002, p. 50). This has led to a pattern of development which is increasingly unsustainable, as discussed later in this paper.

The same picture emerges when economic growth is considered. The regional economy of Dublin leads Ireland. In 1999, the Gross Value Added of the GDA represented 47.9% of the national total (DELG, 2002, p. 22). Furthermore, Dublin is home to over 80% of government agencies and 70% of the headquarters of major public and private companies as well as all Irish financial institutions. The economy of the Dublin FUR is dominated by financial services sector, followed by information, communication and technology, creative and media sector and tourism. The latter has led to the doubling of the number of hotel beds between 1990 and 1999 (Williams and Shiels, 2002, p. 50). Since the mid 1990s prime office rents have risen by over 150%, putting Dublin in the third highest position in Europe after London and Paris (Kelly and Lang La Salle, 2002, p. 106).

The evidence presented above shows that the GDA has achieved an impressive level of growth, well above the EU average, which has contributed to the move towards the central goal of the ESDP, i.e. a more polycentric pattern of development across Europe. Indeed, Dublin area has been identified by the research undertaken under ESPON 1.1.1 project\(^5\) as one of 64 Metropolitan European Growth Areas (MEGA), with the potential to act as a counterbalance to the core area of Europe, described by the ESDP as the pentagon. However, this success has been realised at the expense of an over concentration of population

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\(^3\) This is the unit of analysis used in NSS and refers to the area including Dublin City and all of the Counties of Dun Laoghaire/ Rathdown, Fingal, Kildare, Meath, South Dublin and Wicklow (NSS, 2002, p. 11).

\(^4\) This refers to Dublin Functional Urban Region defined as the travel to work area for Dublin and covers a smaller area than GDA used in NSS which has a population of 1.5 million.

\(^5\) ESPON 1.1.1: The role, specific situation and potentials of urban areas as nodes in a polycentric development, see [www.espon.lu](http://www.espon.lu)
and economic activity around Dublin and the underutilisation of economic potentials of other regions. It could therefore be argued that although economic growth of Ireland as a whole has led to greater convergence with average EU GDP per head and further polycentrism at the European level, it has at the same time accelerated greater monocentrism at the national level. Whilst the former has been celebrated as one the European ‘success’ stories, the latter has raised the alarm for the national policy makers as a phenomenon which if unchecked would lead to two negative trends, one is an increasing level of negative economic externalities in GDA resulting from further dispersion of activities and the other is a deepening and widening of regional disparities.

**Dublin: a dispersed city**

The economic boom has led to the continuing suburbanisation of not only residential but also office and commercial development, with a number of major retail centres, hotels and business parks being developed along the main road and rail transport corridors, radiating from the City to the regions. The hi-tech industries located around the city’s edges, for example, draw their workforce from a labour market area which stretches to 80 kilometres, but within about one hour driving time (Williams and Shiels, 2002). As is evident from Diagram 1, Dublin is becoming a 'dispersed city' with its commuter belt continuing to widen beyond the GDA, making infrastructure provision such as public transport difficult and expensive. Based on recent trends it is estimated that four-fifths of the projected 0.5 million population growth in Ireland could take place in and around the GDA over the next 20 years (DELG, 2002, p.24). All this has resulted in a deteriorating quality of life reflected in problems such as bottlenecks and congestion around the capital and rapid house price inflation encouraging long distance commuting and leading to environmental pressures on the surrounding areas. House prices in Dublin have risen 200% between 1994 and 2001 compared with 151% for Ireland as a whole reaching an average of almost a quarter of a million Euros for new housing, 33% above the national average (Williams and Shiels, 2002, p.51). Across the country the number of new cars has trebled between 1995 and 2000 (O’Leary, 2003, p. 5) and the rising demand for second and holiday homes are leading to unsustainable development pressures on accessible rural areas.

**The emergence of a ‘regional problem’**

Whilst economic growth has led to a much higher standard of life for a majority of people (Nolan et al, 2000), this has been accompanied by a widening of relative levels of inequality between and within regions, demonstrating an uneven development pattern (Boyle, et al, 1999; Walsh, 2000; O’Leary, 2003). These trends have led to what O’Leary (2003) calls the emergence of a ‘regional problem’ in Ireland.

Prior to the mid 1990s, the significance of regional policy in the Irish national economic competitiveness had received little attention. For EU statistical purposes the country had been identified as a single EU NUTS 2 region qualifying for Objective 1 Structural Funds (SF) and given the poor performance of the economy particularly in the 1980s all Irish regions were seen as having potential for growth (O’Leary, 2003). As the GDP began to rise above the qualifying threshold for 1996-2000 SF, it became clear that Ireland as a whole was no longer eligible for funding, yet parts of the country still had a GDP per capita of less than 75% of EU average. Hence, in order to maintain EU funding for those areas, the government divided Ireland into two NUTS 2 regions, one consisting of the Border, Midlands and West (known as BMW region), which remained eligible for Objective 1 status; and one comprising the remaining 5 regions [known as South and East (S&E) region], which qualified only for Objective 1 Transition
fund, to be ceased in 2006. For each region two new Regional Assemblies were formed in 1999. These have almost the same functions as the eight Regional Authorities (RAs) which were formed five years earlier for administrative areas corresponding to NUTS3 regions (see Map 1). In the BMW Region, Gross value added (GVA) per head stood at 75% of the State average in 2001, while in the S&E Region it stood at 109% (CSO, 2003). Furthermore, the strength of the economy of the S&E Region as a whole has concealed significant intra-regional disparities at NUTS3 regions. The 2001 indices of disposable income for example showed considerable disparities in living standards ranging from 116.7 in Dublin to 87.7 in the South East NUTS3 Region (CSO, 2004).

Towards a balanced regional development

The exposure of these disparities plus the problems associated with the overheated GDA called for a change in policy direction. The rapid growth took place in the context of a lack of appropriate infrastructure, an absence of a strategic spatial framework and a limited institutional and governance capacity to guide and coordinate the development. As Walsh (2004) suggests, from the mid-1990s a number of reports by various government departments as well as the business community were calling for a coherent regional policy and the importance of an effective spatial planning strategy for achieving territorially-based integration among various policy sectors. However, the definitive shift came with the publication of the third National Development Plan: 2000-06 (NDP) in November 1999 (GoI, 1999).

The Plan moved away from a dominant discourse of ‘Ireland as a region of Europe’ towards recognising the ‘regional problem’ in Ireland (O’Leary, 2003). For the first time, the traditional goal of enhancing national growth was complemented by the objective of “a more balanced regional development in order to reduce the disparities between and within the two Regions (BMW and S&E) and to develop the potential of both to contribute to the greatest possible extent to the continuing prosperity of the country…” (GoI, 1999, p. 43).

The NDP provided the mandate for the preparation of a National Spatial Strategy which would act as a framework for the Plan’s proposed investment programme. The NSS is expected to achieve two outcomes. The first one is to “identify broad spatial development patterns for areas...”. The second one is to “develop and present a dynamic conception of the Irish urban system...” (GoI, 1999 quoted in Walsh, 2004, p. 5).

The National Spatial Strategy

The preparation of the NSS began in Spring 2002, a few months after the publication of the ESDP, to which the document makes only a passing allusion in a footnote. However, despite a lack of explicit reference to the ESDP and its underlying concepts, such as polycentric development, it is clear that the NSS’s approach to develop a strategic framework for future spatial structure of Ireland mirrors the ESDP’s approach for development of Europe as a whole.

As with the ESDP, the main thrust of the NSS is to promote a win-win solution where further growth in the less developed regions is to be gained without jeopardising growth in the economically buoyant areas. It argues that, “the fundamental approach of the NSS is to encourage greater spatial balance by strengthening areas and places in a structured way, rather than seeking to stop growth in Dublin” (DELG, 2002, p.30). This clearly indicates that the Strategy has adopted a ‘potential’ rather than a ‘redistribution’ based approach to achieving
balanced regional development (Walsh, 2004), mirroring the ESDP’s departure from traditional regional policy (Davoudi, 2003).

The NSS draws on the European experience and concludes that, “successful regional development in today's Europe” has been achieved by adopting three forms of spatial planning: “urban clusters of neighbouring cities ..., urban networks between more distant cities... [and] urban-rural partnerships” (DELG, 2002, p. 25).

The manifestation of this model in the NSS is the targeting of a limited number of strategic centres with ‘potentials’ to be the drivers of development. The Strategy “sets out how Ireland can be spatially structured and developed over the next twenty years in a way that is internationally competitive, socially cohesive and environmentally sustainable” (op cit, p. 38). The proposed spatial structure consists of an urban hierarchy whose components include: the GDA, four existing gateways (Cork, Limerick, Galway, and Waterford), four new national level gateways, nine strategically located medium-sized hubs (see Map 1), county and other town structures and rural areas. The strategic objective for the future development of these areas is to: consolidate the GDA, strengthen the larger urban centres in the south, southeast, west and northwest to complement Dublin, revitalise the western areas furthest away from Dublin, reinforce the urban system in central parts of Ireland and southeast, and co-operate across border with Northern Ireland in an ‘all island’ context (op cit, p. 55).

This urban hierarchy is to be further enhanced by adopting the concept of urban networks (see Table 1) which is widely used in the ESDP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of urban network</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single gateway of two centres</td>
<td>Limerick-Shannon Gateway</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linked gateways</td>
<td>Athlone-Mullingar-Tullamore</td>
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<td>Growth Triangle</td>
<td>Waterford-Wexford-Kilkenny</td>
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<td>Cross border network</td>
<td>Letterkenny-Derry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linked Hubs</td>
<td>Ballina-Castlebar and Tralee-Killarney</td>
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However, the NSS comes closest to the ESDP and the concept of polycentricity when it attempts to identify a new zone of economic growth on a par with the GDA. Here, the Strategy suggests that if the complementary strengths of the existing four gateway cities and their hinterlands are added together, a critical mass of over one million people will be achieved, supported by international airports, three universities, and so on. It is argued that, “such inter-connected and developed network of cooperating and complementing cities” (DELG, 2002, p.45) would enhance their national and international capacity in such a way that they would be “capable of competing with the GDA” (ibid). However, the Strategy falls short of conceptualising this proposed polycentric urban region by either visual illustration (such as a diagram) or a metaphor similar to those widely used in the past such as ‘Blue Banana’, ‘Golden Triangle’, and ‘pentagon’ (Davoudi, 2003).

However, for the first time (and the only time in the main text), the NSS mentions the term ‘polycentric development’, yet without referring to the ESDP. It states that, “models of activating such multi-centred or polycentric development approaches are evolving in other countries in Europe” (DELG, 2002, p. 45). It then refers to Appendix IV where a Danish example has been used to show “this type of cooperative approach”. The term polycentric development is then defined as a development model which “involves linking and integrating the
development of a number of urban centres in a way that combines their strengths in terms of infrastructure co-ordination, business promotion, innovation and cultural ties” (op cit, p.146).

The Strategy has adopted this model both at the national scale in the form of identifying the combined potential of the four existing gateway cities as leading to a new internationally significant economic zone and, at the regional scale by promoting links between gateways and hubs across the country. Central to the effectiveness of this model, which advocates a potential-based approach to balanced regional development, is the relevance of the indicators used to define or measure ‘potential’.

The NSS argues that in order to support the increased economic activity and regional competitiveness which will be needed if more spatially balanced patterns of development are to evolve in the next 20 years, the following conditions must apply: a critical mass of population, a range of skills, an innovative capacity and business and transport linkages in an environment attractive to people. (DELG, 2002, p.35). The location and availability of a critical mass of population, however, seems to have dominated the selection of gateways and hubs. This has led to questions being raised as to whether the Anthlone-Mullingar-Tullamore Triangle or Sligo are capable of creating an urban structure of sufficient scale and complexity to be able to attract and maintain internationally competitive industries (O’Leary, 2003). The selection of Sligo as a growth centre in BMW region in particular is based arguably on political rather than economic reasons (op cit). Another reason however could be its location in Objective 1 area and hence its access to substantial level of funding for at least six years.

Irrespective of the validity or appropriateness of the strategic choices made, it is important to note that as mentioned by the NSS itself, “to stabilise the GDA’s share of national population at its current level, around 75% of the jobs growth likely to take place in that area ... over the next 5 years, would have to take place instead in other regions. Such scenario is clearly unrealistic” (DELG, 2002, p. 30) Instead, “NSS seeks to establish a position in which the regional components of the country grow at a broadly similar pace .... The process of levelling off will be likely to occur beyond the current NSS timeframe of 20 years...” (op cit p.31). And, even that depends on the effective implementation of the Strategy, a prospect which, as yet, is not guaranteed.

**Implementing an ambitious strategy**

The NSS has been criticised as being weak on implementation because of a lack of specific measures and its dependence on other government departments to integrate NSS in their policies (Morgenroth, 2003). It is argued that, the Strategy has been drawn up without the conditions necessary to see its fruition (van de Kamp, 2003). While, in part, this reflects the character of the NSS as a “national, spatial and strategic” document (DELG, 2002, p.10) rather than an operational plan, it is however weak in providing sufficient guidance particularly with regard to major infrastructure provisions. The timely development of physical infrastructures, including transport\(^6\), energy and communication, are seen as vital for achieving the NSS’s key objectives. However, an assessment of the Strategic Infrastructure Projects concluded that a number of key factors have been acting to stall the effective development of the NSS and its policy of BRD (van de Kamp, 2003). For example, there was evidence of emerging conflicts between what was

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\(^6\) To support balanced regional development, the NSS proposes a series of strategic radial and linking corridors as well as strategic international access points.
perceived to be national interests acting against local interests partly due to limited consultation. Furthermore, the NSS gives only limited provision of specific guidance regarding strategic infrastructure planning, particularly in relation to: the nature and location of the nationally significance projects, the elimination of unsuitable areas, the identification of potential sites or search areas for major developments such as ports and airports, the gas pipelines, wind energy and waste management facilities.

Another challenge facing the effective implementation of the NSS is its link with the NDP, which is a major State's investment programme and as such plays a pivotal role in achieving balanced regional development (BRD). However, the approach taken by the two strategies to BRD is somewhat contradictory. Whilst NSS promotes a potential-based approach, the NDP retains a distributive approach to regional policy (O'Leary, 2003). On the one hand, the NSS argues for “focus[ing] much effort on complementing the areas that are attracting or generating substantial investment by fostering critical mass at the small number of additional locations where this is feasible” (DELG, 2002, p.35), and on the other, the NDP puts the emphasis on “spreading the benefits of national economic development more widely across the regions” (GoI, 1999, p.44). The latter is reflected in the NDP’s balance of investment programme where BMW region is set to receive a higher per capital level of investment than S&E region and the State as a whole (GoI, 1999). Furthermore, almost half of the NDP’s seven-year programme had been completed prior to the formulation of the NSS. In the absence of the NSS in the first three years of NDP operation, the funding has been, and will be in the future, allocated on the basis of two NUTS2 regions rather than the NSS’s proposed gateways, hubs, etc. The need for reprioritisation of funding in such a way that underpins the principles enshrined in the NSS, such as development of key infrastructure projects in designated Gateways, has been strongly highlighted in the Mid term Evaluation of Regional Operational Programme for BMW and S&E regions, conducted to satisfy the Structural Funds regulations (GoI, 2003).

There is also the temporal mismatch between long term policy goals and short term political expediency, which often results in policy fragmentation and opportunism. A particularly revealing example is the recent proposed decentralisation of Irish public administration. The Government intends to relocate some 10,000 civil servants from Dublin to other cities, but not necessarily to the ones targeted by the NSS as the potential growth areas (i.e. gateways, hubs, etc). On the contrary, the relocation has focused largely on the traditional county towns partly to re-gain their political support which might have been lost because these towns were not designated as growth areas.

**Conclusion**

The Irish ‘success’ story has been widely applauded and exemplifies as a model for other developing regions not just in Europe but internationally. However, her impressive growth in the 1990s has been coupled with a deepening of regional disparities and an over-concentration of wealth and population in GDA. This has further accentuated the mono-centric structure of the country and hence called for a change in policy direction towards a more balanced regional development. The policy shift was marked by publication of the NDP and followed through by the policies of the NSS. Whilst avoiding the ESDP’s terminologies, the Strategy promotes its key principle of polycentric development as the most appropriate way to achieve BRD without halting the growth of the GDA or national competitiveness. It seeks to optimise local potential by creating critical mass at strategically selected locations, elevated to gateways and hubs.
The publication of the NSS has been generally welcomed by the planning community both within and outside Ireland as a ‘breath of fresh air’ when compared with other similar strategic guidelines which are littered with iteration of standard and often procedural policies. Nevertheless, it has not been immune to criticism by both academics and practitioners, particularly with regard to its lack of attention to implementation issues and its methods of identifying growth areas. As regards the latter, it is important to note that planning is a political process. Inevitably, the selection process for growth areas has been based as much on political choices as on sound technical methodologies. Negotiated consensus had to be achieved among key stakeholders during the course of the NSS preparation. Given the hard choices that the NSS had to make in terms of targeting some areas and not others, the most difficult challenge must have been securing “widespread support in political arenas” as pointed out by Walsh (2004, p.12). What matters now is to maintain the consensus that has been achieved during the formative stages of the NSS and to further strengthen it at the implementation stage. Whilst there is evidence of institutional reforms for better co-ordinations between government departments and partnerships arrangements at the local level, further commitment at various levels of governance is needed if the NSS’s ambitious goal of balanced regional development is to be achieved. The extent to which the Irish policy community is up to this difficult challenge is an issue for the years ahead.

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