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Planning for a Future that is Going to Happen, not Against it

Lorcan Sirr
Technological University Dublin, lorcan.sirr@tudublin.ie

Conor Skehan
Technological University Dublin, conor.skehan@tudublin.ie

THE IRISH TIMES

Opinion & Analysis

Handbags as index of fashion, economics . . . and too much baggage

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ANALYSIS

Planning for a future that is going to happen, not against it

Proper planning is about more than permission to build; it is about managing the future. And planning in Ireland, including the National Spatial Strategy, isn't working. First of two articles

Unless we are prepared to make some politically unpalatable decisions and begin to plan for a new and rapidly changing reality that is already unfolding around us, Ireland is on the threshold of making critical planning errors that will significantly prolong the unfolding recession. Failing to plan is planning to fail.

In 2008, we face similar choices to Japan after the end of its property boom in the early 1990s. They failed to acknowledge change and take the hard but necessary decision to re-evaluate their economic and political model, and as a result Japan has seen its economy stagnate over the last 15 years with no end in sight.

Ireland now needs to address startling new challenges and old problems caused by outdated models of enterprise and client-based systems of governance.

To meet these challenges many familiar practices need to be questioned, none more so than our repeated failure to plan adequately and appropriately for the future.

Planning aims to support and enhance environmental, social and economic betterment. It cannot create jobs but it can create and sustain attractive conditions for creating jobs.

But "planning" in Ireland, in the words of Michael Smith, the minister for environment in 1993, has become a "debased currency".

Used almost exclusively to describe consent to build, it is almost never used for its original purpose – to make provision for the future. The Irish planning system's lack of foresight is now recognised as one of the fundamental causes of the recent property bubble. This has distorted our economy and ultimately undermined our competitiveness.

Planning for a successful Ireland of, say, 2030, means identifying, examining and working with, not against, the forces that will shape our future. To plan a future Ireland on a business-as-usual, or, worse still, on a political basis, as we have already done with the plan for the decentralisation of government, would be another exercise in folly.

Recent commentaries on Ireland's future have concentrated on the familiar topics of immigration and the high-tech industry, but they have overlooked a series of deeper spatial and social changes that are already completely changing Ireland. These changes are both tangible and intangible and the hardest decision will be to acknowledge their existence and accept the magnitude of these changes.

The biggest intangible change will be to our value systems. Urban attitudes are different, solutions are demanded immediately, and problems left unsolved are obvious and cumulative. Most Irish people now live urbanised lifestyles, living in or near towns. However, very few settlements have reached the critical size of 100,000 that allows all of the benefits of city life to begin to occur.

The small size and the markedly eastern distribution of Irish settlements is a reality that few policies recognise or accommodate, and the rate of urbanisation in Ireland means that our traditional rurally based value system will change more rapidly than any other European country.

Changing values, combined with increased urbanisation and a larger population mostly concentrated in the area around Dublin and four other cities, also have profound political implications.

For the last 25 years or so, the two largest and traditionally rural-based parties have been losing their share of overall voting percentages at each election. In less than 10 years urban agendas will dominate politics in Ireland. These large political parties will need to rethink their approach to local and national governance in order to survive in this changing society.

The first major tangible change will be our population and where we'll be living. By 2030, it is estimated that the population of the Republic will be around 6.45 million. Of these, 2.76 million, or 43 per cent, will be living in the greater Dublin area (GDA) – which occupies less than 10 per cent of the area of the State. If we include the seven counties adjacent to the GDA, then almost two-thirds of the population will be living on about a quarter of the land. (See figure 1.)

Although the population will continue to grow, there is unlikely to be much change in the pattern of low-density accommodation provision. This means that urbanised areas will spread both up and down the eastern region, creating a corridor of continuous development, ultimately stretching from Belfast through Dublin to Waterford and on to Cork. About two-thirds of the population will be living within 35kms of the entire east coast, and no plan for "balanced regional development" is going to prevent that.

By 2015, the Common Agricultural Policy will have been reformed and Irish agriculture as we currently know it will have been altered forever. For climatic and geological as well as economic reasons, it is likely Ireland will have two main agricultural sectors, with intensive agribusiness concentrated mainly in the south and east. In the north and west, it is likely that environmental designations will become common, and will be the main determinants of future development.

There will also be far fewer farmers in a future Ireland, which means larger landholdings, and, through necessity, the emergence of creative agriculture, food and farming practices. (See figure 2.)

The economy, too, will alter significantly. Our over-reliance on foreign direct investment (FDI) is a dated approach to economic planning. We have also failed to provide the infrastructure many large corporations need in time, and what is there is arguably too dear, too small and in the wrong location. FDI has also FSC - Found Somewhere Cheaper.

The future scale and distribution of Ireland is not crystal ball-gazing: several publications have dealt with likely future scenarios for Ireland, most recently the Urban Forum's *Twice the Size* report.

The indicators and patterns of development have been evident for some time, and yet, incredibly, no credible plan exists to deal with this clearly emerging future. Instead we have the National Spatial Strategy (NSS), a plan devised to achieve balanced regional development, thereby diverting resources from Dublin. The net result of this is a lack of investment for economic growth in the one region that sustains the rest of the country.

This in turn makes the transfer of funds from the advantaged areas to the disadvantaged more difficult.

The continued implementation of the NSS has serious implications for our future success. It proposes spreading the jam too thinly across the country, so everybody gets a taste but nobody's hunger is satisfied. Crucially, the NSS is planning for an Ireland that is probably not going to happen.

There is a need for plan for the future that is more likely to happen – the continued urbanisation of the eastern region – instead of trying to prevent it. This has obvious political implications.

Deliberately fostering, providing and sustaining the conditions for a human being to live an entire fulfilled lifetime is the business of planning, and it is a huge challenge. Where rural communities can survive in a *laissez faire* regime, the urban citizen is entirely dependent on the city to supply and sustain these conditions of life, potential and prosperity. We need to acknowledge our duty of care to urban dwellers, those whose prosperity will have direct positive economic and social impacts on the rest of the country.Many existing institutions, policymakers and professionals will find these changes and challenges difficult to accept. No one is saying planning for the future will be easy, but planning against the future is far more difficult.

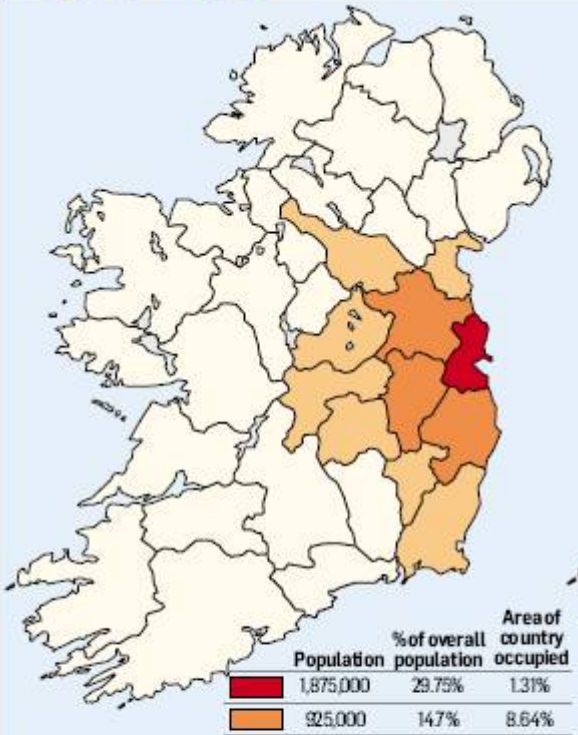
Tomorrow: Planning for success

CONOR SKEHAN AND LORCAN SIRR

Conor Skehan is head of the Department of Environment and Planning; Dr Lorcan Sirr is head of research, Faculty of the Built Environment at Dublin Institute of Technology

Housing off the M50 in Dublin. It is estimated that 43% of the Irish population will live in greater Dublin area by 2030. Photograph: Bryan O'Brien

Ireland in 2030



	Population	% of overall population	Area of country occupied
	1,875,000	29.75%	1.31%
	925,000	14.7%	8.64%
	960,000	15.25%	16.47%
	2,540,000	40.3%	73.58%

FIGURE 1
How many will we be?
By 2030, it is estimated that the population of the Republic will be c.6.45 million. Of these, 2.76 million or 43%, will be living in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) which occupies less than 10% of the area of the State. If we include the seven countries adjacent to the GDA, almost two thirds of the population will be living on about a quarter of the land.

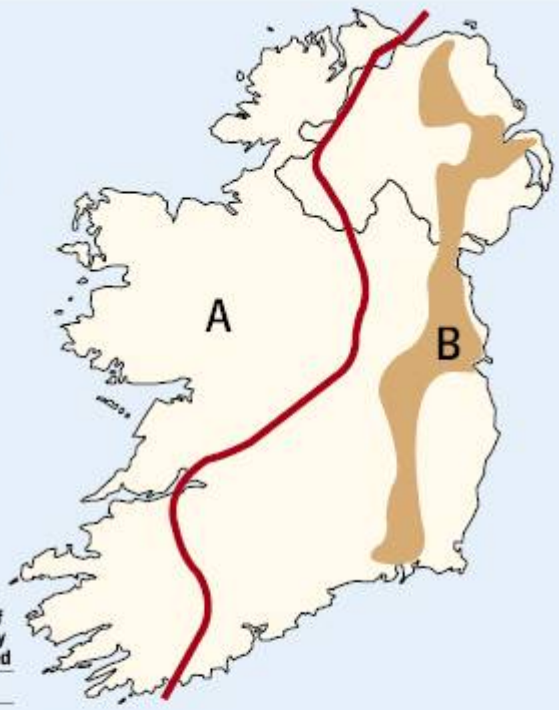


FIGURE 2
What will we be doing?
By 2030 the area **A** west of the line will be dominated by areas that will be highly protected through a combination of sensitive landscape, habitats and waters. Agriculture will be mostly small scale and part-time or specialist. The appearance of very large areas will change - as trees and shrubs return to unused farmland.
Area **B** will contain the majority of the population and most of the main economic activities - including services, industry, and agribusiness.