

A marriage of convenience: the EU and regionalisation in Ireland

Paper delivered to PSAI Annual Conference, University College Cork, 21 October 2006

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Abstract

The case of Ireland epitomises both the strengths and the weaknesses of the process of regionalisation within the European Union. On the one hand, few states have established as many new structures for sub-national governance in direct response to EU requirements as rapidly as Ireland. On the other hand, and contrary to the normative justification for such change, few sub-national institutions are quite as democratically insignificant as the Irish case. As well critiquing the form that regionalism has taken in Ireland, this paper highlights the bureaucratic complexity and obfuscation associated with it. Not only does this case raise serious questions regarding the role of regionalisation in a European context, it portends inherent problems in the EU's use of Structural Funds as a 'carrot' for institutional development in member-states.

Introduction

The relatively recent phenomenon of Irish regionalism owes much of its shadowy existence to a fortuitous combination of political pragmatism and European funding. As a consequence, the movement towards regionalisation in modern Ireland has been a definitively 'top-down' process, driven by assessments of national advantage rather than by local pressure for devolved power. In the midst of this, the enlargement of the EU has had a profound causal effect on the regionalisation of Ireland. The Commission's

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(1997) blueprint for the pre-accession strategy of the EU in *Agenda 2000* rang warning bells for Ireland that receipts from the EU would rapidly diminish in preparation for the new member-states. If it remained a single region in the next round of Structural Funding, the 'Objective 1 in transition' status would apply to the whole country and result in substantially less financial support from the EU. The Irish government's response was to divide the country into regions in order to multiply the amount of EU funding it was eligible for. The following year, it lodged an application with Eurostat to have Ireland classified into two NUTS II regions, thus allowing full Objective 1 status to remain with a large part of the territory and lose it only gradually in the south-east (Boyle 1999: 738).

The Irish case therefore stands somewhat in distinction from other examples of decentralisation in the European Union (EU) given that sub-national democracy and identity can in no way be seen to be legitimating or motivating factors. Indeed, the main players in the story of Irish regionalism in the EU context are not local actors but national politicians and, even more importantly, government officials. For this reason, perhaps, this aspect of Ireland's experience of EU membership can be seen to exemplify the ad hoc, agenda-driven and reactive nature of the Irish public administration's response to the conditions of European integration.¹ This chapter develops this theme in outlining the form and function of regional governance in Ireland, its relationship to and development through the European Union, and its limited public impact.

The EU and sub-national government in Ireland

Local government

Sub-national level government was first given clear constitutional status in Ireland in 1999 following a national referendum on the subject.² Until that point it had only had a

basis in Acts of the Oireachtas (Parliament) and had changed little since the 1898 Local Government (Ireland) Act enacted prior to independence (Coyle 1997: 76). This Act has meant that the primary unit for sub-national government has been the county and not the region. This was confirmed in the 2001 Local Government Act which divided the state for the purpose of local government into 34 units (O'Sullivan, 2003: 41). These so-called county and city councils, supported by the small municipal councils, make up the core of the local administrative system in terms of power, functions and finance. The members of these local authorities are directly elected using the system of proportional representation with single transferable vote (as in elections to Dáil Éireann, the national parliament). They have an extensive range of responsibilities, including waste services, environmental protection, recreation amenities, and development incentives/controls. However, in many instances, the local authorities' role is subordinate to the state-sponsored bodies responsible for policy delivery and enforcement in specialised areas, such as the National Roads Authority, the National Educational Welfare Board, and An Bord Pleanála (the planning appeals board). There are over 120 such bodies (with government-appointed boards but whose employees are neither elected representatives nor civil servants) and they fulfil a range of cultural, commercial, developmental, advisory and regulatory activities without being subject to ministerial control.

The trend to create these single-function executive agencies in response to the demand for new services from government – rather than to upgrade local authorities and devolve responsibilities to them – typifies what Adshead (2003: 117-8) describes as a system whereby 'practical problems are often solved at the expense of democratic accountability'. The devolution of power to officials rather than to local politicians has been held as a precaution against corruption since the first such measures (giving dominant power to managers rather than councillors in local authorities) were taken by

the new state in the 1920s (Chubb, 1992: 270). The history and structuring of regional-level governance exemplifies on an even greater scale the prioritising of pragmatism over democracy in public administration in Ireland. Acting as a significant bolster to this agenda has been the EU's influence in the construction of regional administration in Ireland; encouragement of 'social partnership' aside, the EU has done little to enhance the democratic credibility of these new institutions.

The EU context for regionalisation in Ireland

The very meaning of regionalism in Ireland is contested; the boundaries of even the official bodies deemed to be 'regional' cover a conflicting variety of geographical areas.³ Reflecting the lack of popular use of regionalism as a political or social reference, the recent establishment of regional-level public institutions has been by way of executive discretion rather than bottom-up mobilisation or lobbying. By far and above the most important factor in this process of deconcentration ('decentralisation' would be too strong a term) has been an assessment of the economic interests of the state. The dallying with regionalisation that occurred on a somewhat sporadic basis in the 1970s and 1980s was primarily due to recognition that major regional imbalance was injurious to Ireland's economic welfare. At that time, the government response (such as it was) essentially took the form of extending the aforementioned state-sponsored body sector to the regional level, adding regional arms to national organisations (such as the Irish Development Agency) and forming regional development agencies (such as the Western Development Commission) (Whelan, 1976: 284, 288; Boyle, 1999: 742). Somewhat ironically, as the EU was coming to prioritise regions for development in the late-1980s, the main public regional bodies Ireland did have (the Regional Development Organisations, established in 1969) were abolished as part of budgetary cost-cutting measures. Nonetheless, the requirements for EU

Structural Funding were too important for the Irish government to overlook, and so in order to fulfil the Commission's demand for regional consultation, it quickly established a superficial regional structure (based this time on seven regions) to assist it in the preparation of the National Development Plan (NDP) for 1989-1993.⁴ Yet the simultaneous designation of the whole state as a single underdeveloped region meant that the Irish government remained in effect *the* regional authority for the purposes of EU Structural Funding (Coyle, 1997: 81). The cosmetic nature of regional participation (merely taking the form of Sub-Regional Review Committees) at this time was glaringly apparent and a cause of explicit 'regret' from the then-EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, Bruce Milan (Coyle and Sinnott, 1993: 82).

When it came to the negotiation of the next Community Support Framework (CSF) for 1994-1999, Ireland's NDP again placed a strategic emphasis on national over regional development. However, an embryonic conception of multilevel development and administration was present in the form of the eight NUTS III-level Regional Authorities established at the start of this period (see section below). Nonetheless, the virulent economic growth in Ireland in the late 1990s continued to be spatially imbalanced in a pattern that followed that of regional deprivation (i.e. much poorer in the west than the east) and thus a stated core objective of the next (much larger) National Development Plan for 2000-2006 was for 'more balanced regional development'. To this end, the Irish government's NDP revised regional boundaries (allowing for allocation at NUTS II level for the first time) and included two Regional Operational Programmes (Border, Midland and Western, and Southern and Eastern) for which two Regional Assemblies were constructed (also discussed below). This division of Ireland into two regions facilitated devolved responsibility for the regional programmes. Crucially, however, the conjuring up of these two regions also enabled Ireland to receive Objective 1-level

Structural Funding for as long as possible, phasing out funding to the prosperous Southern and Eastern Region up to the end of 2005 whilst retaining Objective 1 status for the poorer Border, Midland and Western Region (see Figure 1 below).

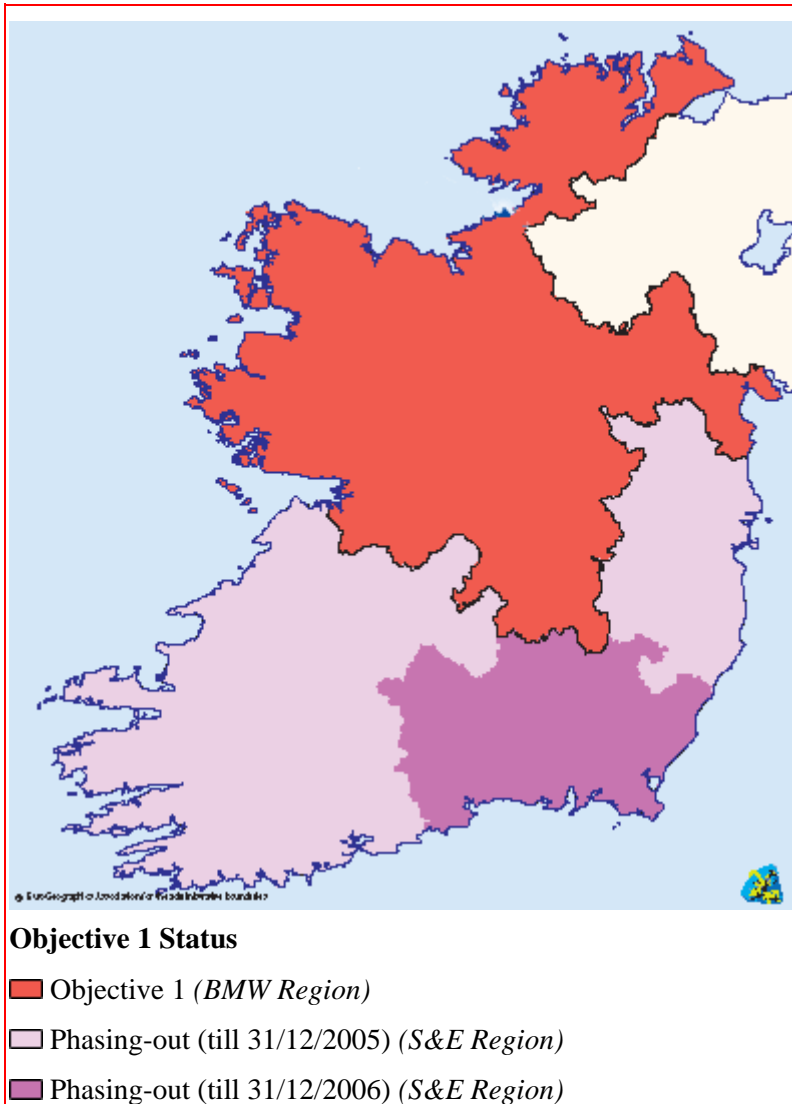


Figure 1. Map showing eligibility for Structural Funding⁵

Regional Authorities

There are no directly elected provincial or regional authorities between central government and the local authorities in Ireland. What exists place of elected bodies are the Regional Authorities and Assemblies, to which elected councillors from the member local authorities are nominated and which are essentially run by centrally-appointed

(albeit small) managing authorities. The eight NUTS III Regional Authorities (see Figure 2) came into existence in 1994 (through the 1991 Local Government Act) and served to review the implementation of the Operational Programmes for the 1994-1999 period. According to Carroll and Byrne (1999: 174), the nature of the powers and functions assigned to the Regional Authorities shows that they were designed to be weak and uninfluential. They have two main functions. The first is to coordinate the provision of public services by the local authorities; the other is to monitor the delivery of EU Structural and Cohesion Funding in the region. Members of these Authorities are nominated by elected members of the constituent city/county councils from amongst themselves, with the number of seats (from 21 to 37) being based on the population size of the area. Each Regional Authority has a chairperson, a director, a designated city/county manager (to enhance links between the local and regional authorities), and policy and administrative staff (see Figure 4 for an illustration of the structures of the Regional Authorities). The work of the Authority is assisted by an Operational Committee and an EU Operational Committee responsible for reviewing progress in the various EU operational programmes in place in its NUTS III region. This involves the preparation of Regional Strategies, which are specifically intended to monitor the delivery of EU Structural Funds as well as to promote the co-ordination of public services in the region (DELG, 2003).



Figure 2. The eight Regional Authorities (NUTS III) ⁶

Regional Assemblies

As noted above, prior to the programming period 2000-2006, the Irish government designated the country into two NUTS II level regions: Border, Midland and Western (BMW) and Southern and Eastern (S&E). These Assemblies were established in 1999 under the same parent legislation as the Regional Authorities in order to have them in place at short notice.⁷ Each of these regions has a Regional Assembly whose members are nominated by constituent city/county councils from among their elected representatives who are also members of a Regional Authority. There are 29 members in the BMW region and 41 in the Southern and Eastern Region given that membership is based on population rather than territorial size. The tasks of the Regional Assemblies are closely aligned to those of the Regional Authorities. Their general function is to promote coordination in the provision of public services among the public, regional and local authorities in their regional areas. Most particularly, however, each Regional Assembly is charged with being the managing authority for its respective Operational Programme (i.e. BMW or S&E). These Regional Operational Programmes for EU

Structural and Cohesion Funding are designed to target investment at local production, infrastructure (such as urban renewal), and social inclusion. Not only is each Assembly responsible for the financial management and control of the Operational Programme, it has a statutory duty to provide guidance to implementing bodies/final beneficiaries to ensure the sound financial management of the Structural Funds (BMW, 2006: 12). The Assemblies also have to monitor and evaluate the impact of the various measures of the Regional Operational Programmes, provide information and publicity on these measures, and ensure compatibility with Community policies such as gender mainstreaming (BMW, 2006: 23). The Department of Finance funds the costs of the Assemblies in their function as managing authorities for the Regional Operational Programmes, and their other costs are paid by the local authorities, as is also the case with the Regional Authorities.

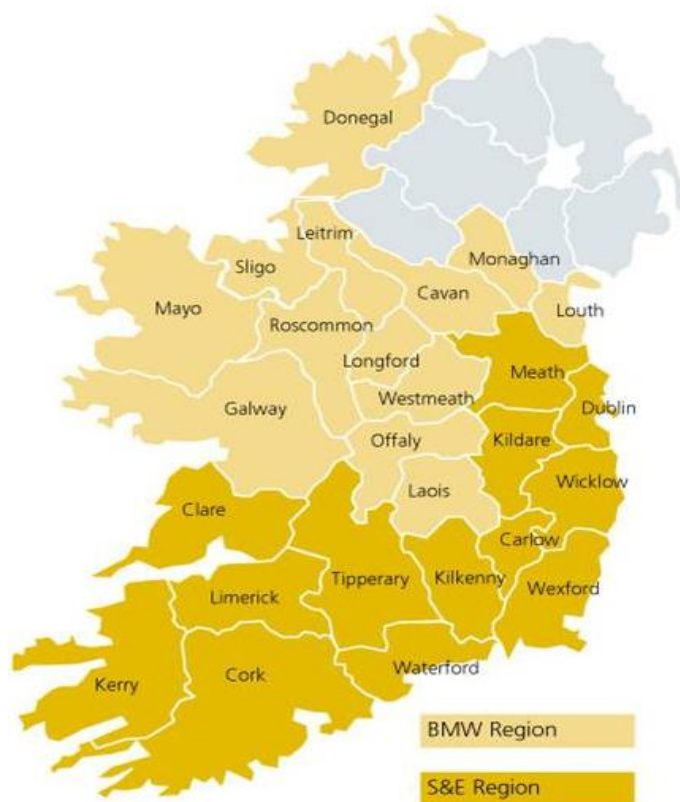


Figure 3. The two Regional Assemblies (NUTS II)⁸

The structure of the Authorities and Assemblies

The structure of the Regional Authorities and the Regional Assemblies (see Figures 4 and 5) immediately gives a clear impression as to the priorities of the Irish government in creating these regional institutions. Both the Authorities and the Assemblies are bottom-heavy in that the committees that run under their aegis are substantially larger and have more specific responsibilities than the forums in which the elected councillors meet. Moreover, the fact that these councillors are not directly elected to either type of institution, plus the fact that they meet so infrequently (approximately monthly in the Authorities, bi-monthly in the Assemblies) suggests that it would be difficult for even the most motivated members to have much more than a symbolic role. Indeed, in satisfying the EU Commission's requirements for broad participation and consultation, elected representatives have been bypassed at local and regional level in favour of committee-contact with appointed representatives of social, sectoral, and public interests. Meetings of the Operational Committees of the Regional Assemblies were even reduced from a fixed basis to 'as and when required' by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2004 (this meant once in 2005 for the S&E Assembly) (SERA, 2006). The end result, Marshall (2002: 2) contends, is that Ireland's regions have among the most convoluted and inscrutable structures of governance in Europe. This is illustrated in Figures 4 and 5 below.

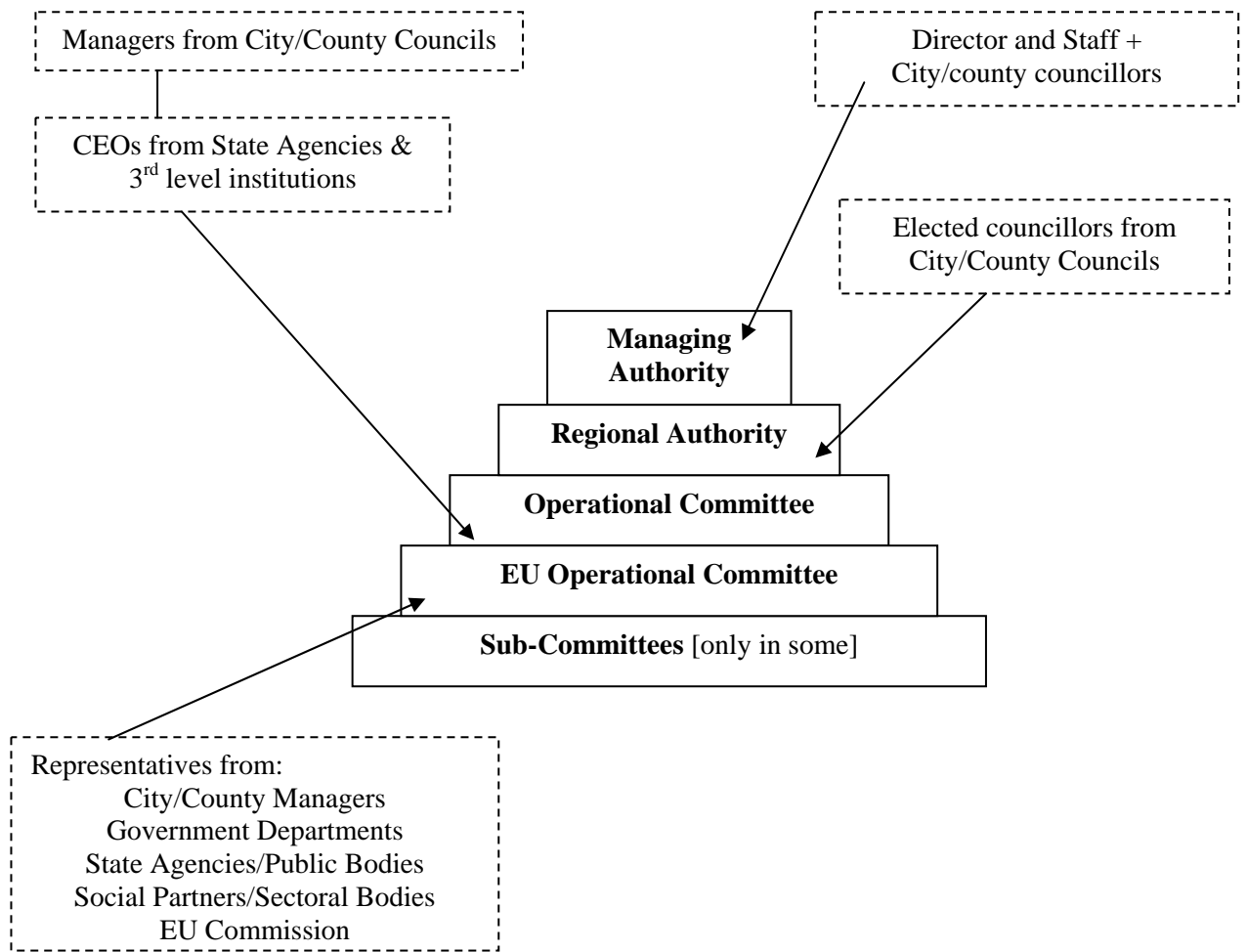


Figure 4. The structure of Regional Authorities

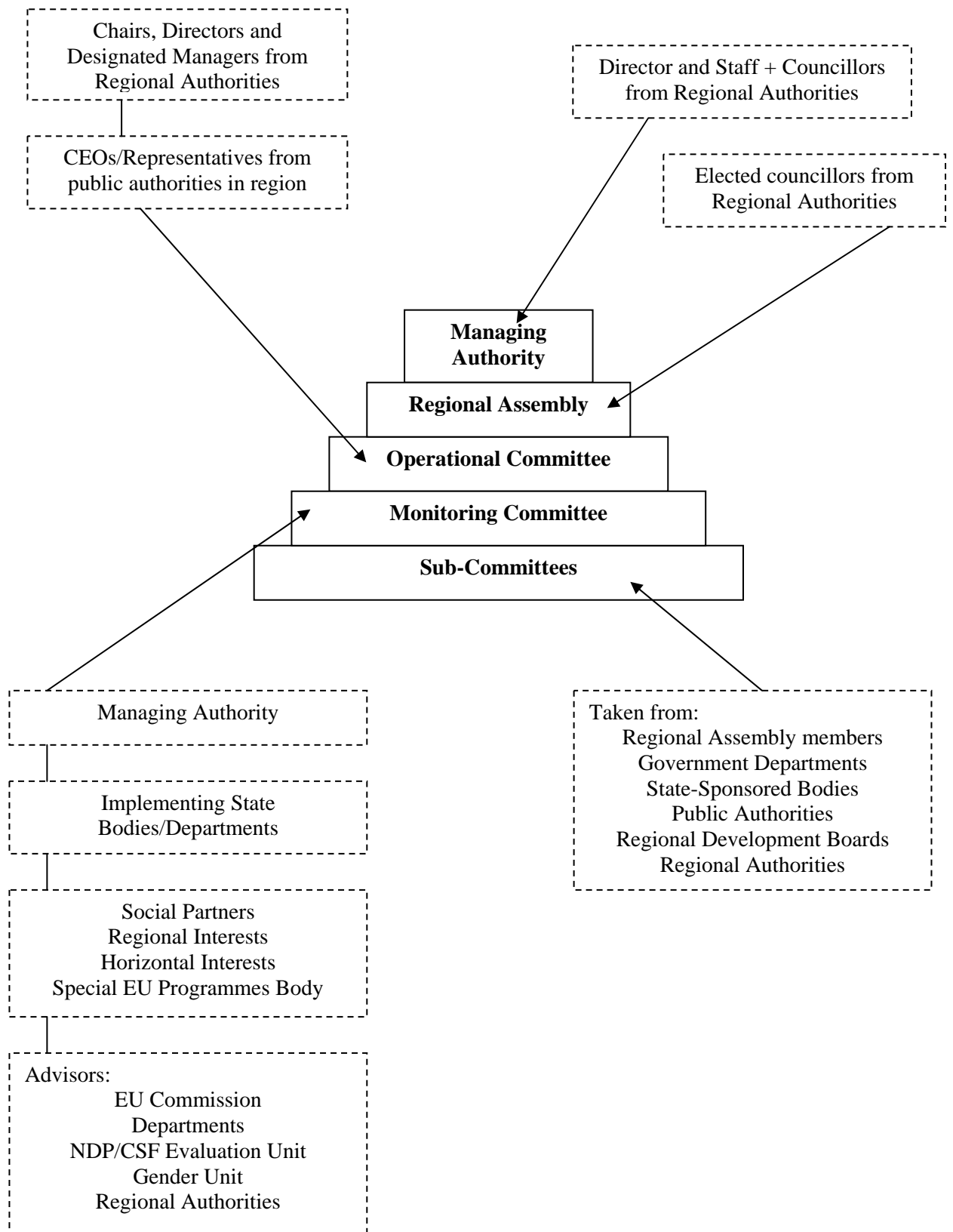


Figure 5. The structure of the Regional Assemblies

Evaluating the role of the regional institutions

The main conclusions from the first mid-term evaluations of the running of the Regional Assemblies have been quite heavily critical. Not only have they quite clearly failed in equalising the level of development and living standards across the territory of Ireland,⁹ the general assessment is that there has been poor overall performance in the running of the institutions and committees. This has been due to four main problems. First, there has been a substantial amount of under-spend in all key areas. In the Southern and Eastern region an average of 46 per cent of that forecast for end 2002 had been spent; in the Border, Midland and Western (BMW) region this under-spend was 59 per cent and under 20 per cent in some seven measures (just 4.6 per cent of spending forecast for regional innovation and 1.2 per cent for waste management had been spent) (Finn, 2004). This has been due in some part to a slowdown in the economy and delays and cutbacks in the distribution of government funding. Yet even those areas that had received funding were not without their problems and there are outstanding concerns about value for money (Finn, 2004).

Secondly and somewhat ironically given the chief 'coordinating' remit of the Assemblies, there is a lack of coordination or cohesion between the various bodies and plans involved in regional governance. Partly due to shifts in the government's own priorities (seen in the substantially altered plans of the Exchequer for regional development), some of the Operational Programme measures the Assemblies are tasked with implementing are seen to lack relevance or even to contradict other priorities. Linked to this is the essential difference between the Operational Programmes in the two regions. There is concern that, although regional structures overlap at various levels and effort is being made to coordinate planning within the regions, intra-regional

development is not taken into account. This is set to be an increasingly urgent issue with the National Spatial Strategy – yet another initiative coming on top of others for balanced development across the country.¹⁰ In the meantime, lessons and results from pre-existing programmes (such as gender equality through the EU initiative EQUAL) are not being mainstreamed or integrated into the system.

Thirdly, there is a need for better management. As it stands, the decision-making process does not even factor-in the Regional Planning Guidelines or the Consultation Documents that regional bodies spend so much time and effort compiling. A solution to the sense of disorder that has been proposed by the Director of the S&E managing authority is that a leading authority be appointed and that the managing authorities in the regional assemblies be strengthened (Blair, 2004). Certainly, the work of the committees could be improved with professional support services and targeting issues of particular need. Yet there is, it may be argued, opportunity here for devolution of certain functions in another direction, i.e. to local authorities. Such a response would, however, need to ensure that it does not exacerbate the final core problem, which is the lack of clarity in the working of the sub-national bodies in general and the regional institutions in particular. Complaints in this area regarding the Regional Authorities are that pressing needs are obscured through the complex details the various committees have to deal with. Even those within the process as members of the committees can feel under-informed or confused as to the functions of the bodies and the running of the various programmes and projects. Unsurprisingly, actors working at the sub-national level in a wide variety of areas find it difficult to enter and engage with the regional-level institutions.

Inputs from Irish regions into the EU

The role of central government

Benz and Eberlein (1999) found, in case studies of regionalism in France and Germany, that European multilevel governance can cope with the challenge of coordinating decision-making among a large number of actors and arenas as long as the national institutional setting was supportive of functional and territorial differentiation. There have always been concerns as to the capacity of the Irish administrative structures and institutions to adapt as necessary for successful regionalisation. Addressing the specific question as to the conditions necessary for regional development to occur in post-accession Ireland, Barrington (1976: 354-8) argued that success in this area would depend on resources, political will, promotional and supportive policies, and institutional machinery. Each of these four areas were deemed to be in need of much advancement at the time. Thirty years later, the effects of continued neglect and underdevelopment in these four areas are apparent, not only in the effective functioning of the regional bodies (as seen above) but also with regard to the relationship between sub-national actors and the EU. The fundamental cause of this weakness is the stubborn belief of the national government that central control is fundamentally necessary for 'the requirements of efficiency, effectiveness and expediency' (Haughey, 1989). The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has traditionally held enormous power over local authorities, exercising financial and administrative control as well as regulating their relations with central government (Coyle, 1997: 81). Because the Department is relatively peripheral to EU negotiations in areas outside its remit, local authorities have as a consequence been effectively held back from input into policy formulation in the EU. It was only in the mid-1990s that sub-national authorities gained any sort of direct contact with EU institutions.

Ireland's informal policy style on EU negotiations mirrors the ad hoc nature of consultations between central and local administrations (Callanan, 2002: 73). The limited (and sometimes fairly sporadic) amount of dialogue between central and local government in Ireland is reflected in the fact that expertise from the local level in Ireland is rarely incorporated in negotiations on new EU legislation (Coyle and Sinnott, 1993: 102; Callanan, 2002: 73). Insight into why this is the case was given in a comparative report by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR 1999), which found consultations between central government and local authorities in Ireland 'usually involve lobbying actions or information meetings rather than genuine negotiations producing binding decisions'. It is not surprising, therefore, that there has been no cohesive or coordinated local authority perspective on EU issues (Coyle, 1997: 81). More generally, this has meant that general discontent at the local level regarding the decentralisation of powers has not been channelled into any concerted campaign to improve or enhance it (Coyle and Sinnott, 1993: 101, 103).

Regional capacity

The Irish government has traditionally been wary of allowing direct links to develop between the EU Commission and the local authorities, preferring to act as mediator for all relationships between the EU and the Irish state. This has gradually changed, however, shifting from what was in effect a prohibition on local authority-Brussels links in the early years of membership, to reluctant permissiveness in the early 1990s, to cautious support at the present time. Yet the government remains watchful of EU-related activities at the sub-national level, aided by the role of its departments in managing, monitoring and implementing EU programmes (Coyle, 1997: 90). The position of local and regional authorities in Ireland contrasts with that of the majority of their EU counterparts in terms of their democratic standing, capacity and powers. It is

the managers of the local and regional authorities who have been bestowed with most autonomy and discretion at a sub-national level. Yet the City and County Managers' Association can be credited with having invited the Institute for Public Administration to provide a consultancy service and, later, a training programme for local authority officials on the workings of the EU. As local officials have gained knowledge and confidence in working in and with the EU institutions, it has become more common for local government to look for support from the EU in negotiation with central government departments (Callanan, 2003: 425).

Access strategies to the EU

Direct contacts between sub-national authorities and EU institutions have, indeed, become increasingly necessary with the growing amount of EU legislation impinging on local government. These have been fostered through a variety of means but primarily for specified purposes related to local authorities' role in the management of EU funding/legislation or to their representation in EU policymaking. First, the role of regional and local authorities and assemblies in monitoring and managing EU Structural Funds and programmes has led to direct links being formed with the European Commission. For example, representatives from the EU Commission (particularly from Directorate-Generals dealing with regional policy, fisheries and agriculture) sit on the Monitoring Committees of Regional Assemblies and the EU Operational Committees in the Regional Authorities. More generally, Irish delegates are regular attendees at the range of seminars, training programmes, and study visits hosted by Brussels for local authority members and officials. Expanding upon this role are the projects funded by the EU to encourage links between other regional players in the EU. For instance, the Southern and Eastern Assembly is involved in the ReAct project, funded by the ERDF. This two year project aims to learn from the combined experience of eight regional

partners in managing INTERREG funding in order to help the EU improve the quality of INTERREG projects and their management at the NUTS II level (SERA, 2006).

Secondly, the Committee of the Regions (CoR) is the most important forum for Irish sub-national government at the EU level. Ireland's nine members are nominated by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government from local authorities (although it is also in the remit of Regional Authorities to nominate CoR members if requested to do so by the Minister). Although they are first and foremost local councillors, because they represent their region in the CoR all members are automatically given membership of their Regional Authority upon nomination and are required to brief it on developments within the Committee. There are also the offices in Brussels established to promote direct contact between sub-national authorities in Ireland and the EU. As early as 1992, six local authorities in the west of Ireland set up a liaison office, known as NASC, in Brussels (see www.nasc.ie); they have since been joined by Údarás na Gaeltachta (for the development of Irish-speaking areas) and the West Regional Authority. NASC is the most successful of such initiatives and works to inform local actors about developments in the EU, facilitate partnerships and support dialogue between the various levels. This is especially notable because the limited remit and power of local authorities in Ireland means that they do not fit all that well into the large transregional organisations (such as the CEMR) that work to lobby the EU on local authorities' behalf. Nonetheless, participation in smaller, direct partnerships, especially in projects funded by EU Community Initiatives such as INTERREG and RECITE, has generated genuine co-operation and exchange of experience.

A government initiative in this area is the Irish Regions Office (IRO) established by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2000. In Brussels,

it is a resource for the Irish members of the Committee of the Regions and their Regional Authorities and serves to assist sub-national authorities in influencing EU policy. At the local level, it seeks to maintain awareness of developments within the EU and to identify funding opportunities.¹¹ Its role at this level has been expanded through collaboration with local authority managers and the Association of Irish Regions, the national organisation of the Regional Authorities and Regional Assemblies. As well as facilitating communication between its members, the Association represents them in relation to central government, offering advice on economic development in the regions, for example. The Association is, however, constituted of chairpersons and directors from these regional bodies rather than a wider body of elected representatives. If there is, therefore, any burgeoning ‘para-diplomatic’ role for Irish regional actors in relation to the EU, it remains limited in scope (due to the restricted remit of the regional bodies to begin with), by and large confined to the involvement of officials rather than politicians and, consequently, beyond the public eye.

Outputs from the EU to Irish regions

Experience of EU laws and directives

As Ireland settles into being a net contributor to the EU, the costs associated with implementing a large body of EU legislation are going to be felt increasingly acutely, not least at the local level. The micro-detail of EU legislation, policies and funding has meant that the burden of EU membership has become increasingly heavy for local authorities. In their role as service providers, property owners, employers, development agencies etc., local authorities are responsible for implementing nearly three quarters of EU legislation (Callanan, 2003:408; Irish Regions Office). The experience of EU directives can be both direct and indirect for local authorities. A direct impact can be seen in the large-scale administrative and financial costs of managing and maintaining

the infrastructure needed to meet the Urban Waste Water Directive (91/271/EC), for example, or in compliance with the Landfill Directive (99/31/EC). Indirect effects of EU legislation may impact local government activity in such areas as health and safety, employment, recycling targets or the protection of habitats (Callanan, 2003: 408-410). Although national governments are responsible for implementing EU legislation *de jure*, local authorities tend to be responsible in practice, and thus growing Commission vigilance regarding infractions of EU legislation may become a source of increasing tension between local and central administrations (Callanan, 2003: 411). Moreover, because a large extent of the observation, implementation and enforcement of European legislation occurs at a sub-national level, the EU itself is increasingly dependent on local authorities (Callanan, 2002: 67). In recognition of this fact, the European Commission's White Paper on European Governance (2001) proposed enhanced involvement for local government at all stages of EU policy making (Callanan, 2002: 66, 70).

Recent alterations to the structure and functions of sub-national government in Ireland have not amended the fundamentally centralised nature of the Irish state. Indeed, it may be said that, whilst the EU has facilitated significant change in the role of regional and local authorities in Ireland, the central government's mediation of Ireland's experience of EU membership has prevented such changes from having wide or deep implications for governance in Ireland more generally. This is in part because much of the strength of Irish public administration in response to the requirements of EU membership has resided in its use of centralisation (Laffan, 2001: 88). In addition to this, the multilevel nature of the impact of the EU has if anything served to complicate rather than coordinate the workings of sub-national government in Ireland. Critics may see this 'multiplicity' as a direct effect of the notoriously bureaucratic nature of EU influence,

whereas a more sanguine observer would interpret it as the (necessarily complex) operation of network-building. Certainly, Carroll and Byrne (1999: 177) identify the embedding of some EU principles such as networks, partnership and sustainability in Irish regional development strategy, 'even if the other key principle of subsidiarity has yet to gain a firm foothold'.

EU Funding

Cohesion Funding ran from 1993-1999 and 2000-2006 and was concentrated on improving transport and the environment in member-states lagging behind in development. Given that Cohesion Funding is determined on a national rather than regional basis (i.e. under 90 per cent of EU average Gross National Product), Ireland ceased to be eligible for this from the end of 2003 with a GNP of 101 per cent.¹² In the ten years of Cohesion Funding, Ireland had received around two billion euro for infrastructural projects within its remit.¹³ Local authorities acted as the implementing bodies for Cohesion Funding in the areas of water treatment/supply (with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government) and national roads (with the Department of Transport and National Roads Authorities). EU Structural Funds have been used to establish and finance a range of local development groups (such as area partnerships and county/city enterprise boards) largely independent of local government (Callanan, 2002: 67). A contemporary study by Hart (see Coyle, 1997: 86) found that even in the early 1990s, local authorities were tending to over-concentrate on EU Structural Funds to the neglect of the numerous directives associated with the European Single Market. This perhaps shows another dimension of Irish regionalism and the EU: it has from the start and from all levels been concerned much more at the direct input of the EU than with the wider contextual and more complex legal etc. effects of membership.

The Community Initiatives enable interests not covered by the National Development Plan but within the interests of the EU as a whole to be met by additional funding. This provided a new opportunity for sub-national authorities and organisations to communicate directly with the Commission in applications for local funding requirements. Even by 1993, two-thirds of local authorities in Ireland had participated in at least one of the Community Initiative Programmes (Coyle, 1997: 89). The most significant Community Initiatives for the regional level have been INTERREG (particularly the Ireland-Wales and Ireland-Northern Ireland programmes), LEADER (for rural development), and RECITE (exchanges between local and regional authorities). As Cohesion and Structural Funding diminished in the 2000-2006 programming period, sub-national organisations became even more motivated to apply for funding from the Community Initiatives, raising their importance for local and regional authorities.

New ways of making policy

Sub-national authorities in Ireland have effectively no involvement in major policy areas or in the negotiation of central government policy (Coyle, 1997: 78). Yet one indirect consequence of EU membership has been the changing relationship between central civil servants and their local government counterparts. In 1987, Collins found that that civil servants in government departments viewed local authority managers as 'troublesome functionaries'; yet, ten years on, their political autonomy and policy-focus has made the two key allies (Asquith and O'Halpin, 1998: 88-9). Indeed, in their optimistic vision, Asquith and O'Halpin (1998) foresee a future 'steering' role for local authorities in the EU context: developing 'a multitude of working relationships with other state, semi-state, not-for-profit sector and private business sector organisations'.

However, this overestimates the capacity for leadership in local politics in a context long-inhibited by tight party discipline, the persistence of clientelism and localism, and (until recently) the dual mandate by which individuals could simultaneously hold seats both as local councillors and members of the Dáil (Coyle, 1997: 80).

The increasing complexity of policy making and delivery in the context of EU membership has not served to counteract the relative invisibility of elected representatives at the sub-national level. Nor has the development of the regional level of administration in Ireland had any effect on democratic input to policy delivery, given that members to the Regional Authorities and the Regional Assemblies are not directly elected but rather nominated from constituent authorities. Any effects of deconcentration in responsibilities across the local, regional and national spheres have therefore primarily impacted on public servants rather than politicians. This fact is, one might argue, reflected in the low-level impact that changes to sub-national governance in Ireland have had on public opinion, including in EU-related matters.

Complication and obfuscation

The sub-national system of public administration and governance in Ireland has long been highly complicated and difficult for the majority of citizens to understand let alone relate to. Chubb (1992: 263) argued that the ‘jungle’ of administrative areas, ‘is both impenetrable to the ordinary citizen and frequently inconvenient for any kind of business that involves more than one authority or regional organisation’. Bearing this in mind, the former leader of Fine Gael, Alan Dukes, suggested that citizens’ lack of identification with or comprehension of the EU is unsurprising given that very few have good comprehension of the directly-elected local authority within which they live.¹⁴ The impact EU and other initiatives towards the goal of regional area development have, if

anything, served to complicate this 'jungle' even further. This is partly because of their aim 'to incorporate an ever wider circle of policy actors into sub-national government' (Adshead, 2003: 119), and partly because of their encouragement of group mobilisation and community activity in the third (voluntary) sector. On top of this, the classification of Ireland as a single region for such a long time in the EU undoubtedly contributed to the lack of popular and political debate about regional disparity within Ireland particularly in relation to representation of local interests at the EU level.

Conclusions

Early on in Ireland's EU membership, the process of European integration was predicted to make the very aim of balanced regional development 'increasingly hard to hold' (Barrington, 1976: 364). It is possible to contend that this has indeed been the case, in light of the fact that development in Ireland remains heavily skewed in favour of Dublin and the Eastern region. The bulk of the burden of responsibility for this failure must undoubtedly rest with the Irish government's approach to devolution of power at both the supra- and sub-national levels. The central administration's long insistence on a tight-reined gatekeeping role in sub-national-EU links, the flip-flop nature of decisions on regional policy and development within Ireland, the reluctance to trust substantial policymaking roles or democratic powers to the sub-national level, and the emphasis on function over form in regional bodies... all these factors have contributed to a largely inauspicious beginning for regionalism in Ireland. Nonetheless, the case of Ireland also provides valuable lessons for the EU in its encouragement of regionalisation. The huge amount of bureaucratic complexity associated with the new regional institutions in Ireland relates directly to the EU's use of Structural Funds as a 'carrot' for regional-level development in member-states. As it now stands, the strength and effectiveness of sub-national administration in Ireland may depend less on official

devolution than on a growing multiplicity of networks and channels of communication between the local, regional, national and European levels. Yet given the fact that there are still no clear conduits for political participation, knowledge and identification alternative to the nation-state, the development of sub-national governance in Ireland and the EU's influence therein is likely to remain a bureaucratic and technocratic rather than a democratic phenomenon.

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Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was conducted as a visiting fellow on the 'Regionalism and Constitutionalism in an Enlarged EU' project of the Wales in a Regional Europe Centre, University of Wales Aberystwyth. The author wishes to acknowledge the funding support of the Irish Research Council in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

¹ For detailed critique of the Irish administration's response to EU membership, see Laffan (2000; 2001).

² Article 28a of the Constitution, inserted following the referendum of June 1999, gave constitutional recognition to local government 'in providing a forum for the democratic representation of local communities' and established that local elections be held at least every five years.

³ For example, the administrative structures classified as ‘regional bodies’ include the health boards (of which there are in effect ten), the regional authorities (of which there are eight), the regional fisheries boards (of which there are seven), the regional tourism authorities (of which there are six), and regional assemblies (of which there are two).

⁴ The National Development Plans are drawn to facilitate negotiations between the government and the European Commission prior to the designation of the Community Support Framework through which EU Structural and Cohesion Funds are distributed.

⁵ Source: CEC Directorate-General for Regional Policy

(http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/atlas/ireland/maps/pdf/map_ie_en.pdf).

⁶ Smaller units shown are the 26 counties. Source: Irish Regions Office (www.iro.ie).

⁷ This means that, strictly speaking, the Assemblies are classified as regional authorities under the 1991 Local Government Act (Callanan, 2003: 437).

⁸ Source: BMW Regional Assembly.

⁹ The percentage difference in Gross Value Added for the Southern and Eastern Region and the rural Border, Midlands and Western Region actually increased (from 39.5 to 42) between 2002 and 2005 (BMW, 2006).

¹⁰ The National Spatial Strategy was launched in 2002 as a response to the European Spatial Development Perspective. It aims to ‘drive development in the regions’ through building ‘a network of gateways and hubs’ (see www.irishspatialstrategy.ie).

¹¹ Source: Irish Regions Office (www.iro.ie/)

¹² Source: europa.eu.int/comm./regional_policy/funds

¹³ Source: www.csfinfo.com

¹⁴ ‘people are just not very well informed about governance in general. I think the same applies whether you talk about EU governance, national governance, or even people’s county council. There are a lot of people who know less about their county council than

they do about their government.’ Extract from interview with the author, Institute for European Affairs, Dublin, 9 September 2004.