THE IRISH URBAN SYSTEM AND ITS DYNAMICS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objective and Method

The objective of the study of the Irish Urban System and its Dynamics is to define and describe the system of cities and towns, including the economic and social functions of urban settlements of different sizes and to define the urban fields of cities and towns of population 5000+.

For purposes of the study, urban centres are regarded as those with a population of 1500 or greater in 1996. The set of urban centres is illustrated on Fig. 1.1.

Brady Shipman Martin undertook the study in association with NUI Maynooth and Fitzpatrick Associates. It involved the collation and analysis of a range of data on the size, functions and fields of urban centres, together with a review of previous studies of the urban system.

European Perspective

In European terms, Ireland has a relatively low rate of urbanisation and lies outside of the heavy concentration of urban centres in England, Belgium, the Netherlands and western Germany. Whilst Dublin is a European capital city, it is of relatively modest size, having less than half the population of Birmingham or Manchester, less than a third that of Milan and less than a quarter that of Madrid.

Hierarchy and Distribution

Dublin is much larger than any other urban centre and dominates the economic and social life of the country to an overwhelming degree. In 1996, the Dublin Metropolitan Area had 31% of the national population. This strongly 'primate' character of the urban system is its most distinctive feature.

The other principal cities, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, are relatively small compared to Dublin; the aggregate population of these centres being only 38% that of Greater Dublin.

There is a good size distribution of urban centres below 40,000 in population. However, there is a bias in their geographical distribution towards the east and the south-east. In particular, there is strong clustering of urban centres in the 10,000 to 39,999 category in the east and south-east of the country. Some of these centres, such as Bray, Swords, Malahide, Leixlip, Celbridge and Greystones, have grown very rapidly in recent years and are now part of the Dublin Metropolitan Area. Other centres in this size category have also been influenced by the economic and employment growth of the Dublin region, including Dundalk, Drogheda, Naas, Droichead Nua, Navan, Mullingar, Tullamore, Carlow and, probably to a lesser extent, Athlone.

Four of the centres in the 10,000 to 39,000 population category, Tralee, Sligo, Killarney and Letterkenny, are located in relatively isolated parts of the country, where they are the most important towns and act as 'sub-regional' centres.

The relatively well developed urban structure of the east, south and south-east is contrasted to the less developed structure to the west and north-west of a line that runs approximately from Limerick to Dundalk. Here urbanisation levels are lower than for the rest of the country and there are fewer large towns. As a consequence, many smaller centres provide a level of function far greater than their population would indicate.

The distribution of centres below 10,000 in population is more evenly spread across the country, but there is a greater density of all urban settlement sizes in the east and south.

Nearly half of all urban centres of 5,000 population and over are located on or near the coast.

The urban structure of Northern Ireland is characterised by a greater density of larger urban settlements than the Republic and with a less primate hierarchy.

Changes in Hierarchy and Distribution

There has been a continuous increase in the share of the national population residing in the aggregate urban areas, reaching a level of 58% in 1996.

With some exceptions, the larger urban centres have generally shown more consistent growth than the smaller centres. The highest levels of growth occurred in centres over 10,000 in population, but many centres in the 5,000 to 9,999 category also grew significantly, especially in the 1971 to 1981 period.

There has been a concentration of growth in the Greater Dublin Area and, to a lesser extent, in the vicinity of the other main cities. The rapid growth of commuter settlements in the hinterlands of the major cities, especially Dublin, is a feature of the past two decades.

Urbansiation in the west has been strongly influenced by the growth of Galway but has also been associated with the development of sub-regional centres, such as Letterkenny, located at relatively remote distances from Dublin.

Some urban centres, notably in the border, midlands and north Munster areas, recorded a continual decrease in population in the period 1981-96. These centres broadly correspond with rural areas, which are experiencing a marked process of change associated with the re-structuring of agriculture. Examples include Monaghan, Ballinasloe and Thurles.

Urban Functions

Consideration of the functions (specific activities or services such as retailing, education, finance, etc.) of the urban centres over 5,000 in population indicated that they may be classified as (Fig. 6.1):

- Those with a level of function significantly higher than their population level would indicate. These are mainly market centres, providing goods and services to rural hinterlands. Letterkenny, Monaghan, Thurles, Castlebar and Enniscorthy are examples.

- Those with a level of function broadly in keeping with their population levels. These include the major cities as well as centres such as Ennis, Clonmel, Carlow and Portlaoighse.

- Those with a level of function significantly lower than their population level would indicate. These are mainly commuting centres, within the sphere of influence of the larger cities, especially Dublin. Examples include Balbriggan, Malahide, Leixlip and Swords, as well as Carrigaline and Cobh. Shannon is also in this category, explained by its lack of established hinterland.

A small number of centres have a high level of specialised function. Killarney, with its concentration of tourism and leisure facilities, is an example.

Urban Fields

Each function of an urban centre has an associated field or catchment, representing the area that it serves. The extent of these fields varies from function to function, with higher level functions generally having a more extensive field. The urban fields of centres of 5,000 population and over were examined as part of the study.

There is a relatively dense distribution of urban fields in the east and south, reflecting the number and distribution of cities and towns of over 5,000 population in that part of the country. Many of these fields merge into each other.

In the west and north-west, larger urban centres are more widely spaced and their fields are more widely separated. Smaller centres, such as Roscommon or Carrick-on-Shannon, consequently serve some of the functions normally associated with larger centres.

Spread of Urbanisation into the Countryside

There is a significant level of urbanisation occurring outside of the formal boundaries of urban centres, with many areas, especially close to cities and towns, exhibiting markedly urban characteristics. This process of urbanisation is spreading into the wider countryside. The extent of 'urban Ireland' is, therefore, greater than indicated by consideration of the cities and towns alone.

Components of the Urban System

Consideration of the characteristics of the urban system allows the identification of sets of urban centres of 5,000 and over in population which have relatively well-defined relationships with each other. These are shown on Figure 7.8 and include Dublin, which has a strong relationship with a set of urban centres in the Greater Dublin Area and in County Louth, and a number of sets in the south and west. For example, a Planning, Land-Use and Transportation Study, embracing Limerick, Ennis, Nenagh and Shannon, is currently in preparation, indicating that these centres have a defined relationship in terms of strategic planning.

Sets of urban centres with less defined relationships, except at a relatively local level, occur in the midlands, the border area and the south-east. These are also shown on Fig. 7.8. In the south-east, there are, however, some sets of established relationships based around Waterford and Wexford.