

Lack of Local Government Undermines Social and Civic Viability of Ireland's New Suburbs – TCD Policy Institute Study

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The quality of life and civic engagement of communities within the new suburbs emerging across Ireland will prove difficult to sustain without a change in the institutions of local government, according to a new study launched today by Dr Maureen Gaffney, Chairperson of the National Economic and Social Forum, at Trinity College Dublin's Policy Institute.

The study, **Civic Engagement and the Governance of Irish Suburbs**, recommends that local voluntary associations be given a statutory role in local government and community forums established to support the involvement of residents in local decision-making.

Authors Dr Michel Peillon, Dr Mary P. Corcoran and Dr Jane Gray of the Department of Sociology, NUI Maynooth, address the policy implications of suburban growth in Ireland, examining the social fabric of Ratoath, Co. Meath as an example. The study explores the rapid expansion of new suburbs and the ways in which social capital and community ties are generated in this new suburb. The study finds that the lack of institutions of local government at that level negatively impacts on residents' efforts to manage the affairs of their local community.

"While suburbs are often presented as soulless and uniform places, the findings of the Ratoath study present a picture of a community in which many residents are attached to the place where they live, belong to local networks of family, friends and neighbours, participate in local voluntary associations and want to be involved in local public affairs. Residents are particularly keen to be involved in tackling what they perceive as key issues impacting on the quality of life of their community for example the unregulated nature of development, a lack of basic amenities, access to school facilities and high traffic volumes on inadequate road infrastructure," explained Dr Peillon, a former Visiting Research Fellow at TCD's Policy Institute.

"Despite many Ratoath residents attempting to do something to address these problems, they were aware of the ineffectiveness of their action. Residents of new suburbs such as Ratoath face an uphill struggle in this as they have encountered an institutional void – that is, a lack of institutions of local government at that level. Hence residents rely heavily on local political networks and politicians to ensure access to the formal structures of local government. Rarely consulted and unable to participate in the decision-making process, they can only uphold their views and interests negatively, through various forms of resistance to external pressures and interests".

A partnership model to address this institutional void is proposed in the study.

Applied to local government, below county level, it would involve the following:

- A commitment to the formal involvement of voluntary organisations in local and county decision-making processes
- Granting of a statutory function of meaningful consultation to representative bodies of local residents through the establishment of a “community council” (comprised of a federation of all associations operating in the locality)
- Granting representative organisations a statutory role in local government: this would require formal regulation of the way in which representative organisations are constituted and operated to ensure they are representative of their membership and constituency
- Provision of state aid to support the development and activities of representative local organisations.

The net effect of the statutory establishment of a “community council” would be to provide a meaningful pathway to support local residents in accessing the structure of local government and to assist them to sustain their civic engagement and to address the institutional void, which undermines the social and civic viability of Ireland’s new suburbs.

- The study is the 21st in the series Studies in Public Policy, published by The Policy Institute at Trinity College Dublin. The series aims to bridge the gap between the academic and professional policy communities and to make a difference to public policy debate in Ireland.

Copies available from **www.policyinstitute.tcd.ie**

The growth of suburbs

The rapid transformation of Ireland since the 1990s has been accompanied by the creation of new suburbs and peripheral towns. While the Dublin urban core grew by 5% between 1991 and 2002, the city expanded by over 30% in a radius of 15 to 25 miles from Dublin city centre. Ratoath, Co. Meath, provides a good example of this peripheral development: a small and rural place up until the late 1980s, Ratoath quickly turned into a new and now large suburb of Dublin.

Some findings of the Ratoath study

- Attachment to the locality was quite high, with nearly 80% of Ratoath residents stating that they feel attached or strongly attached to Ratoath.
- Most residents belonged to networks of social support (that is the people they turn to for help, for socialising, etc). Close relatives and neighbours represented the main elements in these networks. Quite crucially, about two-thirds of these supportive individuals lived locally.

- About a third of respondents indicated that they belonged to a local voluntary association, and 20 % actively so.

Some findings about civic engagement

- About half the residents stated that they acted in some way to deal with local problems. This action consisted mainly in approaching local politicians and in signing petitions.
- The action of respondents, when it took place, was not perceived as very effective. Of those who stated that they did something about local problems, two-thirds did not think that their action had improved the situation. This highlights a low level of empowerment.

Civic Engagement and The Governance of Irish Suburbs

Peillon, Michel and Corcoran, Mary and Gray, Jane (2006) Civic Engagement and The Governance of Irish Suburbs. Studies in Public Policy 21. Four localities are included in the research: Ratoath, Co. Meath, Leixlip, Co. Kildare, Lucan-Esker, Co. Dublin and Mullingar, Westmeath. The researchers are currently writing a book on the topic.

Abstract

In 2002, and as part of a larger New Urban Living Study, a survey of Ratoath, Co. Meath was conducted. A small, predominantly rural, townland until the late 1980s, Ratoath had, during the 1990s quickly turned into a new suburb of Dublin. The survey, in its most general objective, endeavoured to comprehend the social fabric produced in such localities.

<http://eprints.nuim.ie/archive/00000613/01/Civic1.pdf>

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