

Metropolitan–hinterland relations in the Dublin city-region: Lessons from Germany

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Abstract

Current proposals for regional governance reform have significant implications for the Dublin city-region and its wider hinterland. This paper traces the evolution of governance reform in the Dublin city-region from the introduction of regional authorities in the early 1990s to the present, and examines current reform proposals within this context, focusing specifically on issues of spatial jurisdiction and regional boundaries. The paper subsequently places the Dublin city-region case within an international context, drawing specific lessons from the experience of supra-regional urban–rural partnerships in Germany. The paper makes the case for a partnership and project-based form of regional governance based on principles of variable geometry and flexible cooperation.

Keywords: Regional governance, urban–rural partnership, variable geometry, spatial fit

Introduction

The reform of regional governance boundaries announced by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in October 2012 will have potentially far-reaching but uncertain implications for the Dublin city-region and its wider rural hinterland. In the case of Dublin, *Putting People First* postpones a decision on the

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reorganisation of local authority structures until the aftermath of the 2014 local government elections (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012, p. 12). This situation has created a high degree of uncertainty over the future of local government in the Dublin region. The creation of an Eastern and Midlands Region creates one large region encompassing the Dublin Metropolitan Area, its functional commuting belt and an extensive rural hinterland with limited direct socio-economic connections to Dublin (see the article by O’Riordáin & van Egeraat in this issue). The geographical extent of the governance remit and constituency of a directly elected mayor remains an open question, which has received surprising little attention to date. Previous proposals indicated that a Dublin mayor would receive an electoral mandate from the population of the currently defined Dublin Region² but would have responsibility for regional planning for the considerably larger Greater Dublin Area (GDA),³ creating an unusual and potentially problematic mismatch between electoral mandate and spatial jurisdiction (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008).

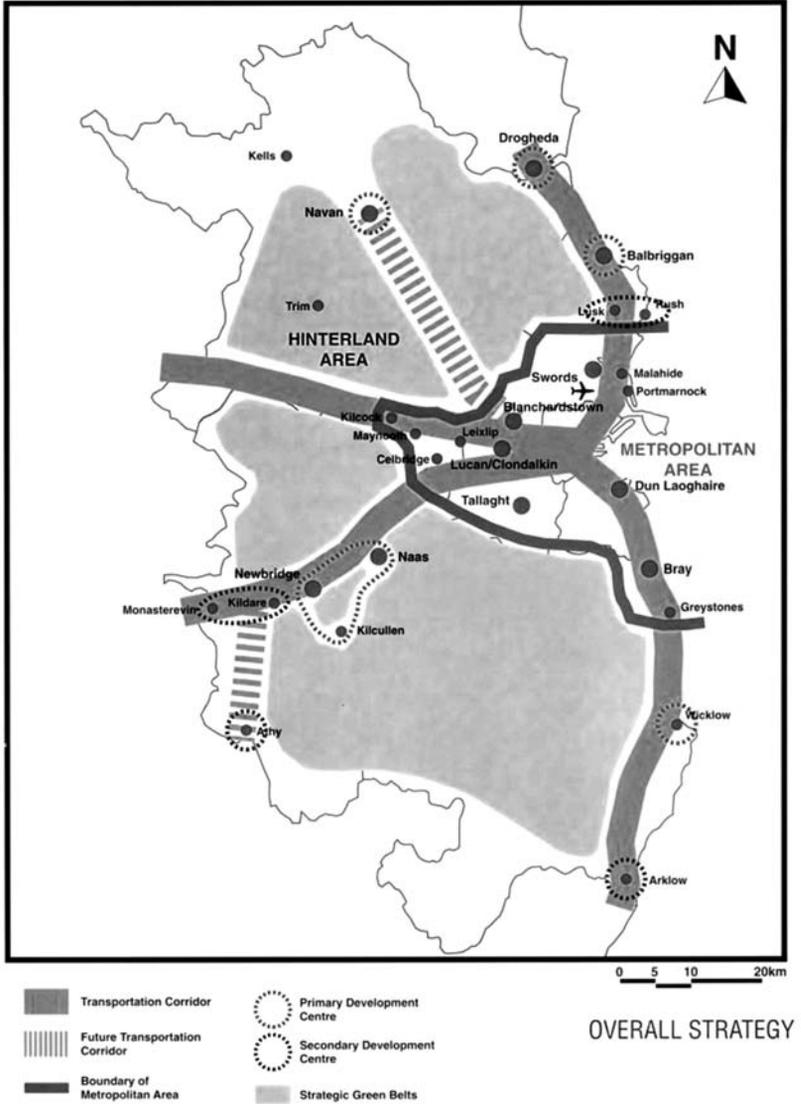
The current Local Government Bill 2013 envisages the holding of a plebiscite in 2014 to decide on the introduction of a directly elected mayor. Here, the spatial jurisdiction of the proposed mayoral office is determined to correspond with the area of the four Dublin local authorities, referred to in the text as the ‘Dublin Metropolitan Area’ (Government of Ireland, 2013, p. 92). This (territorial) definition of the Dublin Metropolitan Area deviates significantly from the established (functional) distinction between the Dublin Metropolitan Area and Hinterland Area, first adopted by the *Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area* (SPGs) in 1999 and reaffirmed in the regional planning guidelines (RPGs) of 2004 and 2010 (Brady Shipman Martin et al., 1999; Dublin Regional Authority and Mid-East Regional Authority, 2004, 2010; see Figure 1 below). The preparation of regional spatial strategies is envisaged as one of the primary functions of the new regional assemblies. Whether these strategies will replace or sit alongside the existing *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS; Government of Ireland, 2002) and/or RPGs is, however, uncertain (see Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012, p. 13).

² Dublin City, Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown, Fingal and South County Dublin.

³ Dublin Region and the three counties of the Mid-East Region: Kildare, Meath and Wicklow.

Figure 1: Strategic planning guidelines for Greater Dublin Area settlement strategy, with functional distinction between metropolitan and hinterland areas

Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 1999



Source: Brady Shipman Martin et al. (1999, p. 8).

From this perspective the reform of regional governance boundaries represents a lost opportunity regarding the potential for rationalising governance arrangements for the Dublin city-region. Currently, the Dublin and Mid-East Regions are required to work together to produce joint RPGs for the GDA. The fact that they are two distinct regional authorities, however, contributes to the polarisation of debates at the level of the GDA (Walsh, 2012a). The development of regional governance strategies and frameworks for the proposed Eastern and Midlands Region will need to take explicit account of its diverse urban–rural character, recognising the distinct endogenous and relational potentials of individual functional areas within the regional boundary. This paper consequently seeks to draw lessons from experience with metropolitan governance and supra-regional urban–rural partnerships in Germany, which we consider to be applicable to the Eastern and Midlands Region. The German experience is of particular interest as a case of the overlaying of flexible and, at times, informal regional governance structures across the existing institutionalised territorial divisions of federal states and sub-divisions (see also Harrison & Grove, 2012).

City-regional governance: Questions of spatial fit and functional organisation

The question of regional governance for Dublin and Ireland's wider eastern region reflects a long-standing academic, if not policy, interest in the match between governance boundaries and functional regions (see Davoudi, 2008). The reform of regional government boundaries can thus be motivated by a desire to achieve a greater *spatial fit*, even where it is recognised that a greater degree of spatial fit with respect to one functional area can produce spatial misfits elsewhere (Moss, 2012). In practice, the optimal functional areas for housing, water supply, waste management and international marketing may each differ significantly. At the same time, the delineation of regional boundaries cannot be easily separated from issues of regional identity and assumed cultural affinity (Harrison, 2010; Walsh, 2012a). Indeed, regional governance can follow territorial or functional logics or a mix of the two (Blatter, 2004). Within this context, spatial strategies of various forms can perform a significant role in establishing a framework for coordination on spatial issues and a strategic vision guiding future development. From an analytical perspective, three distinct but interrelated dimensions of coordination in spatial planning practice are identified:

- spatial: to ensure consistency across the different levels and scales of policymaking and implementation;
- functional: the linking of land uses and activities and their complex interactions, e.g. housing, transport infrastructure, health and education facilities;
- sectoral: between public, semi-state, private and voluntary sectors (Salet et al., 2003b, p. xiii).

The capacity for spatial planning to provide a framework for coordination across public and private actors in a spatial development context remains, however, a considerable challenge and is subject to significant academic and policy debate. Harris & Hooper (2004) pointed to a pragmatic interest in coordination across policy sectors as one of the most significant drivers of a shift towards spatial strategy-making in Wales. They further identified a role for spatial strategies in highlighting inconsistencies in the spatial implementation of sectoral policies, potentially leading to their resolution. Significantly, they argued that heightened spatial awareness of the effects of public policies ‘necessarily demands that questions of distribution, differential policy impact and spatial equity are addressed’ (Harris & Hooper, 2004, p. 165). From this perspective, spatial planning policy is directly associated with normative concerns for spatial justice and the articulation of policy objectives concerning the spatial distribution of resources and opportunities.

The role of metropolitan regions in economic profiling or place-branding has received increased significance in Europe and further afield over the past two decades. The challenges presented by accelerated economic globalisation and the associated political–economic imperative of economic competitiveness have led to a focus on enhancing governance capacity at the metropolitan level (Brenner, 2003; Keating, 1998). Despite this ‘new regionalist’ focus on external profiling and the economics of recognition at the global level, internal tasks of spatial, institutional and sectoral coordination within the city-regional context continue to be of importance for policymakers and political stakeholders alike. Thus, although metropolitan regions increasingly position themselves within a global space of flows (Castells, 1999), the regional space of the metropolitan area itself continues to be significant, which raises questions regarding the appropriate boundaries for regional governance. Blatter & Knieling (2009) argue that the degree of external or internal orientation of metropolitan regions has implications for the design of institutional

structures, including the allocation of competences and decisions on the geographical scope. Metropolitan regions with a primarily external orientation are often larger than those which are primarily concerned with internal regional development issues. Zimmermann & Heinelt similarly note that different problems require political units of different sizes and argue for a 'flexible political geometry' (2012, p. 18). Although it is thus possible to identify distinct functional rationales which may influence decisions on regional governance reform, critical commentators warn that the construction of new governance spaces at the metropolitan or city-regional level should be understood as a process underlain by conflict and power struggles, as new political spaces challenge pre-existing territorial spaces (Harrison, 2013; Lefèvre, 2010, p. 625).

Here it is important to recognise that the GDA, as currently defined (the four Dublin local authorities of the Dublin Region together with the three surrounding counties of the Mid-East Region), provides a relatively good spatial fit in terms of commuting patterns and, by inference, housing and labour markets. Detailed analysis of 2006 Census data has demonstrated that less than 5 per cent of all workers with a place of employment located within the GDA commuted from beyond the GDA. Indeed, almost 83 per cent of those working in the Dublin Region (as defined above) also lived within the Dublin Region (Williams et al., 2010, p. 21). Previous commentary attributing housing development in 'Outer Leinster' to the widespread extension of commuting patterns beyond the GDA is not supported by the detailed analysis of origin-and-destination data. It is conceivable that comparable analysis of the 2011 Census data will tell a different story. Given the decline in housebuilding and employment opportunities in the intervening period, however, it is unlikely that the functional urban region of Dublin will have significantly extended its geographical reach. Furthermore, according to the official classification of urban, rural and intermediate regions at the European level, the current Mid-East and Midlands regions are designated not urban or intermediate but rural (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion, 2011). This classification combines indicators of population density and travel distance to the nearest urban centre above a specified population threshold. While a certain level of caution is advisable with regard to typologies prepared at the scale of the EU, they can nevertheless help to provide a fresh, external and evidence-informed perspective.

Implementing the National Spatial Strategy: 2010 Update and Outlook identified the NSS as a ‘critical instrument for prioritisation and coordination of scarce resources’. Integration between strategic spatial planning and capital investment prioritisation is further identified here as a key means of delivering the objectives of the NSS (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2010). The establishment of formal links between the NSS and the *National Development Plan 2007–2013* spending programme was recognised as an important step in furthering this agenda of relating spatial planning to capital investment, and as an example for other countries to follow (see also O’Riordáin, 2013; Walsh, 2009). In practice, of course, a number of factors have led to this potential not being realised and this link not materialising in practice. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge the role that spatial strategies can adopt in providing a coherent approach to regional development across the state, with the capacity to influence decision-making on infrastructural investment at all scales.

In the context of the current climate of public sector austerity and economic recession, the reorganisation of regional governance boundaries must be understood as a means of reducing expenditure rather than as an investment in regional governance. International experience demonstrates, however, that while requiring a certain minimum level of financial resourcing and institutional support, effective regional governance can develop through informal mechanisms which require limited additional cost or indeed can produce cost savings. Concluding a comparative study of metropolitan governance and spatial planning across European city-regions, Salet et al. (2003a) understood metropolitan governance as a ‘process of learning’ rather than the product of formal territorial structures of government. They contended that solutions to problems of coordination and strategic spatial planning are found in new methods of ‘organising connectivity’, establishing connections between different spheres of action (Salet et al., 2003a, p. 377). Significantly, it was argued that informal strategies of coordination may supplement and reinforce formal structures of metropolitan governance, and in some cases have a significant impact in practice. This informal approach to metropolitan governance, focused on the ‘organisation of connectivity’ and identification of synergies and potentials for enhanced policy coordination, is highly applicable to the Dublin city-region. This is particularly the case given that formal structures with significant executive functions are not foreseen and are unlikely to be introduced in the near- to medium-term future.

The Dublin city-region 1990–2013: Between policy ambition and governance failure

It is instructive to examine retrospectively the regional governance experience in the Dublin city-region over the last two decades. It is evident that there have been significant governance failures, particularly with regard to the management of urban growth and the strategic coordination of transport investment, social infrastructure provision and land-use planning (see Walsh 2010, 2012b; Williams et al., 2010). There has also been a notable failure to achieve a sustainable relationship between economic development policies and strategies and spatial development policy (Convery et al., 2006). At the same time, not insignificant institutional dynamics and capacities have developed at the city-regional scale of the GDA, which are relevant to current debates on future regional governance and metropolitan–hinterland relations.

The legislation establishing regional authorities, which came into effect in 1994, identified a specific role for the regional authorities in relation to the coordination of public service provision. The regional authorities were required to ‘keep under review the provision of public services in or relating to or affecting the region’ with a view to identifying possibilities for improvement in the coordination of service provision (Dublin Regional Authority, 1996, p. 26). Reflecting this policy coordination remit, the operational committee of each regional authority included senior representatives from a wide range of public sector bodies with direct and indirect roles in service provision. The managers of each constituent local authority were also included in the membership of the operational committees, indicating the intended strategic governance function of the regional authorities in relation to the functions of local authorities. The regional reports produced by each regional authority in 1996 set out the potential policy coordination role of the regional structures, specifically in relation to the provision of public services by local authorities and other public sector agencies. The Dublin regional report, in particular, identified itself as an ‘important first step’ in an ongoing process of review of public service provision within the Dublin Region (Dublin Regional Authority, 1996, p. 26). The Dublin and Mid-East regional reports both identified a lack of standardisation or consistency of regional boundaries among public service providers as a very significant obstacle to effective coordination (Dublin Regional Authority, 1996; Mid-East Regional Authority, 1996). The task of spatial coordination

among multiple governance agencies was recognised as a critical issue from the outset. A study commissioned by the Dublin Regional Authority advised, however, that central government intervention would be required to address the issue of aligning the regional boundaries of state and semi-state agencies to those of the regional authorities (Dublin Regional Authority, 1995). It was also noted that the time horizons adopted by the strategic plans of ten different agencies often differed, constraining opportunities for synchronisation, and suggesting a temporal as well as a spatial misfit.

The Dublin regional report noted a 'general reluctance to co-ordinate' among public sector bodies and indicated that the Dublin Regional Authority would seek to encourage participation in 'modest, low risk collaborative ventures' with the objective of developing relations of trust and the institutional capacity required to support further opportunities for coordination (Dublin Regional Authority, 1996, p. 43). The Mid-East regional report identified a potential 'brokerage' role for the Mid-East Regional Authority, involving a concerted effort by the authority to influence the direction of strategies adopted by agencies in the Mid-East Region. The report further noted, however, that even this modest role was constrained by a lack of resources and the non-conformity of regional boundaries (Mid-East Regional Authority, 1996, p. 152). It is evident from the language of the regional reports that the capacity of the regional authorities to act as a focus for policy coordination or direction in relation to the provision of public services was significantly constrained due to a lack of formal powers to ensure compliance with policy initiatives and strategies. It is also apparent that the limited or purely brokerage role in the design of the institutional framework within which regional authorities operate has led to significant underachievement in their potential roles. The operation of public sector agencies according to specific statutory duties, objectives and priorities was identified as a further barrier to coordination in the Dublin regional report. More significantly, however, the regional report found that the increasingly competitive environment within which public sector agencies operate leads to distrust among public sector agencies and a situation where the corporate plans of individual agencies are closely guarded rather than transparent and accountable. Competition for central government funding, potential duplication of responsibilities and service-provision roles, and a shift towards an increasingly market-oriented model of public service provision may be identified as key drivers leading to the perception of an increasingly

competitive operational environment for public sector agencies (OECD, 2008).

The proposals of the Dublin regional report nevertheless led to the preparation of an integrated spatial strategy for the Dublin city-region: the *Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area* (Brady Shipman Martin et al., 1999). The Dublin regional report explicitly identified and outlined the potential cross-sectoral policy coordination role of such a spatial planning strategy. This was characterised in terms of ‘a more comprehensive and complex form of spatial planning’, echoing European developments in spatial planning thinking in the 1990s (see Albrechts et al., 2003; Healey et al., 1997). Specifically, it was envisaged that the proposed ‘Strategic Regional Plan’ would address social, economic and environmental issues in addition to physical or land-use planning issues (Dublin Regional Authority, 1996). Thematic policy areas identified for incorporation within the regional strategy included the administration of EU regional policy, environmental sustainability issues and social exclusion issues. Each of these thematic policy areas represented complex cross-sectoral policy domains requiring significant levels of horizontal coordination between policy actors and institutional arenas. The SPGs, as published in 1999, were less ambitious with regard to this broader policy coordination and multilevel governance agenda. The SPGs nevertheless sought to address a range of cross-sectoral policy coordination issues with the objective of providing an integrated sustainable development strategy or vision for the GDA (see also Walsh, 2010). Specific sectoral policy areas addressed in the SPGs included housing, transportation, sanitary services infrastructure, social and economic infrastructure, and amenity heritage and recreation. The spatial strategy of the SPGs identified the desired spatial distribution and expected scale of spatial development over the period 1999–2011, a period of anticipated rapid demographic growth and urban development. The SPGs stressed the need for the strategic planning of, and investment in, physical, social and economic infrastructure to support anticipated levels of population growth and spatial development at a time when key public service providers such as the regional health boards were reluctant to acknowledge the need for large-scale capital investment (Walsh, 2010). Together with the *Cork Area Strategic Plan* (W. S. Atkins, 2001), published two years later, the SPGs represented a significant shift towards a new form of strategic spatial planning at the regional scale in an Irish context.

The fact that the SPGs combined both the Dublin and Mid-East Regions to produce a spatial strategy for the GDA is, in itself, significant. The counties of the recently established Mid-East Region feared that their concerns would not be adequately represented within a Dublin-centred regional strategy and governance framework. The Mid-East regional report recommended that the Mid-East should be viewed as an integral part of the 'greater East region' (Mid-East Regional Authority, 1996, pp. xv–xvi). County development plans (in Kildare, Meath and Wicklow) of this period contained explicit statements expressing a wish to develop independently from Dublin. Previous research demonstrates that Dublin and Mid-East Regional Authorities are characterised by distinct territorial and political identities and an associated 'them and us' politics of opposition, reducing the potential for the development of political agreement on a shared spatial strategy and effective regional governance. This polarised oppositional politics may be attributed to a long-established perception of the relationship between Dublin city and its surrounding rural hinterland as somewhat problematic, whether this relationship is framed in terms of encroaching urban sprawl, a threat to the characteristic identity of predominantly rural counties or an inequitable distribution of economic development and employment opportunities between urban and rural areas. It also reflects the clientelist nature of the Irish political system, whereby localist 'parish pump' politics plays a very significant role (see also Delaney et al., 2010). This question of contested territorial identity and allegiance has continued to play a significant role in the politics of regional governance (Walsh, 2012a).

The subsequent adoption of the SPGs' spatial strategy within the NSS in 2002 and publication of RPGs for all regional authorities in 2004 (and their revision in 2010) have affirmed the role of regional strategies within the spatial planning system. Under the Planning and Development Act, 2010, local authority development plans are required to be consistent with the RPGs. With institutional embedding and statutory status, however, has come a significant shift in the objectives and scope of the RPGs away from the integrative, cross-sectoral governance approach of the 1990s to a focus on implementation of the NSS through the planning system at local level (see, for example, Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2005). The capacity of the RPGs to provide strategic direction regarding the future development of the GDA, however, must be questioned (see also Walsh, 2012b). Whereas the

2010 RPGs explicitly acknowledge the economic and financial crisis strategy as the most critical issue for the GDA and include a regional economic strategy, the approach to spatial development is remarkably similar to the spatial strategy of the SPGs dating from 1999 (see also Walsh & Allin, 2012).

In the period since the production of the initial regional reports and SPGs, the privatisation and liberalisation of public service provision has continued apace, further reducing the potential for policy led by the public sector and for operational coordination (see also Gorecki et al., 2011). The effective concentration of financial and resource management at national level has furthermore been strengthened through the establishment of delivery bodies such as the National Roads Authority, National Transport Authority and Irish Water. The policy coordination role initially envisaged for regional authorities corresponded to the integrated, diagonal governance model, promoted by both the NSS and the OECD review of the public sector (OECD, 2008; O’Riordáin, 2013). However, institutional path-dependencies associated with a classical hierarchical model of government, as well as the minimal resourcing of the regional authorities themselves, have hindered the development of an effective integrative governance culture.

Towards strategic urban–rural governance: Lessons from Germany?

The concept and practice of strategic urban–rural partnership has emerged in Germany since the introduction of new spatial policy guidelines (*Leitbilder*) at the federal level in 2006 (Kawka, 2009; Zimmermann, 2009). In response to criticisms that previous policy had overly focused on promoting the economic development of Germany’s metropolitan regions, the introduction of ‘supra-regional’ urban–rural partnerships sought to create relations of responsibility and solidarity between the metropolitan regions and their wider rural hinterlands (see also Harrison & Growe, 2012). Indeed, it is argued that a key purpose of the 2006 *Leitbilder* was to reorient spatial development politics in Germany away from perspectives which set urban and rural in opposition to a new integrated understanding of urban–rural relations. The document made explicit reference to the contribution of non-metropolitan regions to growth and innovation, indicating a shift away from a supposed exclusive focus on large urban agglomerations. Supra-regional urban–rural partnerships subsequently became the

focus of a demonstration project of the Federal Ministry for Transport, Building and Urban Development, with limited financial support (€50,000–80,000 over two years) provided to seven pilot regions for the period 2008–2010 (Kawka, 2009). Given this low level of federal government financing, the partnerships relied on investment from the federal state governments.

The supra-regional partnerships are recognised as having provided an important opportunity to test the concept of urban–rural partnership promoted as a cornerstone of European spatial development policy since the late 1990s (see also Scott, 2006). The principle of *variable geometry* plays a particularly significant role in enabling a flexible approach to cooperation. This principle, also employed in academic and policy discussions at the EU level (Stubbs, 1996), implies that the constellation of actors and spatial focus of a cooperation initiative can vary on a project-by-project basis. Although each urban–rural partnership structure has well-defined boundaries, recognised as important for project management at the strategic level, local and regional actors can opt in or out of individual thematic projects on a flexible, voluntary basis. A distinction is made between *internal* and *external* variable geometry. Internal implies the adoption of a specific spatial focus located within the boundaries of the wider regional structure. External, on the other hand, refers to partnership initiatives that extend these boundaries (BMBVS, 2012).

Based on this experience, a number of key factors or principles for ensuring effective cooperation at this supra-regional scale have been identified. The partnerships have adopted a pragmatic, project-oriented focus and attracted the participation of a wide range of actors from public administration, business and civil society. Participating stakeholders have stressed the importance of parity of participation. In practice, this approach implied that peripherally located rural localities could participate as equal partners with much larger city administrations. The sometimes widely diverging interests of urban and rural areas were openly recognised and acknowledged. Through consensus-based decision-making and flexible structures of voluntary participation, partners in each case were able to find thematic areas where win-win situations could be identified and both economically stronger and weaker parties could benefit from participation (BMBVS, 2012; Jacuniak-Suda, 2013). The thematic networks developed under the umbrella of the demonstration projects cross spatial, sectoral and functional boundaries and have been found to play an important role in cutting across administrative hierarchies.

This capacity to cut across administrative hierarchies and link distinct policy sectors is significant, given the dominance of the Weberian model of classic bureaucratic organisation, characterised by steep internal hierarchies and sectoral specialisation at local and federal state levels of government in Germany (Kuhlmann, 2010, p. 1,118). This consensus approach was in line with the federal policy, which included a strong normative focus on spatial solidarity and the fostering of communities of joint responsibility. In practice, metropolitan stakeholders viewed the development of relations of solidarity with neighbouring hinterland regions as an important 'soft' aspect of place marketing and regional competitiveness (BMVBS, 2012; Jacuniak-Suda et al., forthcoming).

The case of the MORO Nord urban–rural partnership in northern Germany serves to illustrate these principles of variable geometry and flexible participation in practice. Centred on the metropolitan region of Hamburg, MORO Nord encompassed a land area of almost 40,000 km² with a population of 6.7 million (BMVBS, 2012, p. 32). Significantly, the partnership crosses the boundaries of four federal states (Hamburg, Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) and includes a substantially larger area than the Hamburg Metropolitan Region. It is recognised as one of the more successful of the pilot demonstrations, supporting a total of fifteen individual projects across a wide thematic spectrum, from training and skills shortages to life sciences development, regional food networks and place branding. One project in particular focused specifically on the role of rural areas in the supra-regional partnership. Project outputs included a strategy paper, detailing thematic areas for future cooperation from the perspective of the core metropolitan area, 'middle peri-urban ring' and 'outer rural ring' of the partnership area, as well as a political declaration (Bad Bevensen Declaration) concerning the positioning and role of rural areas in relation to the metropolitan core of Hamburg. Through this process, the following seven thematic areas were adopted as priorities for future cooperation: demographic change, education and culture, climate change and energy, economic development, transport, tourism and health (MORO Nord, 2010). The political declaration is recognised as an important step in developing a common platform among the rural regions of northern Germany. Significantly, the declaration emphasised the functional interdependence of rural and urban areas within the overarching policy framework of joint responsibility.

Figure 2: Map showing the extent of the Project Partnership North supra-regional partnership and Hamburg Metropolitan Region



Source: Metropolregion Hamburg (n.d.).

Following the end of the formal project and federal-level financial support in 2010, the partnership has continued under the title Projekt Partnerschaft Nord (Project Partnership North). MORO Nord furthermore provided the opportunity for the development of networks extending across the international border to southern Denmark, an example of external variable geometry (see Figure 2). Both MORO Nord and Project Partnership North have functioned as umbrella structures supporting project-based cooperation. They have not led to the development of formal competences at the supra-regional level, nor was this intended. In comparison to the comparatively formal Hamburg Metropolitan Region, the MORO Nord and its successor have a larger spatial remit, have greater flexibility in their operational structures and have provided

opportunities for business and civil society actors to participate at this supra-regional scale. Critical commentators nevertheless point to confusion and overlap between the functions and responsibilities of the Metropolitan Region and the supra-regional partnership, and question a perceived shift in focus from the metropolitan–hinterland scale to a wider geographical scale where actual functional relations are less evident (ARGE Rand, 2010). Indeed, at the time of writing, the future of Project Partnership North is uncertain, indicative perhaps of its dependence on the engagement of a small number of key personalities within each of the federal states and the difficulties in finding viable themes for cooperation in the absence of substantial financial support beyond the initial pilot stage (Jacuniak-Suda et al., forthcoming). The German experience with urban–rural partnerships nevertheless offers important insights of relevance to the future of regional governance in Ireland.

Discussion and conclusions

Supra-regional partnerships in Germany are clearly on a greater scale than would be possible in Ireland and include populations of several million. This approach is nevertheless of relevance to the Eastern and Midlands Region. Following the principles of variable geometry and flexible voluntary cooperation, urban–rural partnerships under this model are primarily concerned with the identification of potential synergies between individual urban and rural regions or sub-regions. Within this context, the task of regional governance may be understood in terms of the organisation of connectivities among multiple actor constellations at multiple scales. Thematic policy fields where such synergies are envisaged include the production and consumption of sustainable energy, the promotion of regional foods and alternative food supply networks and the development of specialist knowledge clusters among academic and industry partners. Practice experience in the north of Germany and elsewhere indicates that the identification of such synergies can be quite challenging but can lead to unexpected cooperative initiatives. A variable geometry approach, however, allows for such partnerships to develop on a project-by-project basis without the need to ensure geographical coverage of the full regional area.

In the case of the Eastern and Midlands Region, it is possible to imagine that some policy issues and governance projects would be specific to the four Dublin local authorities – the Dublin Metropolitan

Area in the terminology of the Local Government Bill. Other issues may be appropriate to the scale of the current GDA whereas others may primarily concern the Mid-East or indeed the Midlands Gateway. Through the operation of this principle, it would be feasible to incorporate such a differentiated approach within the framework of the wider Eastern and Midlands regional structure. Supra-regional partnerships in northern Germany have engaged with a wide range of public sector as well as social and economic actors. In the Irish case, there is potential to build on the existing network governance structures developed through city/county development boards and enterprise boards.⁴ The active and effective inclusion of central government departments and agencies, however, may require legislative provisions stipulating a responsibility to cooperate. Participating stakeholders would need to recognise and accept that they will not benefit from all projects or policy initiatives. As with any regional governance arrangement, it would be necessary to find a fine balance between a concern for spatial equity and concerns for social equity, where the recognition of the different levels of population in the urban and rural local authorities becomes more significant. Such a governance model based on a strategically selective and competitive approach to regional development may be one way to introduce new dynamic regional governance in Ireland without requiring large-scale investment from central government.

The future of regional governance for the Dublin city-region and its wider urban–rural hinterland will require a flexible approach to working with multiple spaces and boundaries, recognising the heterogeneous nature of the Eastern and Midlands Region. Such an approach can help to replace existing polarised perspectives on the relationship between Dublin and its hinterland with constructive partnerships that draw on the specific place qualities and resources of each sub-region. The form of governance adopted for the Eastern and Midlands Region, however, will depend on the specifics of the legislative framework within which the regional assemblies will operate and the future decisions regarding local government reform, including the question of a directly elected regional mayor.

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⁴ Under the Local Government Bill 2013, city/county development boards are due to be replaced by local community development committees.

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