Building Resilient, Smart Communities in a Post-COVID Era:
Insights From Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly throughout the world in early 2020. Beyond the substantial health impacts, the crisis has served as a catalyst for a dramatic shift in working practices, a greater reliance on technology, and a subsequent reduction in air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in the most heavily populated parts of the planet. Indeed, the crisis has highlighted the interconnected nature of society's vulnerabilities while also demonstrating that transformational change is possible. These rapid changes have ignited debate around how to build more resilient societies and the role of planning in promoting equitable and sustainable recovery. This article presents key insights from Ireland, as policymakers grapple with these questions and the role of technology in ensuring ongoing delivery of services and a continuation of democratic processes. Specifically, this short article focuses on the impact of the pandemic on town centres and regional growth in Ireland and the potential interventions which can aid in addressing recently intensified local challenges.

KEYWORDS

Ireland, Regional Development, Rural Areas, Smart Villages, Town Centres

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has spread rapidly throughout the world in 2020, presenting a myriad of complex challenges for the global community. Beyond the significant health impacts and human cost of the crisis, economies and public finances have been put under considerable strain. The pandemic has also significantly altered our way of life, serving as a catalyst for a dramatic shift in remote working practices and a subsequent reduction in air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in the most heavily populated parts of the planet. Indeed, the crisis has highlighted the interconnected nature of society's vulnerabilities while also demonstrating that radical, transformational change is possible.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, Ireland had largely recovered from the significant impacts of the 2007/8 global economic crisis. Towards the end of 2019, and despite uncertainties related to

Brexit, the Irish economy was performing strongly and was forecasted to grow further in 2020. Indeed, in December 2019, the Irish unemployment rate was at a 13 year low of 4.8%. This was nearly three percentage points lower than the euro zone average of 7.5% at the time. However, as of May 2020, the unemployment rate was at a near record high of 26.1% (down from a pandemic peak of 28.3% recorded in April). It has been a swift and profound change in circumstances. These rapid changes have ignited debate around how to build more resilient societies and the role of spatial planning in promoting equitable and sustainable recovery. It has also accelerated existing societal trends and the urgency with which we address challenges stemming from these.

Indeed, recovery from the previous 2007/8 crisis has not been felt evenly across all regions, cities and towns of Ireland. As a traditionally rural country, Ireland has a landscape dotted with small to medium sized settlements, with few major towns or cities. In 2016 (when the last Irish Census of population was carried out), over a third (37%) of the population lived in rural areas or settlements of less than 1,500 people. A further 13% of the population lived in towns with populations of between 1,500 and 10,000. The 2007/8 crisis further sharped existing difficulties faced by many of these settlements. Many town and village centres outside the catchment of Ireland's five main cities – Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford, have struggled to maintain vibrant regional high streets with increasing vacancy rates impacting their vitality. Of course, these issues are not unique to Ireland. There are a range of global trends which have influenced the difficulties these settlements have faced, as explored within a recent piece of research conducted by Future Analytics Consulting (FAC) entitled 'Rejuvenating Ireland's small town centres - A Call to Action' (2018; commissioned by the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland). These include the increasing digitalisation of economic activity (including an exponential rise in online shopping); changing consumer behaviour; increasing broadband availability; and changing demographics (with more people choosing to live in larger urban centres and a subsequent decline of the rural population). Smaller countries like Ireland that have traditionally relied on indigenous retailers are now exposed to a global market.

Commercial vacancy rates are reported quarterly in Ireland through the GeoDirectory[1] and the publication of the 'GeoView Commercial Vacancy Report'. At the end of 2019 (Quarter 4), the national commercial vacancy rate stood at 13.3%, with vacancy rates continuing to rise in most of Ireland's counties (sub regional territories which demarcate areas of local government). The five counties with the highest vacancy rates were all located in Connacht (a region in the west of Ireland), with County Sligo recording the highest vacancy rate at 18.9%. Almost a quarter (23.5%) of all commercial properties in Ireland are located in Dublin (in the east of the country), a sign of the prominent east-west divide in terms of commercial activity in Ireland. Dublin is also home to 44% of Ireland's urban population (as of April 2016).

2. UNDERSTANDING THE POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 ON REGIONAL ECONOMIES

Within the current context, the Covid-19 pandemic has added another layer of complexity to these existing trends. The three Regional Assemblies of Ireland have recently prepared a "COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis" (2020) to identify which regions, sub-regions, counties, cities and towns are more likely to be exposed to economic disruption caused by the measures necessary to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The overarching purpose of the document is to ensure that national, regional and local bodies are adequately equipped in designing appropriate policy responses to this unprecedented crisis. Using the GeoDirectory commercial database, and specifically the NACE codes[2] allocated to commercial units as of September 2019, the report identified each geographical area's reliance on the sectors that are likely to be severely affected by the public health measures needed to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

On foot of this, "COVID-19 Exposure Ratios" have been developed for each of Ireland's regions, sub-regions, counties, cities and for 199 settlements. Specifically, a geographical area's "COVID-19

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