

## Environmental Citizenship: the Need for Civic Engagement and Participatory Democracy – The Case of Spatial Planning

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Niall Dunphy and John Morrissey

Cleaner Production Promotion Unit, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering,  
University College Cork, Ireland

Socio-technical transitions are defined as major transformations in the way societal functions including, housing, transportation and communication are fulfilled. A significant body of literature has emerged on socio-technical transitions in recent years. Central to this body of theory is the argument that policy shifts to longer-term perspectives and approaches are critical for environmental sustainability. The transitions approach also draws upon social, environmental and governance considerations to generate insights. This paper discusses the potential of transitions theory as a framework for informing low-carbon development at local and regional scales, with a focus on mechanisms for governance reform in the Irish planning regime. The transitions literature emphasises that in order to respond to the scale and complexity of socio-ecological problems, fundamental changes in social institutions are required. However, processes of state intervention and governance reform need to be initiated through political processes, and need to be legitimised through political and civic mandates. In addition, tangible linkages between economic, social and environmental reform agendas need to be developed. This paper considers the case of Ireland's small open economy, comprised of a simultaneously dispersed and polarised urban hierarchy and characterised by limited integration of transport and land-use planning, an inefficient low-density urban form and a high level of fossil fuel dependency. While the Irish planning regime was foremost in the governance failures characteristic of the 'Celtic-tiger' boom era from 2000-2008, planning in Ireland has historically been characterised by a high degree of political influence on planner decision-making, a lack of integration of approaches across county boundaries and a critical deficit of appropriate mechanisms to foster, facilitate and enable civic engagement in planning processes. These challenges represent critical barriers to a low-carbon, efficient and participatory democracy, which the sustainability paradigm suggests. In particular, a deficit of participatory local democracy and a lack of civic engagement with the planning process in Ireland perpetuate long standing regional and economic imbalances in the State. While the transitions literature has emerged as a potent sustainability narrative, to date the literature has not focused in depth on the potential of participative and strategic planning processes applied at local, regional and national scales to foster sustainable transition. This paper characterises current problems and identifies alternative reform pathways to realise efficiently functioning,

participative and civically engaged governance structures for low-carbon regions in Ireland. Immediate challenges to the implementation of strategic change, including the restrictions imposed by fiscal crisis, the physical infrastructure legacy of a housing boom and a high degree of institutional centralisation are evaluated in the context of longer term transition issues, including a lack of local and regional autonomy. Analysis reveals that current institutional arrangements regarding planning in Ireland are unfit for purpose and present a risk to the capacity of Irish communities to face the economic, environmental and social challenges of the 21st century. A forwarded portfolio of suggested reforms are targeted at institutional and community arenas and emphasise the need to foster civic engagement at the local, regional and scales. Results suggest that a range of mechanisms for community empowerment, including instruments for participatory democracy and civic engagement at the regional level, would serve to significantly affect community resilience and could begin to address national imbalances in development and economic activity. At the national level, analysis reveals the requirement for a systematic consideration of strategic policy approaches to address future sustainability challenges. In addition, the need for coherent and integrated multi-level governance approaches across local, regional and national levels is a clear and pressing need of the Irish planning regime.