

Title: A Strategic Approach to Rural Repopulation

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Abstract

This paper explores the rationale for a strategic approach to rural repopulation in Ireland. The empirical context is the current concern with increasingly problematic Irish settlement patterns, characterised by a metropolitan concentration suffering significant diseconomies of agglomeration together with large tracts of desertified (depopulated and structurally weak) rural areas. The remainder of the paper argues that the proposed policy response - a National Spatial Strategy based on a nodal model of spatial development - will not repopulate desertified rural areas. Therefore, an alternative approach is needed to ensure that the policy objective of 'vibrant sustainable communities' in rural areas as outlined in the White Paper on Rural Development (1999) is realised.

Drawing on the literature on population change, an analytical framework is adopted consisting of macro scale factors and the local environment, the interaction of which is identified as the critical factor explaining rural population changes. Based on the literature on ex-urban population flows, it is argued that there are limits to the extent to which these population movements can be expected to repopulate desertified rural areas. Furthermore, insights from the literature on agglomeration economies and the daily urban system, suggest that, unaided, the tendency will be for both population and economic activity to continue to concentrate in more populous areas due to the dynamic inherent in a modern economy. Building on these ideas, and supported by contributions from the disparate population settlement literature, a framework for understanding the processes behind, and identifying the essential components of, a strategic approach to rural repopulation is presented.