

Annex D

Urban settlement and rural areas - Background and historical perspective

The historian S Zaluckyj¹ has written

“Most people’s understanding of a town would be a settlement of such size and density of population that it drew in its surrounding population both to trade goods and also in search of certain trades, services, businesses and specializations that were unable to exist or thrive in a sparsely populated rural area”.

However, as the historical geographer BJ Graham² has remarked,

“It is exceptionally difficult to define ‘urban’ and further it is impossible to specify a point at which a settlement definitively becomes a town”.

Despite this caveat, Graham also quotes the following table, which shows a number of key characteristics of urban centres, as used by archaeologists, historians and geographers:

Table 1: A grouping of urban characteristics

1. Economic Characteristics	Market Central place roles
2. Social Criteria	Relatively large & differentiated population in diversified employment
3. Morphological	Planned street system House plots Defences
4. Institutional phenomena	Complex religious organization Judicial function Mechanism of administration

¹ S Zaluckyj “Mercia, the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Central England” Almeley, 2001, p193

² BJ Graham “Early Medieval Ireland c500-1100: settlement as an indicator of economic and social transformation” p29 in Ed BJ Graham & LJ Proudfoot “An Historical Geography of Ireland”, London, 1993

Urban development came comparatively late to Ireland, and urban development within Ulster was later than in much of Ireland. The settlements in Ulster prior to the seventeenth century plantation, based originally on monastic sites and Anglo-Norman administrative centres, were few in number. Of these pre-plantation settlements, the majority have retained some significance but plantation settlements were the more numerous. In general, it was the plantation settlements which showed greatest growth. Of these, Belfast was the most dynamic, acquiring a regional pre-eminence that paralleled the pre-eminence of Dublin within Ireland.

Within Ulster, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, urbanisation of the population proceeded at a considerable pace. In 1821, 2% of the population lived in towns of over 10,000 population (in effect, in Belfast). By 1901, the proportion was 28%, spread over a greater number of settlements, and by 1926, it was 36%.

From Table 1 above, it will be seen that the urban characteristics less easily influenced by government action are economic (market and central place), social (population) and morphological (settlement form). The location of religious and administrative functions has always been prone to ad hoc or even arbitrary decisions eg the location of the ranking archdiocese of England in Canterbury rather than London in the 6th century. The following sections consider the three more independent components of urban characterisation. There is also an examination of rural characterisation.

Settlement identification

The criteria on which urban settlement is identified should be clearly stated and justifiable. Three main criteria seem appropriate, in light of generally accepted approaches, and in light of the above:

Population size (cf social criteria in Table 1).

Many definitions are based on population size, and it can be demonstrated in many areas that there is an identifiable urban hierarchy with considerable numbers of settlements clustered together around a limited range of typical sizes, with relatively few settlements of intermediate size. This hierarchy can be disrupted by external events eg post World War I partition of Austro-Hungary or Ireland, leaving oversized settlements such as Vienna or Belfast which have been separated from part of their previous hinterland. Another cause of disruption to the hierarchy can be the growth of dormitory and overspill settlements (such as Carrickfergus, Bangor and Craigavon) whose true urban status is not proportionate to their population. It cannot be assumed that limits identified in one part of the world are appropriate in another.

Population density (cf morphological issues in Table 1).

In urban areas, a major land use is residence. The concentration of dwellings, diluted somewhat by their associated gardens, amenities and access, generate a high population

density. The exact level of that density is determined mostly by the proportion of the built-up residential area devoted to gardens, amenities and services, rather than dwelling footage. For the most part, it is relatively easy to delineate a built-up area, but the associated population may be less easy to obtain. Care is needed, when comparing population density for standard units, to ensure that there are no radical differences in the proportions of non-residential land. The weakness of this approach is that the delineation of the boundary for a settlement is critical. A hamlet of four or five houses may, within its bounds, have a higher population density than an upper class suburb - it is not, thereby, urban.

Service provision (cf economic characteristics in Table 1, as well as institutional phenomena).

Provision of services has always been associated with urban areas. The presence of a market was linked to borough status in the middle ages, with much thought being given to the size of a reasonable catchment area. A city was defined by the presence of a cathedral. More recently, an extensive body of theory and research derived from the thinking of Christaller seeks to identify a hierarchy of services for which service centres develop, each with their own catchment area. It should be noted that there is no absolute requirement for a service centre to be a population centre. As C Dyer notes, "some rural markets ... began to resemble towns"³. Others did not. In Ireland, as in Wales, Scotland and highland parts of England, it is not uncommon for services for a wide area to be provided by an isolated shop, public house or hall. Graham⁴ points out that English, unlike French, lacks a term for a settlement intermediate between town and village. He suggests that a very high proportion of Irish settlement fell into this intermediate category.

None of the three approaches can be regarded as satisfactory in isolation, but taken in conjunction, they tend to correct each other's deficiencies eg a housing estate with a population of 5,000 but virtually no shops has only a weak claim to be regarded as an independent town (though it may perhaps form part of a greater urban settlement) whereas a settlement with the same population but a wide range of services clearly has a much better claim to be regarded as an urban settlement in its own right.

Rural areas

The above gives limited consideration to the issue of rurality, save in the negative sense of "not urban". One way of approaching rurality is to take account of the extensive use of land. Whilst all human activities occupy some area of land, activities such as forestry and farming are critically linked to the use of substantial areas of land. This impacts not only on the nature of the activities themselves, but also on the other land uses that are practical in the area. Where a considerable proportion of an area is taken up by extensive land use, settlement is more diffuse, and access to public transport and other services is inevitably more limited, particularly where a minimum threshold population is required in order to make a service viable.

³ C Dyer "Making a living in the Middle Ages: the people of Britain 850-1520", New Haven and London, 2002, p190

⁴ BJ Graham "The High Middle Ages: c1100 to c1350" p82-83 in Ed BJ Graham & LJ Proudfoot "An Historical Geography of Ireland", London, 1993

A rural area cannot be defined simply in terms of the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture and forestry, but must also take account of the proportion of the land surface devoted to these activities. Even though the majority of the population may live and work in settlements, such matters as commuting times and access to services will be conditioned by the degree to which land use in their area is extensive rather than intensive.

Another issue is the distance to urban settlement, which not only tends to govern the type of rural land use that occurs but also, in conjunction with the type of urban settlement, governs access to services and to urban employment. A rural area ten miles from an urban centre is at an advantage compared with a rural area twenty miles from a town - when the town provides more rather than fewer services, that advantage is compounded. Another advantage is almost the inverse of this, since if a rural area has easy access to a town, so the population of the town centre has easy access to the rural area. The rural area may be able to take advantage of low land costs to compete with the town drawing shoppers and labour to out of town shopping and industry eg freezer shops and farm butchers.

As an example, an area such as the northern part of County Down may send the majority of its working population to Belfast, but commuting times and access to services are conditioned by the fact that the majority of the land area is devoted to farming. The population is relatively scattered and the area does not as a whole exhibit the characteristics of a town. The level of services located within small settlements of the area can nonetheless be high.