Irish government neglect flood victims and infrastructure

By Jordan Shilton
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This summer saw unprecedented rainfall throughout Ireland, resulting in a number of flash floods across the country. The resulting chaos and damage to infrastructure and people's homes were largely due to the chronic under-funding of public infrastructure.

The most recent troubles began on the weekend of August 9, when heavy rainfall was recorded in and around Dublin. At Dublin airport, over 70mm of rain fell in less than 24 hours, over three-quarters of the average monthly amount. Travellers were stranded as roads to and from the airport were forced to close as a result of increasing water levels.

Two of the country's main routes, the M50 and the M1, were temporarily closed during Sunday August 10. Further road closures hit routes in County Kildare and County Laois, with rail links heading north from Dublin also affected.

In parts of Dublin, units from the Civil Defence and emergency services were called to hundreds of homes to pump water from flooded properties. In Kildare the town of Celbridge saw severe flooding, with many houses under two feet of water. Sewage from blocked drains backed up on to the town's main street.

Heavy rain in rural areas caused difficulties for farmers. In North County Dublin and parts of Munster, concerns have been raised as to the impact the wet weather will have on the harvesting of grain, silage and various vegetable crops.

Throughout the following week, heavy rain continued and by the weekend many areas of the country were again under water. A train running between Dublin and Cork was derailed by a landslide, with no one on board suffering injuries. On August 17, an apartment complex in Carlow had to be evacuated and the residents re-housed in temporary accommodation. Parts of the town centre were submerged under five feet of water. Serious flooding also hit parts of Sligo, Offaly and Laois. In County Tipperary, a bridge collapsed.

The impact on residents living in the worst affected areas has been devastating. Some have seen the value of their homes wiped out by the floods, and many see little prospect of support or compensation.

It has raised the question as to why, in what is supposedly one of Europe's richest countries, a lack of adequate infrastructure was so apparent.

During the 20th century, Ireland's road and rail infrastructure was notoriously backward, a legacy of British rule and the subsequent inability of the Irish bourgeoisie to modernise the economy. Construction on the first motorway only began in 1983 when, aided by European Community grants, significant efforts were being devoted to attract global investment.

But even when the "Celtic tiger" economy grew with global production, ever more focus was placed on maintaining Ireland's competitiveness through tax breaks for corporations and low levels of public spending.

The results were predictable. While the economy grew at unprecedented levels during the late 1990s and the early part of this decade, basic infrastructure was neglected, beyond what was immediately required to transport goods to export markets.

An OECD report entitled "Closing the infrastructure gap" noted in 2006, "Soaring activity and a rapidly growing population have created an infrastructure deficit that is constraining productivity growth. Major pressure is evident especially in the areas of transport, electricity transmission, landfill, waste water treatment and broadband internet. Insufficient investment in environmental infrastructure has led to pollution and soaring prices for some services such as landfill."

This under-development increased the impact of the floods. An Irish climatologist, Professor John Sweeney, believed that major roads such as the M50 and the M1 should have been able to withstand the rains that forced their closure. He cited a severe lack of funding for local authorities as preventing sufficiently frequent drain and ditch maintenance.

Much remedial work is now needed, when instead the government is preparing savage public spending cuts. Barely a month before the floods hit, Finance Minister Brian Lenihan announced proposals to cut nearly 500 million euros from public spending over the coming year. Noting that the government was facing a shortfall in tax revenue of three billion euros, Lenihan claimed that the cuts were necessary to preserve the strength of the economy.

Since then the government's estimated shortfall from taxation has risen to eight billion euros, meaning that the cuts outlined by Lenihan in early July are only the start. The budget is being brought forward by six weeks this year, a sure sign that further cuts are on the agenda.

The government has immediately come under criticism for miserly levels of financial help handed out to victims—a mere 40,000 euros has been paid out this summer. By contrast, in 2002 a dedicated fund set up to support those affected when the river Dodder burst its banks has paid out 13.5 million euros. The fact that the 2002 floods took place on the eve of a general election has led many to the conclusion that the government's concern at the time was solely to improve its image ahead of the polls.

Ireland has consistently had one of the lowest levels of public spending as a percentage of GDP in Europe. Since the beginning of the 1990s, government policy has been to starve public services and increase private sector involvement in every aspect of public life. Over the past few months, however, it has become clear that Ireland is entering its first recession since the 1980s. Demands to yet more sharply rein in public sector spending are widespread among the business elite.

The pressure of a large shortfall in government finances has already led to a request being sent out to all departments to provide a list of projects which can be put on ice.

Recent reports indicate that if no action is taken borrowing will increase to over five percent of GDP in the coming year. Some believe that spending will have to be scaled back by at least three percent across all departments. The consequences for already severely under-funded infrastructure will be disastrous.

Another problem identified by experts following the flooding has been the lack of building regulations to guard against such events. The economic boom in Ireland, now at an end, was driven largely by a vast growth in the construction industry with government providing tax breaks and other incentives to encourage new developments across the country. Ireland's corporate tax rate of 12.5 percent gave it the edge in attracting foreign direct investment over many of its European competitors.

But as Professor Sweeney noted, the rush to find space for new developments has resulted in little thought being given to the appropriateness of the location of new buildings. "Once you start urbanisation on flood plains, you remove the storage capability for flooding and the water ends up going into the main channel down stream," he commented.

Situated on the banks of streams and rivers, flood plains are created by sediment which gathers over a number of years. If the plains are left clear, they can provide a natural barrier to flood waters spreading across such a wide area. In Ireland, however, the boom in construction resulted in a huge increase in new projects with little regulation on the part of the government to restrict the activity of the construction companies. As Sweeney continues, "Low-lying, more vulnerable areas should not be built on. We should not be putting people in there, and you have to be very careful about putting infrastructure such as roads and rail in."

With the huge profits that resulted from the expansion in the construction industry, little concern for such basic issues was shown.