

# Thinking about Ireland's National Marine Planning Framework through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic

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During these unprecedented times, we are being forced to reflect on the values that are needed to underpin the kind of society we want to live in, and the inadequacies of the current status quo. In Ireland, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the values that come consistently to the fore include solidarity, equity, empathy and care for fellow citizens. The big picture questions that we are currently reflecting on are not limited to our economy and healthcare system. They are permeating every single aspect of our lives. These reflections are therefore directly relevant to the framework we choose to manage our marine environment.

For the past two years, the Irish Government has been developing a national marine planning framework, led by the Marine Planning Policy and Development Division in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. A public consultation on the draft National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) finally closed on 30 April 2020, two months later than originally anticipated. Delays were caused first by the General Election in early February, and subsequently by the COVID-19 pandemic. In my submission to the policy consultation on behalf of the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, I reflected on the national marine planning process in the unexpected context of a global pandemic.

While climate change is (rightly) positioned as a central consideration throughout the NMPF, the principle of “building back better” (e.g. increasing resilience and equity) and global pandemic preparedness should be integrated as related, cross-cutting considerations. A recent report [1] from the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board pointed to climate change as one of the factors in heightening our vulnerability to infectious pathogens and warned that we are more and more susceptible to “global, biological catastrophic

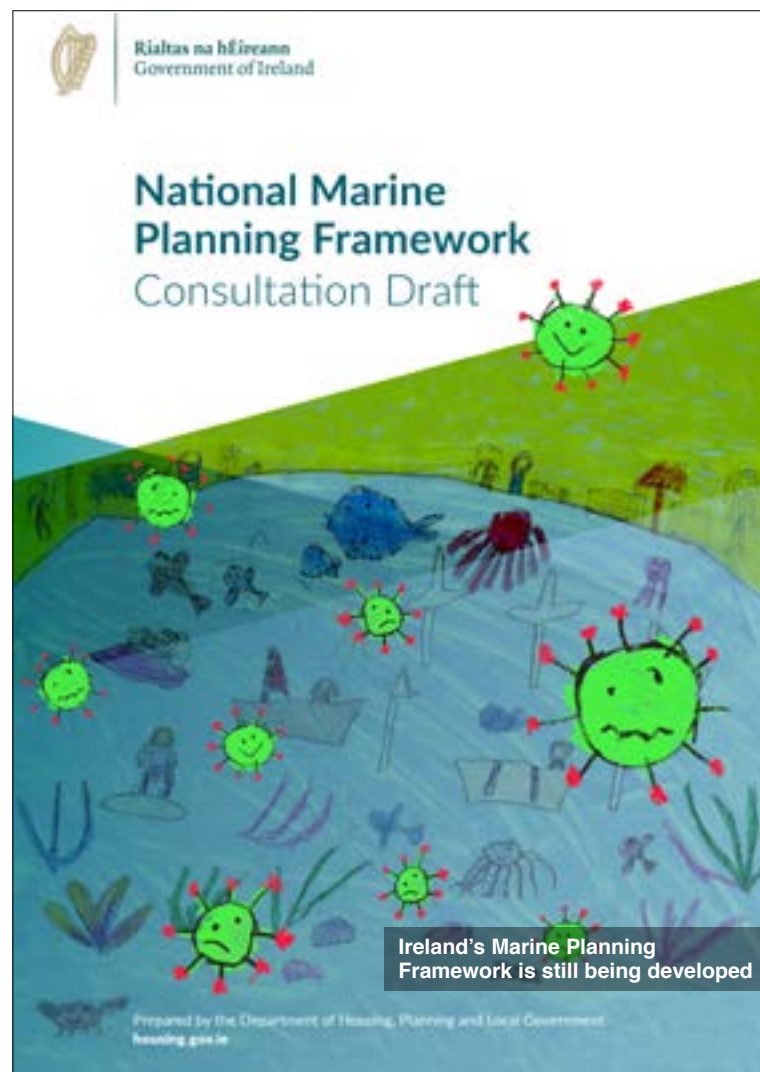
risks”. The NMPF should explicitly acknowledge the societal upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and reflect on how this is shaping/should shape the national approach to planning and managing our marine environment.

For example, what revisions and reframings are possible, and desirable, if we look beyond economic indicators and move beyond the current vision for Ireland's marine environment in *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth*, that is dominated by market-driven logic? This logic assumes, for example, that growth is the best way to measure sustainable economic policies, and that framing the biophysical environment as natural capital will achieve a socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable marine environment.

The societal upheaval we are experiencing provides an opportunity to make space in policy-making practices and processes for imagining new ways of being in the world, for imagining a world that contains many different worlds, as opposed to the world that our policy systems are embedded in, a world where only one world fits. We need to create space for different starting points so that we are not limited by the idea that we must take “the world that is responsible for the plausible destruction of the planet as the exclusive starting point in a conversation about the current condition of the planet.” [2]

In the context of COVID-19, this potential imagining of new worlds has gained prominence. Journalist Peter Baker wrote recently that “disasters and emergencies do not just throw light on the world as it is. They also rip open the fabric of normality. Through the hole that opens up, we glimpse possibilities of other worlds.” [3]

Over a decade ago, in her book on the societal potential of disasters and emergencies, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, author Rebecca Solnit observed that “In the moment of disaster, the old order no longer exists, and people improvise.... Thereafter a struggle takes place over whether the old order with all its shortcomings and injustices will be reimposed or a new one, perhaps more impressive and perhaps more just and free...



will arise.” [4]

Setting aside any cynicism around an aspirational document that has been crafted to entice the smaller, left-wing parties into government with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the new Programme for Government appears to be tapping into this potential for a new order. It acknowledges that there is “no going back to the old way of doing things”, commits to working together to achieve a “stronger, more inclusive Ireland”, and declares that the spirit of people and communities coming together to help each other “must guide any new Government that is formed. These are the values which have been central to our shared national response to this Emergency and they must be the values that drive the work of the next Government”. Of course, there is politicking involved in these carefully chosen words. But it also opens a door to shaping other, possible worlds.

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[1] Global Preparedness Monitoring Board. A world at risk: annual report on global preparedness for health emergencies. Geneva: World Health Organization; (2019) Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. [https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/annual\\_report/GPMB\\_annualreport\\_2019.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/annual_report/GPMB_annualreport_2019.pdf)

[2] Blaser, M. and de la Cadena M. 2018. Pluriverse: Proposals for a World of Many Worlds. In: De la Cadena, M. and Blaser M. (eds). A World of Many Worlds. Duke University Press, Durham and London.

[3] Baker 2020 ‘We can’t go back to normal’: how will coronavirus change the world? The Guardian, 31 March 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/how-will-the-world-emerge-from-the-coronavirus-crisis>

[4] Solnit R. (2010) A Paradise built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster, Penguin, p16



The CO-SUSTAIN project ([www.belongingtothesea.com](http://www.belongingtothesea.com)) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 789524