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COVID-19 Crisis Blog: The Pandemic and the Planet Our Marine Environment

2 June 2020 - As we navigate a national and global public health crisis with the spread of Covid-19 Coronavirus, we hear from our research and policy fellows, and members of our research community in a new weekly blog which reflects on these new societal challenges. This week, Dr Ruth Brennan from the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, reflects on Ireland's National Marine Planning Framework through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ruth Brennan, Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, School of Histories and Humanities, TCD.

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The big picture questions that we are currently reflecting on are not limited to our economy and healthcare system.

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.

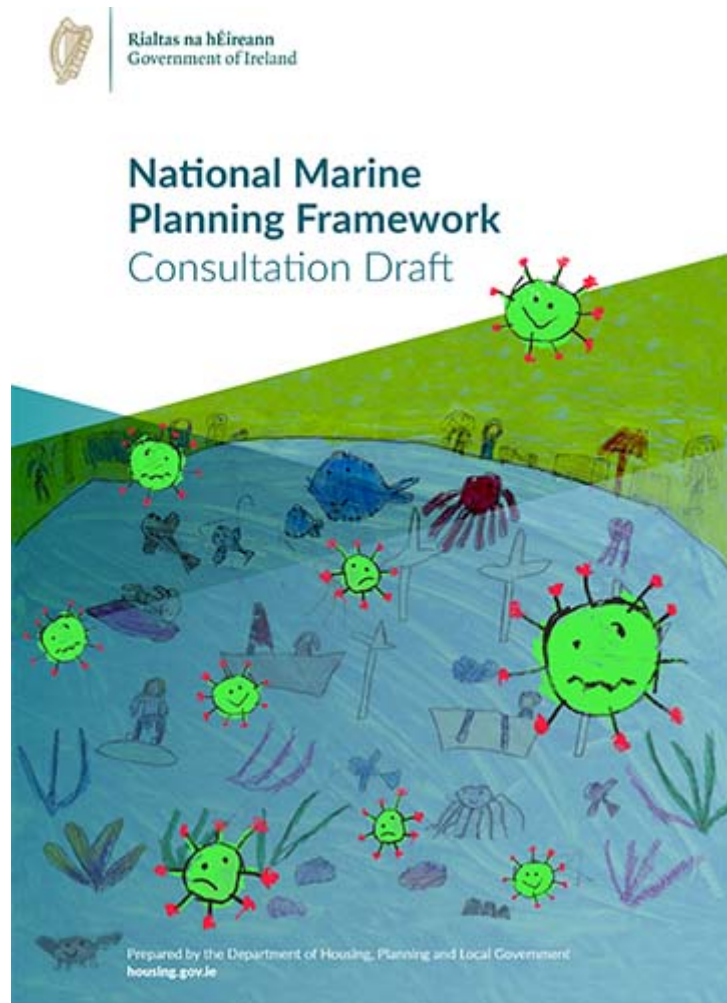
For the past two years, the Irish Government has been developing a national marine planning framework, led by the Marine Planning Policy and Development Division in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. A public consultation on the draft National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) finally 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.

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...the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board pointed to climate change as one of the factors in heightening our vulnerability to infectious pathogens.

While climate change is (rightly) positioned as a central consideration throughout the NMPF, the principle of “building back better” and global pandemic preparedness should be integrated as related, cross-cutting considerations. [A recent report](#) 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.”](#)



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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.

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.” 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.”

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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Through the hole that opens up, we glimpse possibilities of other worlds.

Read submission here:

Brennan R (2020) National Marine Planning Framework Consultation Draft. [Submission of the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities](#)



Ruth Brennan is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellow (2018-2020) at the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, Trinity College Dublin and sea fisheries advisor to MEP Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan at the European Parliament. Her research sits at the arts-science-policy interface and offers insights into the different ways marine and coastal spaces are conceptualised by users, managers and human-

environment interactions, how this relates to natural resource governance challenges and what it means for community engagement. Her [current research](#) has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 789524.

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