

Informing Spatial Planning – Towards 2007-2013

NIRSA / ESPON seminar
NUI Maynooth, 26th Jan. 2007

Opening remarks by Vice-President Prof Jim Walsh

Good morning everybody, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to this very timely seminar on Spatial Planning. I want to extend a particularly warm welcome to our international guests.

This seminar has been organised by Brendan Bartley and his colleagues on behalf of ESPON, NIRSA and ICLRD. Of course all of these entities are intertwined via Brendan.

This seminar is taking place at a crucial moment for the whole area of academic and political endeavour that we describe as spatial analysis and spatial planning. The European Committee on Spatial Development lead the way throughout the 1990s culminating in the *European Spatial Development Perspective* report in 1999. Despite its informal status and its blatant compromises to secure political support, it was a milestone in European approaches to regional planning and development. Over the past five years we have seen major efforts through ESPON, the European Spatial Planning

Observation Network, to deepen our understanding of key concepts that underpin the ESDP, and also through extensive empirical research to provide better evidence and knowledge across the enlarged EU and neighbouring states. The experience of this pilot phase of ESPON has, on the whole, been very positive, and it has laid the foundation for an ESPON 2 which will take the debate further in the light of the EU discussion document on *The Territorial Agenda* (2005).

Coming back to a more local focus, it is fair to say that almost a seismic shift has occurred in the manner in which governments and their advisors conceptualise and strategise frameworks for national development. The National Development Plan published at the end of 1999 recognised the need for something described as a strategy for spatial development which at the time was envisaged as being mostly about physical infrastructure. The National Spatial Strategy published in Dec. 2002, informed by the ESDP and ESPON, introduced a new paradigm in relation to regional development, and crucially had the support of the majority of the key stakeholders. Despite some wobbles over the intervening years, by 2004 a hierarchical planning framework was in place, and by end of 2006 detailed studies had been undertaken on how to progress the key components of the National Spatial Strategy. In parallel,

work progressed on articulating a new perspective on developing the broader rural economy as complementary to the NSS. Finally, and crucially, work was quietly undertaken on how to coordinate and integrate the proposals for spatial planning throughout the island of Ireland.

The National Development Plan published last Tuesday represents a step change compared to its predecessors. Chapter 3 on Regional Development adopts the NSS as its framework, and indeed as the framework for the entire NDP. Included in this chapter is a proposed Gateways Innovation Fund. This is very important as it recognises their central role in the NSS, and in effect it represents the adoption of a functional spatial perspective supported by mechanisms to raise the quality of proposals through competitive bidding. The Gateways focus is supplemented by identified roles for the hubs and other towns. This is a significant departure from previous approaches or expectations that could be described as ‘equity’ driven in response to needs of admin units such as ‘regions’. The next chapter on the Rural economy is dovetailed with the Regional chapter while also recognising the special circumstances and variety of rural areas. Finally, chapter 5 addresses North – South planning and investment strategies.

Successful implementation of the NDP will require effective mechanisms for joined up governance, and also much better, conceptual thinking, data and analysis to underpin the investment strategies. Both of these areas will require a lot of additional support. The universities have been identified as having a crucial role in supporting implementation of the NDP. In this regard we believe that the expertise of NIRSA and related institutions has much to offer. Indeed the time may have arrived for an all Ireland initiative in this area.

I conclude by congratulating the government, and also the officials in the Departments of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and the Department of Community, Gaeltacht and Rural Affairs. I also commend the Department of Finance for their openness to extending the scope and shape of this NDP in directions that make it fundamentally distinctive from its predecessors. Last but by no means least I want to acknowledge the foresight and efforts of NIRSA for organising this very timely seminar.

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