

## CHAPTER 24

### **SPACE AND PLACE IN THE NATIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY FOR THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND**

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#### **Introduction**

The publication of *The National Spatial Strategy 2002 – 2020* (NSS) in December 2002 with the subtitle *People, Places and Potential* was a significant milestone in the history of planning in Ireland. Just over fifteen years previously the Minister for the Environment had abolished the National Institute for Physical Planning and Construction Research (An Foras Forbartha) and also the nine Regional Development Organisations that had since the early 1970s been responsible for the preparation of regional development strategies. Even more remarkable is the fact that just four years after the publication of the NSS it became a cornerstone for the *National Development Plan 2007-2013* with the subtitle *Transforming Ireland A Better Quality of Life for All* (Government of Ireland 2007). In his Foreword to the National Development Plan the Minister for Finance provides an unequivocal endorsement of the NSS: “our spatial strategy ...is crucial to managing the challenges of the future and the potential for growth and development... spatial objectives are integrated within the goals of economic, social and environmental sustainability and our national and international responsibilities under these headings” (GoI 2007: 13).

The NSS was formulated against a background of unprecedented economic transformation in the Republic of Ireland. Over a relatively short period the country had moved from a position of very low levels of economic development compared to the core regions of western Europe, to becoming the state with the second highest level of per capita Gross Domestic Products (GDP). The experience of economic convergence was, however, accompanied by increasing tendencies towards regional divergence within Ireland (Walsh 2000). The reality of unbalanced regional development in the context of increasing national prosperity was a major catalyst for producing the National Spatial Strategy. The goal of balanced regional development was itself problematic in definition and brought to the fore some deeply ingrained conceptions of the distinctiveness and expectations of the residents of certain places in Ireland.

The National Spatial Strategy was also prepared against the background of the changed political landscape following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland (see Chapter Five in this volume) which

opened up the prospect of closer economic links over the longer term between the North and South of Ireland. Chapter Five in this volume provides an account of the initiative that was already underway to develop a regional development strategy for Northern Ireland. It was timely for the government in the Republic to consider the spatial dimension of economic development and how the emerging opportunities associated with a more stable political climate throughout the island might be utilized to the mutual benefit of both the North and the South.

A further influence on establishing a receptive political climate for a National Spatial Strategy was the on-going European debate that culminated with the publication of the *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP) in 1999. Officials from the Department of the Environment in Ireland participated in the ESDP process unlike their counterparts in Northern Ireland and Wales, through which they had become aware of the new spatial planning concepts and the vocabulary adopted for the ESDP.

Taken together, the primary concern with balanced regional development, the emerging all-island dimension, and the awareness of the territorial planning discourse at the European level, provided a powerful synergy of pressures to prepare a Spatial Strategy for a new Ireland coming to grips with managing the fruits of success ‘while ensuring a high quality of life for all our people’ (DELG 2002:3).

This chapter analyses the process of preparing the National Spatial Strategy using the conceptual frameworks relating to space and place presented in Chapter One. The next section commences with a more detailed discussion of the context for the strategy which is then followed by analyses of the strategy making process and the content of the NSS before some general conclusions are identified in the final section. As there are linkages between context, process and content the sub-themes identified in Chapter One are interwoven across the sections. For example, the context includes a discussion of both the empirical socio-economic realities and also of initiatives by a number of government departments and others that helped to create a supportive institutional environment for launching the NSS preparation process. Within the process there was a constant interplay between knowledge creation through research and the various modes of consultation.

The approach adopted here is to examine the concepts of space and place as they are used in the National Spatial Strategy, the extent to which there is a shared understanding of the concepts, and to consider the methodologies used by planners and others in the preparation of the Strategy. The conceptualisation of space has changed very much over recent decades. It includes the more traditional absolutist perspective that treats geographic space as a container of fixed or mobile objects and

dynamic behavioural flows which are susceptible to analysis within the frameworks of positivism (Harvey 1969). More recently greater emphasis has been placed on structuralism and a relational perspective that space is continuously produced and reproduced through socio-spatial relations that include cultural, social, political and economic relations (Smith 1984; Sheppard 1995). The conceptualisation of place has been extensively developed in a relational sense by Massey (1995, 1997) and by others such as Soja (1989) from a post-modern perspective that emphasizes the importance of the personal sense of place, that places are relational and contingent, and are understood differently by different people. These varying conceptions of space and place are relevant to understanding how strategic spatial planning is approached and how that influences the content of the strategy. They are also important for understanding the range of methodologies and tools that are used by planners and others in the preparation of strategic spatial plans. Of particular interest is the extent to which alternative methodologies have been relied upon, including the rational comprehensive planning approach in which many planners were trained under the influence of Faludi (1973) and the more recent transactive planning practices involving participation, communication, abstract visualisation, negotiation, collaboration and institutional capacity building that are advocated by Innes (1996), Albrechts (2001), Allmendinger (2002) and Healey (1997, 1998 and 2006).

The outcome from this review of the NSS process is an interpretation which identifies the coexistence of processes that are typically discussed within the traditions of positivist, structuralist or post-modern approaches to planning. The Irish experience is that processes and practices from each of the different planning traditions were necessary to ensure that a National Spatial Strategy could be produced which was sensitive to the needs of many different stakeholders such as the citizens, the business community, professional planners, senior officials across many departments of the civil service, and the elected political leaders. Reconciling the divergent conceptions of space and place, and the associated planning methodologies, held by influential stakeholders from different disciplinary backgrounds was a significant challenge for all involved in the NSS process.

### **The context for the national spatial strategy**

The spatial context for economic and social development in Ireland is still strongly influenced by a settlement pattern and transport networks that were initially put in place to assist in the territorial organization and administration of a former colony. That legacy, which was historically guided by a relational spatial perspective coupled with a highly centralised public administrative system and an electoral model that encourages a strong sense of localism, continues to influence spatial development patterns even though the contemporary conditions are very different. Superimposed on the historical legacy are the locational imperatives of

foreign direct investment which is a key aspect of Ireland's engagement with globalization and has become the main driver of economic development over recent decades; a labour market catering for a highly educated and mobile workforce including many immigrants; and a more discriminating consumerist, but less cohesive, society that is increasingly attaching a higher premium to quality of life and broader environmental issues (Bartley and Kitchin 2007).

#### *Previous Responses to Uneven Regional Development*

The history of government engagement with the issue of uneven regional development in Ireland originates with the Undeveloped Areas Act of 1952 and can be broadly subdivided into three phases over the past fifty years (Boylan 2005). The first, which lasted until the late 1960s, was mainly characterised by an association between development, industrialisation and urbanisation. For Ireland, given the very weak indigenous manufacturing base and also the imbalances in the urban system, this meant a strong reorientation of industrial policy towards the attraction of inward investment and a strong preference among influential policy advisors for an urban-oriented strategy which was most explicitly expressed in proposals for a regional development strategy based on growth centres (Buchanan and Partners 1968). However, this first phase also highlighted a tension, which has persisted, between the objectives for national economic growth, and other objectives in relation to the regional and rural dimensions of development.

The rational theoretical underpinnings of the growth centre model did not find sufficient political support and it was abandoned by the government in 1969. The perceived risks to the 'efficiency' of national development policies from a proactive approach to championing regional 'equity', along with the political challenges of promoting an urban-led approach to an electorate comprising a very large rural component, resulted in a move towards a regional strategy that became heavily reliant on the dispersal of inward investment in manufacturing, coupled with a restriction on supports for Dublin (Walsh 1989). The Buchanan strategy was a classic managerial or control type intervention that was well grounded on a positivist analytical process but very weak on consultation, consensus building and customisation to meet the particularities of the Irish spatial context. The failure to have the Buchanan strategy adopted as government policy left a long shadow over any future attempts to promote a new spatial development strategy. Indeed, one of the challenges faced by those preparing the NSS was to find ways of differentiating it from its failed predecessor, a challenge that was compounded by a lingering reluctance among some economic analysts to recognise that planning paradigms and the conceptualisations of space and place had changed significantly over the intervening years (see for example O'Leary 2001).

The second phase covered the period from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. Government policy statements in 1969 and 1972 effectively identified the regional industrial strategy of the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) as the main instrument for achieving the goals of regional development. The 1970s was also a period of considerable expansion and improvements in farm incomes during the period of transition to full Common Agricultural Policy's guaranteed prices. The redistribution of employment in manufacturing along with the new prosperity in the more commercially oriented farming regions resulted in a major demographic turn around, where net in-migration, coupled with a high birth rate, resulted in a population increase of 465,200 (15.6 per cent) between 1971 and 1981. Most importantly the demographic change was experienced throughout most of the State (Horner *et al* 1987).

However, throughout this period there were also significant weaknesses in the government strategy for regional development. The effects of industrial restructuring in Dublin and other old industrial centres were largely ignored; elsewhere there was an overemphasis on inward investment without sufficient support for indigenous firms, and there was a policy vacuum in relation to the emerging services sector (Walsh 1989). More importantly, the spatial focus shifted to improving the position of the Republic of Ireland as a single region (without explicit reference to intra-regional imbalances) within the framework of the EU regions. Furthermore the political divisions and the ongoing conflicts in Northern Ireland were not conducive to any consideration of an island of Ireland perspective on spatial development.

A critical review of industrial policy in 1982 led to a revision of the role of manufacturing industry in regional development. This was followed by a government White Paper on Industrial Policy in 1984 that proposed a move to a policy of supporting targeted manufacturing sectors where they could make the greatest progress, which was generally regarded as the larger urban centres. The shift in the focus of industrial policy was further supported by the National Economic and Social Council in 1985 when it recommended that in future the designation of areas for industrial support should be based on criteria related to the potential rather than the needs of regions. This was the beginning of a return to a more urban focussed regional development strategy and a move away from the traditional needs or 'regional equity' approach.

In addition to the reorientation of industrial policy, the general stagnation of the Irish economy in the 1980s resulted in a significant reduction in the volume of inward investment and a greatly diminished capacity by the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) to influence the location of new investments, especially towards the weaker regions. Widespread losses in manufacturing employment, a faltering agricultural sector, a weak producer services sector, and increasing unemployment, all combined to bring about a return to high levels of net emigration from both rural and

urban areas (Walsh 1991). These trends resulted in a mobilisation of local interests with powerful champions in the weaker rural areas (McDonagh 2001) that lead to intensive lobbying of government for a renewed approach to securing balanced regional development.

The foundations for a new era of economic development were laid in the mid-to-late 1980s (NESC 1986) resulting in very rapid economic growth in the 1990s during which the third phase in strategic spatial planning emerged. The transformation of the economy and society of Ireland since the early 1990s has been influenced by many factors including strategic repositioning by government and economic development agencies of Ireland as a space or investment territory in the broader context of the international economy (Breathnach 1998) which has resulted in the Irish economy becoming one of the most open in the world. Crucially, the transformation has been mediated through an unbalanced urban system that is dominated by the Dublin city region (McCafferty, 2007).

The complexity and dynamic nature of the recent geography of socio-economic development has been described by Horner (1993, 2000) who noted the emergence of city regions, while McHugh (2001) and Walsh (2007) have identified the intricate webs of relations that link rural and urban areas and which also contribute to the construction of an increasingly complex rural spatial structure. These analyses, combining elements of both the positivist and postmodern traditions, can be contrasted with others more firmly rooted in the traditional bounded spatial approach (e.g. administrative regions) of some regional economists (Morgenroth 2007). Collectively these studies confirmed the existence of significant inter-regional differences in economic performance, especially in relation to per capita productivity levels and also in the endowments of key resources that are likely to influence future development patterns. These resources include physical infrastructure, human capital and institutionalized knowledge creation and transfer mechanisms.

By the late 1990s it had become evident that while the macro economic indicators for Ireland were rapidly converging towards those for the most developed regions of the EU, there was also a strong tendency towards divergence on key socio-economic indicators for the Irish regions. Unbalanced regional development was reflected in widening differentials in productivity, new physical infrastructure investment, new employment opportunities, migration of the youngest and brightest from rural areas and small urban centres, and ultimately depopulation of extensive rural areas.

At the same time escalating house prices in Dublin and other cities were forcing ever increasing numbers into new housing located at very considerable distances from the main workplaces. This phenomenon of long distance commuting (Williams and Shiels 2002; Walsh *et al* 2007)

from rural areas in the outer hinterlands of the cities while other rural areas continued to stagnate has resulted in heated discourses between those concerned about the implications of seemingly uncontrolled urban sprawl on the one hand, and the depopulation of more remote rural areas on the other hand. This issue combined with the concerns about the need to position Ireland advantageously in the EU and global economy, and the unbalanced distribution of economic activity within the State, was an additional factor in establishing the case for a National Spatial Strategy.

The heightened awareness of inter and intra regional differences in the Republic of Ireland were brought into even sharper focus with the emergence of conditions to support a new era of political stability in Northern Ireland. Some economic leaders were quick to identify the possibility of a potential economic corridor linking Belfast and Dublin. For others it raised the prospect of an even greater spatial divide between the eastern and western parts of the island of Ireland, but it also provided opportunities to take a fresh perspective on spatial planning for the northwest and Border areas (Walsh and Murray 2006). For the government of the Republic it provided a unique opportunity to engage in a process of tentatively putting in place measures to support a more coherent approach to territorial development within the context of the territory of the entire island of Ireland, while fully recognizing the political status of Northern Ireland as a region of Great Britain. This contextual dimension has particular relevance for understanding the conceptualisation of the Border areas in the NSS and more broadly for interpreting the key long term proposal in the NSS for the gradual development of an Atlantic Corridor linking the main cities in the west and south.

#### *Related Policy Initiatives and Other Studies*

The trends just outlined emerged from a period during which the economic growth rates were much higher than anybody had anticipated and for which there was no overall spatial framework, nor were there appropriate administrative structures to ensure co-ordination and integration of policies and strategies. Serious concerns about the emerging spatial patterns of development were articulated in discourses around a number of related policy areas which helped to identify the need for a policy initiative in the area of high level strategic spatial planning. In addition, the case for a national spatial strategy was promoted by a wide range of powerful advisory bodies as well as by some organisations with a specific interest in regional development and spatial planning (Walsh 1999b).

The government's strategy for Sustainable Development (GoI 1997) affirmed the centrality of the environment in the process of development and it emphasised the role of the physical planning system in sectoral integration on a territorial basis. The general thrust of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, which for the first time introduced the concept

of planning and *sustainable* development, is towards a comprehensive and integrated approach to spatial planning extending from the local authority level through the regional to the national level so that the overall objective of balanced and sustainable development can be achieved in a manner compatible with the supranational perspective represented by the ESDP.

The first White Paper on Rural Development, *Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland* included a recommendation that the objectives for rural development should be addressed within a framework for spatial development that takes account of the relationships between rural and urban areas and also of the diverse functional roles of towns and villages for those residing in the countryside (GoI 1999a).

In the area of enterprise development the national policy advisory and co-ordination board for industrial development and science technology published, in 1996, *A Strategy for Enterprise in Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in which a forceful case was made for an urban-led regional policy (Forfas 1996). It was followed in January 2000 with *Enterprise 2010*, which recommended a spatial strategy that would ensure: *inter alia*, co-ordinated provision of access, communication and utilities infrastructure, serviced land at an appropriate scale for towns of different size and a good regional spread of educational and training facilities (Forfas 2000).

The first major opportunity to get the specific concept of a national spatial strategy inserted into the overall thrust of development policies came with the preparation of the third National Development Plan for the period 2000-2006. The previous plans for 1989-1993 and 1994-1999 were particularly weak on regional development and spatial planning (Walsh 1993).

In advance of preparing the National Development Plan for the period 2000-2006 the Department of Finance commissioned a report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on the priorities for investment. Significantly, it recommended that a national spatial strategy focused on a hierarchical hub and spoke settlement model should be adopted as the framework for a massive investment programme over the medium to long term (FitzGerald *et al*, 1999).

Contemporaneously with the preparation of the ESRI Report and ongoing work on the National Development Plan by the Department of Finance, the National Economic and Social Council (NESCC) was also preparing an outline strategy for development for the first decade of the twenty first century (NESCC 1999). It set out a new vision which included the objective of sustainable and balanced development between regions and between urban and rural areas. In placing considerable emphasis on a comprehensive programme of infrastructural investment to encompass economic, social and environmental dimensions the NESCC Report



strongly recommended a National Spatial Development Strategy. This was a crucial report as the NESC is chaired by the highest ranking civil servant and includes among its membership the most senior national representatives of each of the social partners as well as senior officials from key government departments. It is a key arena for consensus building at the highest level and its recommendations are normally taken seriously by the government.

Finally, the National Development Plan 2000-2006 (NDP) published in November 1999 identified balanced regional development as a core objective. This was the first time that a National Development Plan gave such prominence to regional policy for which the following objective was identified:

to achieve more balanced regional development in order to reduce the disparities between and within the two regions and to develop the potential of both to contribute to the greatest possible extent to the continuing prosperity of the country. (GoIb1999:43 (3.19).

In support of this objective the NDP identified Dublin, Cork, Limerick–Shannon, Waterford and Galway as ‘Gateways’ or locations where public and private investment would be prioritised in order to drive the development of their wider regions. Furthermore, the NDP committed the Department of the Environment and Local Government to prepare an overall spatial development strategy for the whole country, including the identification of a limited number of additional regional gateways to complement those already identified in the NDP.

The contextual overview has demonstrated the importance of evidence-based empirical analysis, with a strong emphasis on visual representation as a tool to promote a shared understanding of the need for a spatial policy initiative. It has also illustrated that a consensus around the need for an NSS only emerged after a lengthy process involving many seemingly unrelated initiatives. Much of the early public discourse was facilitated through conferences and publications of the Irish Branch of the Regional Studies Association (McCafferty and Walsh 1997; Walsh 1998) rather than directly through the professional planning institutes which became active at later stages. Finally, an important feature of the process that led to the decision to prepare an NSS was the participation of a small number of individuals who were unaffiliated to any of the major stakeholders, in almost all of the preparatory steps mentioned above which provided a basis for maintaining consistency in relation to the overall objectives that an NSS should address.

### **The preparation process of the national spatial strategy**

The formal process of preparing the NSS was launched in Spring 2000 following the establishment of a Spatial Planning Unit (SPU) within the

Department of the Environment and Local Government. The SPU was a small cohesive group of only four professional planners who were assisted by a senior level administrative civil servant. In recognition of the cross cutting nature of spatial planning a Steering Group of high level representatives from all relevant government departments was established to assist the SPU. This was an important forum which helped to negotiate a consensus across departments with potentially conflicting goals.

In addition an Expert Advisory Committee, chaired by the former Chief Executive of the agency responsible for attracting inward investment to Ireland, was established. It included academic and other professional experts from different parts of Ireland, along with representatives from Northern Ireland and Scotland. Furthermore, the broader European reference frame was represented by a senior member of the ESPON programme management team. This Group assisted the SPU by critically assessing and refining at an early stage new concepts and approaches to planning, and also by ensuring that the NSS retained a clear focus on each of the three keywords: National, Spatial, and Strategy.

Collectively, the personnel of the SPU and the Expert Advisory Group brought a considerable amount of planning expertise and skills to the process which provided the opportunity to develop the NSS in a way that went distinctively further in a conceptual and methodological sense than the NDP or any of the other strategies or reports mentioned in the previous section. The planning methodologies that became important in the preparation process included visual representations of the current and prospective situations based on best available evidence, extensive consultations guided by research, and negotiations aimed at achieving a politically acceptable and administratively workable set of proposals.

The preparation of the strategy was guided by three parallel and complementary methodological processes. The first was an extensive programme of both proactive and reactive consultation; the second was a major research programme, and the third involved formal arrangements to secure buy-in across a number of government departments.

#### *Consultation Phase 1*

From the outset, the Minister responsible for producing the National Spatial Strategy was determined to develop the strongest possible level of consensus about the need for a national spatial strategy and what it might contain. To this end, specialist communications experts were procured to assist the SPU team in developing sophisticated techniques for both listening to the views of various groups and interests and communicating perspectives, conclusions from research and the finished product itself.

Very quickly the SPU produced a scoping report that set out the objectives and methodology for preparing the strategy (DELG 2000a).

The *Scope and Delivery* report sets out clearly the national and international context. In particular, it acknowledges the relevance of the aims and options contained in the ESDP. It then identifies the following objectives for the NSS:

- Continuing national economic and employment growth;
- Continuing improvement in Ireland's international competitiveness;
- Fostering balanced regional development;
- Improving the quality of life for all sections of society; and
- Maintaining and enhancing the quality and diversity of the natural environment and cultural heritage.

In order to achieve these objectives through spatial planning the report identified ten key challenges that the NSS would need to address. Apart from the challenge of fully exploring the concept of 'balanced regional development', other challenges related to reconciling the potentially competing objectives of economic competitiveness with balanced development; developing the concept of Gateways that was initially proposed in the NDP; assessing infrastructural requirements; addressing areas of social exclusion, and ensuring that the NSS would build upon the relationship between the two political entities on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and its EU partners.

This was followed by an outline of the methodology that would be adopted for the preparation process which would include opportunities for participation by a broad range of stakeholders at different stages. The outline timeframe was very ambitious with a target of completing the process by the end of 2001. The scoping report was widely disseminated and generally given an enthusiastic welcome for its level of detail and its commitment to facilitating participation while at the same time aiming for a relatively short timeframe. To the extent that there was any dissent it mostly related to concerns about delays that an extensive consultation process might incur.

Targeting of key audiences was a key aspect of the consultation and communications strategy. The first large event was attended by approximately 300 invited 'leaders' from the public, private and voluntary sectors, and was addressed by 'champions' of the NSS proposal. These included the Minister with overall responsibility for developing the NSS who was an enthusiastic advocate. This "Leaders Forum" was followed by workshops organised with the assistance of the eight Regional Authorities. Other high priority target groups included senior officials in national and regional development agencies, each of the social partners, national advisory fora such as the National Economic and Social Council and the National Partnership for Sustainable Development (Comhar).

The consultation process was guided by presentations of findings arising from the ongoing research programme, and also at crucial stages by papers published by the SPU. The first, disseminated in February 2000, sought to elicit views on an indicative list of issues that were grouped under six broad headings (DELG 2000b):

- Urban Ireland and balanced regional development
- Rural Ireland and balanced regional development
- People and balanced regional development
- Communications infrastructure and balanced regional development
- Management of the environment and balanced regional development
- Delivery mechanisms and balanced regional development.

While the manner of listing issues around urban and rural Ireland might have conveyed a sense of a conceptualisation based on separate, self-contained and unconnected spaces, in practice the emphasis was strongly on the relationships between areas, including an explicit reference to the international and national roles of Dublin, and an explicit recognition of the diversity of rural area types based on a specially commissioned rural typology study.

The Department of the Environment received 73 submissions in response to the *Issues* paper from a wide range of sources that included local and regional authorities, other public bodies, and community-based groups and individuals. Among the key responses were widely held views that the NSS should be unambiguously recognised as the overarching framework for local and regional strategies, and that the interaction with other policy areas should be curtailed to the spatial dimension. Other concerns that emerged from the submissions were around areas such as quality of life, transport and accessibility especially in rural areas, employment prospects particularly outside the main cities, declining population in rural areas, protection of landscapes of national importance, and policies in relation to urban sprawl, ribbon development and single rural dwellings.

From these responses it was evident that expectations were high with regard to the NSS and also that a strong social dimension needed to be included which had to be reconciled with the economic competitiveness concerns of the Department of Finance, representatives of the business community such as the Chambers of Commerce, and others. The overriding conceptual issue that emerged however was to do with balanced regional development, about which there was much confusion and uncertainty.

Recognising the central importance of establishing an agreed perspective on how balanced regional development might be defined, the *Issues* paper

was followed in June 2000 by a Technical Working Paper on the concept of Balanced Regional Development (BRD). This paper was crucial to the direction that the NSS would eventually take. It was published early in the process, following deliberations by the Expert Advisory Group. Two competing interpretations of BRD were considered where the distinction was between 'balance as equality' and 'balance as full utilisation of potential'. Drawing on the report of the *Study Programme on European Spatial Planning* (Nordregio 2000) the SPU recommended the 'potential' interpretation and provided the following definition of balanced regional development:

A structured spatial development approach, which seeks to ensure that no area or space is under or overdeveloped to the extent that this detracts from that area's potential to contribute to realising the optimal performance of the country as a whole in economic, social, environmental and physical terms (DELG 2000c:3).

The concept of 'potential' is a central component of the approach to BRD outlined above. This was defined as 'the combination of socio-economic and locational factors and the interaction between them that create the conditions and possibilities for economic development', (DELG 2000c:4). The BRD paper brought the discussion a stage further by focusing on the concepts of space and place which, following the SPESP report, were defined as follows:

'a 'space' is a territorial arrangement where any given place can be described by comparison with other locations within that territory', and 'a 'place' is any geographical location that can be described in comparison to other locations in terms of unique characteristics' (DELG 2000c:4).

The central task of the NSS was then presented as being about 'spatial positioning' of any given 'place' in relation to a 'space'. This rather abstract formulation provides some insights into the conceptual challenges faced by the members of the SPU. While rejecting the traditional 'needs' or 'regional equity' arguments as the rationale for the NSS, the spatial translation of the alternative 'potential' approach was difficult to achieve with clarity. However, the difficulties in defining the concept of potential within a regional context which has roots in the 'balanced competitiveness' concept used in the ESDP, may well have been helpful at that juncture in the preparation process. A clear rejection of the spatial equity approach could be justified from a rational analytical perspective, and this was necessary in order to maintain the confidence of economic stakeholders in the process who feared that the NSS could lead to a weakening of the national economic performance by detracting investment from Dublin. This concern was acknowledged from the

outset by the Minister for the Environment when he addressed the first Leaders' Forum, at which he confirmed that the NSS would ensure that the international competitiveness of Dublin would be maintained.

The presentation of the 'potential' model was, however, for the most part rooted in conceptions of space and place that are close to the positivist tradition in that 'space' is used to describe territorial containers in which 'places' have locally defined and constructed characteristics. This approach does not adequately reflect the extent to which places in Ireland are economically and socially embedded in international networks of production and consumption.

The Balanced Regional Development paper elicited many responses with the majority supportive of the proposed interpretation. Not surprisingly some of the more cautious responses were from representatives of areas that might have expected to gain more from the spatial equity approach, while on the other hand the most enthusiastic support came from the economic and business interests and representatives of Dublin. There was little response from the academic community of planners and related disciplines so that the opportunity for critical analysis that might lead to further refinement of the core concepts did not arise.

#### *The NSS Research Programme*

An extensive research programme was embarked upon in tandem with the first phase of the consultation process. The abandonment of regional planning for almost twenty years had left a major void in the knowledge base concerning the patterns, and underlying dynamics, of spatial development in Ireland. The SPU identified a list of almost 30 research projects that needed to be undertaken over a very short time frame. In practice this mammoth task was shared between the members of the SPU and several consultancies including university based research units. This approach brought additional planning expertise into the process and resulted in an extensive body of new knowledge which was publicised in summary format on the NSS website.

A selection of the main outcomes from the research programme are summarised in Walsh (2004). The research projects provided a significant resource of new information on spatial patterns that were of direct relevance to the formulation of the NSS proposals. While much of the new information was more descriptive than analytical in nature, which is not surprising given the very limited time frame for this work, it was used extensively in the workshops in order to maintain the focus on high level national issues and to avoid the risks associated with regional or local level introspection. More generally, the research component highlighted that there were significant gaps in the knowledge base on contemporary patterns of spatial development, especially at a fine geographical scale, and there were even greater gaps in the understanding of the underlying dynamics shaping new spatial patterns. For example, very little is known

of the extent of the regional, national and international networks that places are situated within; the new types of rural-urban relations; or the functional roles of small and medium size urban centres. It also became evident that there are serious deficits in the range and quality of easily accessible spatial data, and that the capacity for spatial data analysis and modelling was very weak. The scale of the challenges to be addressed within the time frame of the NSS was estimated by reference to specially prepared population projections.

#### *Consultation Phase 2*

The second phase in the consultation process commenced in September 2001 when the SPU published the final Consultation Paper *Indications for the Way Ahead* (DELG 2001). The 33 page document restates the purpose, vision and principles of the NSS. It then elaborates on the proposed approach to balanced regional development which it suggests should be 'a targeted approach based on the focussed strengthening of a small number of urban centres' (DELG 2001: 4). It also asserts that this small number of strong centres will:

- energise the contribution that different areas can make to balanced regional development,
- facilitate the development of North/South interactions,
- counterbalance the pull of the Greater Dublin Area and the Dublin-Belfast corridor,
- support complementary roles for urban and rural areas, and
- lift the level of development of entire areas.

In order to achieve these objectives five concepts were introduced: functional areas; potential; critical mass; gateways; and linkages. Taken together this set of concepts provided the basis for elaborating a more comprehensive approach to balanced regional development. The introduction of the concept of functional areas as an explicit alternative to thinking of territorial organisation in mainly administrative boundary terms was a major innovation to discussions about regional development and planning in Ireland. By focusing on the relationships between places the SPU selected twelve functional areas that covered the entire State. The boundaries of such areas were depicted as overlapping and imprecise, and were designed to convey a sense that in the latter phase of the NSS preparation the precision associated with formal empirical analysis needed to be modified to take account of additional informal knowledge derived in a somewhat *ad hoc* fashion from the collective wisdom of experienced planners and other spatial development researchers. According to the DELG (2001:15) the functional areas 'typically tend to share common characteristics and issues, and they are spaces where people live their working, schooling, shopping and leisure lives and with which many can identify. This sense of identification spans the urban/rural divide and in places extends across county boundaries'.

Each of the areas contains an urban centre or a number of centres, which are central to the economic functioning of that area.

The functional areas approach to balanced regional development relies heavily on the concepts of potential and critical mass. Potential is now defined as the capacity which an area possesses for development arising from its endowment of natural resources, population, labour, economic and social capital and its location relative to markets. Different areas have varying types and levels of potential. Critical mass is defined as the size, concentration and characteristics of populations that enable a range of services and facilities to be supported and which, in turn, can attract and support higher levels of economic activity. It is, therefore, an important concept in optimising local and regional potential. Critical mass can be achieved in different ways. It normally requires a concerted effort to develop a single town or city to play a larger role and deliver benefits to its wider hinterland. Alternatively, in some areas it might involve providing a package of supports to link a number of neighbouring towns in a polycentric network in order to collectively achieve a critical level of supporting infrastructures, facilities and services. Concentration of resources to achieve stronger centres and, thereby, the development of related areas is a crucial dynamic in bringing about more balanced regional development.

The National Development Plan designated the five largest urban centres as Gateways. These centres are at strategic locations and they also possess good social and economic infrastructure and support services including higher education institutions. The *Indications* paper signalled that there was scope for three or four additional Gateways though it refrained from identifying them. It further asserted that there would be a role for smaller centres, both individually and as components of regional urban networks. Rural areas for the most part were envisioned as constituting the hinterlands of urban centres upon which they depend for services and economic opportunities.

This territorial perspective, which allows for adaptations in response to the profiles of different regions, seeks to distance the NSS discourse from the language of Growth Centres that was associated with the earlier Buchanan report. In doing so it relies upon a broader concept of sustainable development than one primarily oriented towards economic growth. Thus it promotes a territorial approach based on spaces (represented by the functional areas) rather than one based on a small number of places as was the case with growth centre strategies. The adoption of 'spaces' as the territorial units for the draft NSS was a useful heuristic device in shifting the focus of most stakeholders from a short term and absolutist spatial perspective to a more dynamic and longer term approach where spatial positioning within Ireland and in the wider international arena became important. Finally, the *Indications* paper noted the importance of linkages between places or spaces which are regarded



as vitally important for building critical mass, enabling complementary strengths to develop in different places, and facilitating policies and strategies to promote development of a single island economy.

The *Indications* paper was very widely distributed using a variety of media, and followed up by ten Consultative Forums including seven at regional level and three at national level that were facilitated through the National Economic and Social Council, the National Partnership for Sustainable Development, and a Professional Bodies forum that included planners, architects and engineers. The paper was also considered formally by most of the local authorities. This consultation phase took place at a sensitive time as a general election was due to be held before summer 2002. For this and other tactical reasons the content of the *Indications* paper remained parsimonious on specifics, such as identifying additional gateways or potential hub centres. The focus was kept at the conceptual level.

There were in total 259 written responses to the paper from a wide variety of organisational and personal interests. The overwhelming reaction was supportive of the approach and proposals contained in the paper. Half of the responses subscribed without reservation to the overall approach towards balanced regional development and another 39 per cent were also supportive subject to some clarifications.

There were, however, some key areas that generated considerable discussion. The main focus of the new discourse was on the concept of functional areas (FAs), which was followed by comments on the Gateways and other settlement proposals, and also by suggestions in relation to implementation. The functional area concept and the accompanying map elicited some positive support, as a starting position, from the Irish Planning Institute and the Institute of Engineers in Ireland, but overall there were strong reservations with almost 30 per cent of the submissions stating that the concept of functional areas as outlined in the paper did not provide a useful explanation for the manner in which the country functions spatially. The main concerns were that the boundaries of the functional areas were not coterminous with those of the counties and regions. Particularly strong reservations were expressed by the local authorities in the Midlands and Southeast as the draft FA map suggested a distinctive FA located between these two regions.

The emphasis in the *Indications* paper on the role of Gateways in developing the FAs was also a cause for concern among those representing rural interests. In particular there was a view shared by many that the Strategy was likely to be urban led, with potentially detrimental impacts on rural areas. Allied to this was a concern that planning issues in respect of rural housing were not adequately addressed, which in itself is a discourse of contestation. A related issue mentioned by the Irish Planning Institute and other professionals was a need to identify and

protect outstanding landscapes as components of the national culture and heritage, while also recognising that they may constitute significant economic assets especially in some of the more disadvantaged rural areas. A different concern expressed by the National Partnership for Sustainable Development was that the *Indications* paper did not explicitly attempt to integrate sustainable development with spatial planning.

In summary the second consultation phase was characterised as a process led by the experts in the SPU and their advisors, that involved extensive well targeted consultation, and which sought views on a number of key concepts that could eventually underpin the final version of the NSS. At a conceptual level the paper introduced a relational perspective on space with spatial development considered as a dynamic process mediated through a hierarchical network of places. The precision of positivist analysis was replaced by somewhat fuzzy visualisation, and in keeping with the structuralist paradigm the roles of agencies such as local authorities, sectoral development bodies, key infrastructural providers, and professional organisations as stakeholders in spatial development were recognised. The feedback from the consultation process necessitated a revision of some key concepts (e.g. functional areas) and a need to incorporate what may be described as post-modern concerns that acknowledge diversity and the multiple responsibilities of spatial planning such as sustainable development, quality of life, protection of outstanding landscapes, and maintenance of viable rural communities. This phase also emphasised the necessity for clarity and consistency among those responsible for developing the strategy on what ought to be the core issues addressed in the NSS, and what other contexts might be more appropriate for issues that do not strictly come within the scope of the NSS.

The consultation process continued throughout the first half of 2002, though in a less visible manner as the place specific sensitivities implicit in the National Spatial Strategy had to be carefully managed in the volatile context of a national election campaign. While all political parties were in agreement on the broad objective of balanced regional development and on the need for better planning in urban and rural areas it was prudent in the context of an electoral campaign to avoid any politically contrived debate on the roles that particular places might be assigned.

#### *Modes of Implementation*

The *Indications* paper provided several proposals in relation to how the NSS might be implemented. These included the establishment of a Managing Authority at central level that would be supported by an inter-departmental network representing all of the relevant government departments, and also mechanisms for ensuring co-ordinated actions by various State agencies and infrastructure providers. In this way it was envisaged that the implementation, or perhaps more appropriately the

application, of the NSS would build on the partnership model of negotiated co-operation and collaboration that had been fostered throughout the preparation process. It was also proposed that in future all sectoral strategies would need to be consistent with the NSS objectives and overall framework, and furthermore that the application of the NSS would be supported in a consistent way by new Regional Planning Guidelines and county/city development plans while the City and County Development Boards would be required to provide frameworks for integrated development in accordance with the NSS. These proposals were generally welcomed and could be interpreted as evidence of support for a balanced approach that envisaged a combination of some elements of the positivist tradition of command and control via land use regulation, and also elements of the post-modern paradigm with its emphasis on participation, consensus building and shared governance in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions. In keeping with the overarching goal of greater coordination of spatial planning strategies between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland the *Indications* paper also suggested that the North/South Ministerial Council might assume a role in this area.

### **The content of the national spatial strategy**

The final version of the National Spatial Strategy which builds upon the feedback to the *Indications* paper was published in December 2002. It is a substantial document written in a style that seeks to engage the various stakeholders in the expectation that there will be sufficient institutional and political support to ensure that the central messages distinguishing the NSS from other strategies are adopted throughout the public policy arena. Following a brief outline of the rationale and context for the NSS, Section Two provides an overview of the changing spatial structure of Ireland commencing with the external drivers and also summarising recent population and household projections. Section Three contains the core elements of the national strategy and sets out 'how Ireland can be spatially structured and developed over the next twenty years in a way that is internationally competitive, socially cohesive and environmentally sustainable' (DELG 2002:38). This is followed in Section Four by a preliminary outline of how each region will participate in the NSS. Section Five sets out indicative policies on the spatial dimensions of policies related to enterprise development, housing, access to services, and environmental management. In relation to the latter dimension which was identified as a weakness in some responses to the *Indications* paper, there is an affirmation that 'the NSS will be implemented within the framework of strong and ambitious policies for the protection of the environment and policies to integrate environmental considerations into sectoral policies' (DELG 2002:114). Various aspects of implementation are taken up in Section Six. In this part the content of the NSS is reviewed in line with the framework set out in the Chapter One in this volume.

*Interpretation of Spatiality, Conceptions of Place and Spatial Organisation Principles*

The opening parts of Section One clearly establish that a relational perspective on the Republic of Ireland 'space' is being adopted. Figure 2.1 (DELG 2002:21) illustrates graphically the links between Ireland and the UK, the EU core region and wider global context, while the inset on the same Figure captures some of the connections between the North and South of Ireland. Figure 2.2 (DELG 2002:23) has four maps showing the cities and towns throughout the island of Ireland. Taken together the first two Figures in the NSS establish that the NSS proposals seek to address issues concerning the functional and physical connectedness of different places to spaces and places beyond the territory within which the NSS will be implemented.

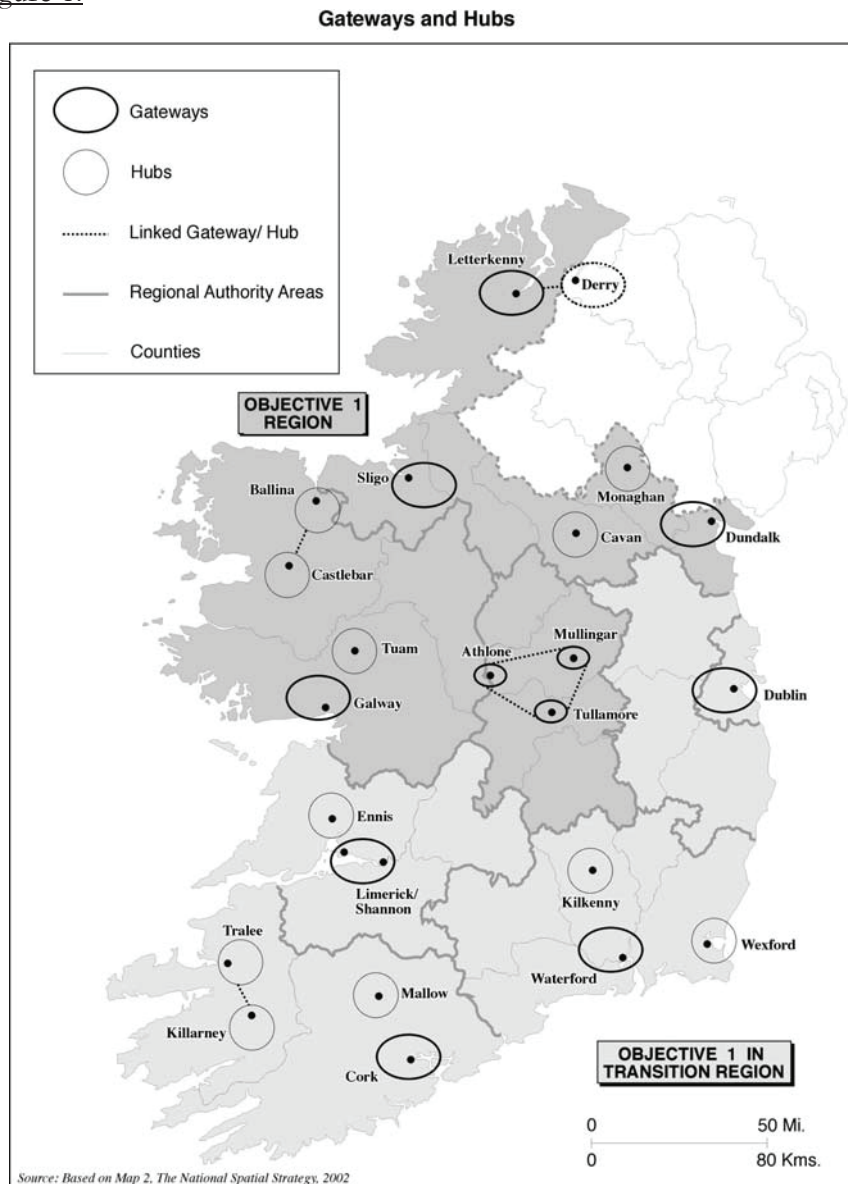
The first attempt to promote a functional spatial perspective according to the functional areas model in the *Indications* paper resulted in concerns that have been summarised above. It became clear that the draft Functional Areas map could not be relied upon as a tool in the NSS. In its place the NSS adopts an alternative functionalist interpretation of the strategic roles that are regarded as appropriate for each part of the country. Taking account of the vital national and international roles of the Dublin city region, the potentials of other cities and towns, and the different types of rural areas (DELG 2002: 54) the NSS outlines five strategic spatial roles. While these are illustrated as zones with fuzzy boundaries (DELG 2002: 57) with each place assigned to only one strategic role, in practice it was envisaged that each of the roles could be applicable to the different parts of each region. In broad terms the strategic roles are guided by the following principles to support a dynamic conception of spatial relations:

- *Consolidating* the Dublin city region,
- *Strengthening* the urban structure in a zone extending from Cork and Waterford via Limerick and Galway to Sligo and Letterkenny / Derry as an alternative development axis to a potential East coast corridor linking the Dublin and Belfast city regions,
- *Reinforcing* the intervening parts of the Midlands by seeking to create the critical mass necessary to sustain an inland Gateway,
- *Revitalising* western areas through urban led economic diversification and further exploitation of local potential based on land and marine resources,
- *Co-operating* in an all-island context with a particular focus on places either side of the Border.

In order to give effect to these roles the NSS proposes a settlement strategy based on Gateways and Hub towns, which is complemented by proposals for other towns and the rural areas. A defining set of attributes, organised according to eleven headings, is provided for the Gateways and Hubs (DELG 2002: 40). These places are conceptualised in a multi-dimensional and multi-functional way that goes well beyond

the ‘agglomeration economies’ arguments of regional economists who prefer to think in terms of growth centres (O’Leary 2007). The NSS identifies four additional Gateways to supplement the five already named in the National Development Plan. Each of the new Gateways (Dundalk, Sligo, Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar, and Letterkenny-Derry) is located in the weaker Objective 1 region (Figure 1).

Figure 1.



The conceptualisation underlying the Gateways and Hubs draws heavily upon ideas contained in the ESDP. For example, the Midland Gateway is presented as a polycentric model linking three towns, while in the northwest the proposal to develop Letterkenny as a Gateway is contingent upon developing closer functional linkages with the much

larger city of Derry in Northern Ireland. Over the long term the NSS envisages the emergence of an Atlantic Gateway corridor linking Galway, Limerick, Cork and Waterford in order to achieve the critical mass to be a significant internationally competitive economic zone that will also provide an alternative to the east coast development. In order to promote balanced development within the regions nine Hub centres are identified, including two that are duo-centric reflecting local complementarities in functional roles.

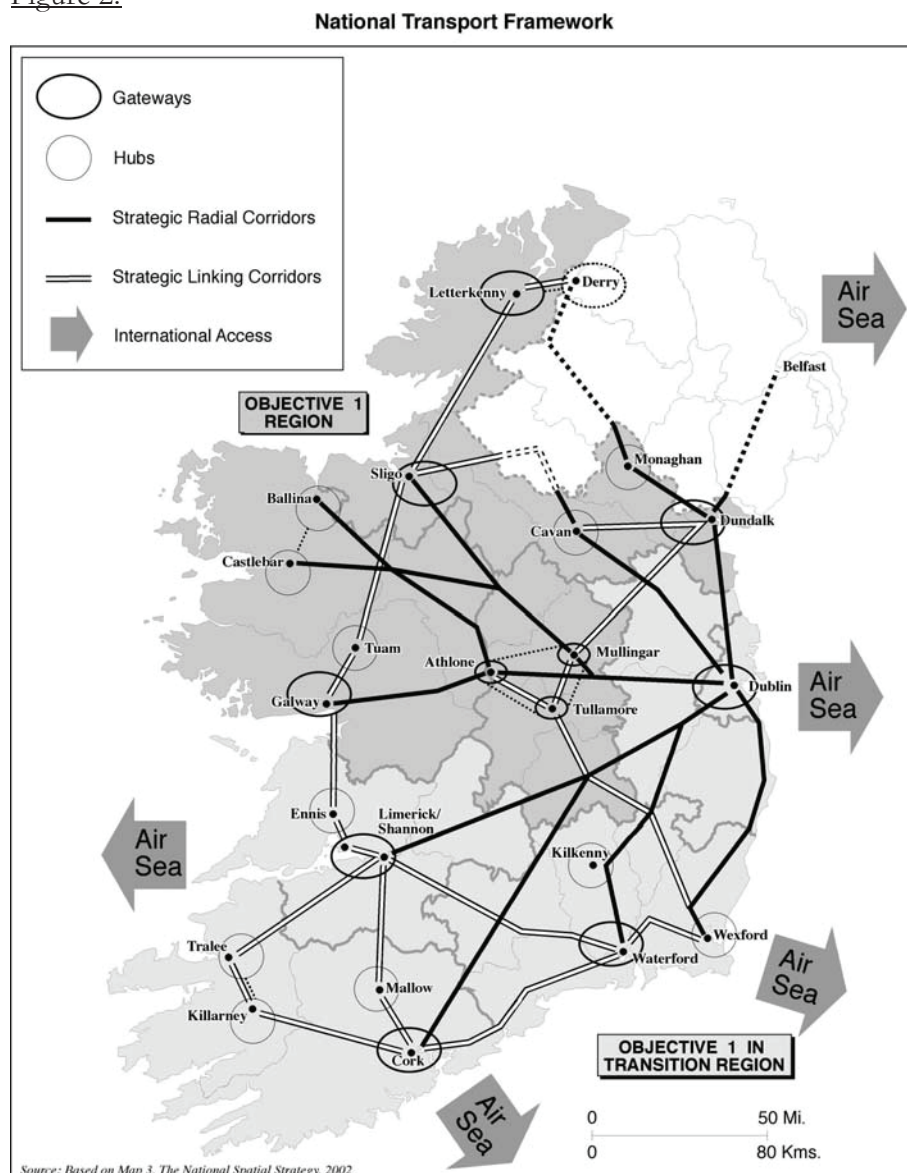
The NSS further seeks to restructure the prevailing patterns of spatial relations through alterations to the transport network (Figure 2). The main proposals include upgrading the strategic radial routes linking each of the Gateways to Dublin, and also by providing improved cross-radial linking corridors to facilitate greater interactions between and within the regions, especially in the western and southern parts of the country. In addition the NSS envisages improving the transport links to the northwest through a co-operative development of the route throughout Northern Ireland. It is also envisaged that enhanced international linkages via air and sea will be required, and in this regard the opportunities for enhancing accessibility through Northern Ireland are noted (DELG 2002: 61).

Throughout 2003 and the first half of 2004 the Regional Authorities, with the assistance of planners from the Department, prepared Regional Planning Guidelines which together with the NSS will provide the framework for future county and city development plans. Securing and maintaining a consensus on strategic spatial priorities at the local level is a major challenge. However, through a refocusing of spatial planning around more strategic issues it is anticipated that it will be possible to bring about a mindset shift away from traditional preoccupations with land zonings and parochialism, and that less reliance will need to be placed on regulation by central government, even though that option has had to be invoked on a few occasions over recent years.

While the NSS relies upon new concepts of spatiality it has been subject to some criticisms. For many professional planners, some regional economists (Morgenroth 2003), and especially representatives of the business community there are concerns that too many Gateways and Hubs have been proposed and that this will lead to a weakening of strategic focus on priority locations that could contribute most to achieving balanced regional development. There has also been criticism that the assumptions underlying the polycentric elements of the strategy may not be well grounded (McCafferty 2002). The absence of designated hub towns from some areas with extensive populations has been noted by Walsh *et al* (2006) while recent analyses based on the 2002 Census of Population (published after the NSS) provide evidence for a more vigorous approach to implementation and revision of the population targets for the Gateways (Walsh 2007). For those concerned more with

the rural dimension there is a concern that the NSS is overly reliant on urban based potential and that it does not adequately deal with the prospects for rural areas.

Figure 2.



Many of these limitations have been addressed in initiatives involving core members of the SPU which have resulted in a number of reports since the publication of the NSS. The initiatives include government strategies for transport, and science, technology and innovation (DETE 2006); a foresight study for Rural Ireland 2025 (Rural Foresight Group 2005); a framework for co-operation in relation to investment in infrastructure in Northern Ireland and the Republic (InterTradeIreland 2006); and detailed proposals in relation to developing the Gateways and Hubs (DEHLG and Forfas 2006; DEHLG 2006b and 2007).

The role of the NSS as the National strategy is to provide a high level overarching framework that is subsequently further elaborated at regional and local levels.

In summary, the NSS is innovative in terms of its conceptualisation of space and spatial relations. Many of the concepts required further elaboration which has been achieved through a continuation of the consensus building approach that characterised the preparation process, and through the building of active networks involving key actors throughout the system of public administration, including cooperative engagements with counterparts in Northern Ireland. Despite the reservations expressed by some the NSS has a high level of political and institutional support as evidenced by the prominence it has received in the National Development Plan. The experience to date demonstrates that in order to develop and secure on-going support for a challenging and innovative spatial strategy the conceptualisation and methodologies require a blending of traditional positivist expert-led analysis with an understanding of institutional structures and processes, and a methodology firmly grounded in post-modern approaches to negotiation, agenda setting and consensus building.

#### *Concept of the Future and Time*

The preparation of the NSS was informed by detailed assessments of recent trends in many spheres of activity that impact upon spatial development. The most important outcome for the NSS was a realisation that a new socio-economic context had emerged since the early 1990s and furthermore that the change is likely to remain on-going, and will continue to be significantly influenced by emerging impacts from Europeanisation and globalisation process. The impacts of these international processes, which are poorly understood, will be even greater in Ireland than in neighbouring states due to the exceptionally high level of openness of the economy. Thus the NSS attempts to provide a twenty year framework for an uncertain future. While every effort was made to ascertain the most likely macroeconomic trends, and a set of population projections were prepared based on alternative assumptions concerning demographic indicators and macroeconomic trajectories, the Strategy opts for a future that is ultimately guided by a quasi linear interpolation of the conditions at the turn of the century. The reasonably well understood contemporary context is uncritically projected into a future sheltered from any radical or uncomfortable shocks. This is all that was feasible within the limited time frame. With more time and resources the preparation process could have benefited from a foresight type assessment that would have developed a number of alternative scenarios which could then be evaluated. Instead, the key futuristic challenge is presented starkly by reference to future patterns of population distribution with or without the NSS.



Despite the uncertainty concerning the future the NSS adopts a confident positivist approach that envisages a twenty year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions. Furthermore, through closer matching of where people live and where they work, different parts of Ireland will for the future be able to sustain a better quality of life for people, a strong competitive economic position, and an environment of the highest quality (DELG 2002 10). These statements fit very comfortably within the positivist tradition of plan making and a belief that the future can indeed be shaped through planning. In order to achieve its objectives the implementation section identifies structures and mechanisms that will be put in place to ensure that the desired outcomes can be achieved. Further work on mobilising key actors and on integrating the NSS approach into other plans and programmes was envisaged for the period 2003-2006 after which implementation leading to tangible benefits will proceed. This phase will be facilitated by the investment programmes contained in the National Development Plan and its successors which tend to operate on five to seven year basis.

#### *Visualisation and Representation*

In contrast to the positivist approach that underpinned much of the analysis and also the conceptualisation of the future, the use of imagery in the Strategy statement and also in some of the earlier presentations during the consultation phase, displays a distinctly post-modern approach. Each of the key maps is deliberately fuzzy at the edges and tends to be more suggestive than prescriptive. Among the key messages emerging from the maps are the importance of spatial differentiation, connectivity, complementarities and inclusiveness. The photographic imagery, while limited in its coverage, captures a sense of a country breaking away from congestion and dull urban construction in the city to brighter, well-connected, free-flowing and energised regions inhabited by smiling happy children in sustainable communities and environments. The underlying messages are that the NSS can contribute to an enhancement of quality of life and sustainability throughout the regions by promoting a settlement framework that seeks to be inclusive without impinging on the established institutional and administrative physical and other boundaries.

A notable aspect of the visualisation techniques is the extent to which they are used, as alternatives to narrative in some cases, to convey messages about strategic spatial planning in an island of Ireland context (Hoch, 2007). The confidence of the political administration in the Republic in this regard contrasts with the more cautious approach adopted in the Northern Ireland strategy (see Chapter Five in this volume).

### *Understanding of Scale*

The National Spatial Strategy as the title implies is primarily a planning framework for the State. However, various geographical scales that impinge upon spatial planning at the nation State level are invoked. In the opening section that particular scale is correctly positioned within larger international contexts. A strong political economy perspective underpins the analysis of the relationship between the national and international scales with references to globalisation, the role of the EU, international obligations in relation to sustainable development, and the role of urban centres as places through which international forces are mediated and through which participation in international production, consumption and governance networks are secured. In relation to the island of Ireland scale, the narrative and visualisation falls more within the post-structuralism and post-modern traditions as it is necessary to take account of the underlying political contestation and variable discourses that have influenced development patterns in the past, and also the variety of more recent political initiatives that may provide opportunities for new forms of territorial cooperation in areas related to economic development and provision of public services as diverse as healthcare and electricity.

The presentation of the internal dimensions of the strategy confirms a nested hierarchical approach to scale in spatial planning that extends from the local through the region to the national level, and vice versa, and which is strongly grounded in the positivist tradition of spatial analysis. The hierarchical vision is elaborated further in the use of spatial categories such as Gateways and Hubs with polycentric networks being invoked to create additional critical mass at a number of scales extending from the Atlantic Gateway to the ternary Midland Gateway and duo-centric Hubs in the West and Southwest. However, the anticipated complementary horizontal integration to be achieved by means of the Regional Planning Guidelines through application of the potentiality principle in pursuit of balanced development owes much to the post-positivist traditions of planning.

In summary in this area, as in so many other aspects of the Strategy, there is evidence of a plurality of conceptual approaches that are appropriate to the diverse objectives underlying the complex business of strategic spatial planning.

### **Conclusions**

The National Spatial Strategy for the Republic of Ireland was embarked upon after a lengthy period during which there had not been any framework for promoting balanced regional development. However, in the context of rapidly increasing prosperity, and the prospect of a restoration of peaceful conditions in Northern Ireland, a number of somewhat unrelated initiatives culminated in a government commitment to prepare a twenty year strategy that would facilitate the promotion of

balanced regional development. The first lesson that became apparent is that the context for preparing the NSS was completely different to that which prevailed when the last previous attempt was made in the mid 1960s. The strong welfare redistribution role of the State had been replaced by a more liberal and entrepreneurial ideology; the nature of the national and international socio-economic realities and their underlying drivers of transformation were utterly different; and additionally the conceptualization of space and place had also undergone a number of paradigm shifts as outlined in the opening chapter. Allied to the diversity of perspectives on space and place were new ways of thinking about development, government and governance. However, the conceptual shifts were not universally shared across disciplines, or among professionals in the areas of planning policy design and implementation, or among officials throughout different government departments.

The review of the Irish experience demonstrates that a plurality of planning paradigms was used at different stages in the process and for different tasks. The traditional positivist based expert knowledge and methodologies of professional planners and others were essential at crucial stages but they needed to be complemented by insights and methods from the structuralism and post-modern traditions. In particular there was a strong emphasis on consultation and developing a consensus based on partnership. It is also apparent that the NSS process and content were strongly influenced by the ESDP process.

Reverting to the discourse in Chapter One the NSS experience demonstrates the extent to which the conceptualization of space and place has shifted away from a Euclidean neutral container and objectively map-able perspective. There is now a greater recognition of the extent to which places are socially and politically constructed as nodes in global production and consumption networks. For example, the role of certain locations in the Dublin city region as points for connecting the Ireland space to the global economy became a key issue, while the assessment of rural areas illustrated that formerly weak and remote rural locations were increasingly assuming new roles as consumption spaces that are incorporated into wider national and international systems of demand centred on tourism, leisure activities and simply differences in lifestyle and values.

Linked to the paradigm shifts are new ways of thinking about the organization and representation of space. While proximity, accessibility and distance decay effects remain important there is an increasing awareness of the role of the extent to which functional spaces are fluid and based on networks that are less place bound, and are also not congruent with administrative areas. These changes in the ways in which spatial relations are considered are particularly challenging to both analysts and practitioners trained in the positivist tradition and methodologies and can make the task of securing a consensus on

fundamental issues quite difficult. This was evident in the debates that occurred around the role and number of Gateways and how they compare with or differ from the older concept of Growth Centres.

The role of planners and other public servants within the process of spatial strategy formulation was vital. In relation to the NSS they had to combine the traditional roles of attempting to predict future development trends (for example population projections, housing demand, car ownership) while also seeking to achieve a negotiated consensus that required considerable consultation around draft proposals guided by expert analyses. The extent, depth and pro-active nature of the consultation process were a crucial factor in securing the support of very divergent stakeholders in a policy area requiring some fundamental reassessment and abandonment of traditional thinking. At one level, the small size of the Spatial Planning Unit made it easier to maintain consistency in the discourses with others and it was also able to keep a tight rein on the overall purpose and scope of the Strategy when at times issues were highlighted that could have posed a risk to the whole exercise (for example, a debate on rural housing based on flimsy evidence occupied the main focus of attention for a considerable period). At other levels, the work of the SPU was greatly aided by the evolution of a network of key high ranking officials in other Government departments and agencies that overtly took the form of the high level interdepartmental steering group but that over time, has developed into a virtual cross departmental team. The formal and robust exchanges between Departments that might normally be anticipated as they forge new relationships in working with each other in developing the NSS were replaced by collaborative and cordial day to day working relationships as the new era of spatial planning and its relational aspects emerged.

More critically while the planners and officials involved in developing the NSS wisely avoided sophisticated technical (positivist) modelling to produce alternative scenarios the process could have benefited from a (post-modernist) foresight type exercise that would have provided an opportunity to think more widely outside the comfort zones of the contemporary world that we know. More generally, while spatial planners have comfortably taken on board processes of engagement and consensus building that fit with the post-modern perspective there are significant challenges in communicating relational and post-modern concepts and having them incorporated into spatial strategy reports.

The experience in relation to implementation is that it is no longer sufficient to rely on a command and control approach through land use regulation. Much more can be achieved through an approach that seeks to promote a deeper understanding of the processes shaping territorial development. Of course, this requires sustained information sharing, a culture of cooperation and collaboration and a higher level of strategic capacity throughout different levels and strands of governance. While the

SPU were successful in building a supportive institutional context at all levels there is a need for on-going reinforcement in a consistent way of the main elements of the strategy. The subsequent studies initiated by the SPU on developing the Gateways, and the report commissioned by InterTradeIreland (2006) on how best to coordinate infrastructural investments in the North and South have been particularly helpful in keeping the core concepts to the forefront and in maintaining an engagement by key stakeholders (see also NESC 2005; National Competitiveness Council 2006). These initiatives are especially necessary when actions by others may unintentionally damage confidence in the process as, for example, the government's decentralisation programme, or at a different level some of the media commentary following the publication of the preliminary results of the 2006 census of population.

Strategic spatial planning should be led by professional planners but the process needs to be better supported. The NSS experience brought to the fore the necessity for a systematic rolling research programme, means to overcome the very considerable gaps in spatial data, and the need to enhance the level of expertise among professional planners at all levels in the administrative system. For the future, there is a need for a greater level of discourse amongst planners, regional economists, other policy makers and decision takers on changing perspectives of space and place and to make more tangible the concepts associated with the relational and post-modern perspectives in strategic spatial planning.

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