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Concepts and Processes in the Preparation of a National Spatial Strategy for Ireland

Professor Jim Walsh, Deputy President, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland
Jim.walsh@nuim.ie

The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 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 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 The strong welfare redistribution role of the State had been replaced by a more liberal and entrepreneurial ideology; the nature of the national and international socio-economic realities and their underlying drivers of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. 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 in preparing a national spatial strategy demonstrates that a plurality of planning paradigms was used at different stages in the process and for different tasks. In particular there was a strong emphasis on consultation and developing a consensus based on partnership. The NSS process and content were strongly influenced by the ESDP process.

The conceptualization of space and place shifted from a Euclidean neutral container and objectively map-able perspective to one that includes 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. 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 in spatial strategy formulation is complex. In relation to the NSS they had to combine the traditional roles of attempting to forecast future development trends while also seeking to achieve a negotiated consensus that required considerable consultation around draft proposals guided by expert analyses. The extent, depth and proactive 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.

The small size of the Spatial Planning Unit (SPU) established in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to drive and manage the NSS preparation process 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. While the planners wisely avoided sophisticated technical modelling to produce alternative scenarios the process could have benefited from a foresight type exercise that would have provided an opportunity to think more widely outside the comfort zones of the contemporary world that we are familiar with. More generally, while spatial planners have taken on board processes of engagement and consensus building there are significant challenges in communicating relational and post-modern concepts and having them incorporated into spatial strategy reports.

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. A special effort is required to make more tangible, perhaps by way of examples, the concepts associated with the relational and post-modern perspectives in strategic spatial planning.