STRATEGIC SPATIAL PLANNING AND CONTESTED RURALITIES: 
INSIGHTS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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Abstract

Since the publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), a growing body of literature has emerged related to European spatial planning. Much of this literature is focused on the influence of the ESDP on city regions and urban policy in individual member states. Much less attention has been paid thus far to the influence of the ESDP on the formulation of spatial strategies and plans for rural areas. Within this context, this paper aims to explore the formulation of a national framework for spatial development in the Republic of Ireland, and in particular to examine the expression given to rural development and planning issues. This paper reviews the extent that the Irish National Spatial Strategy can provide a basis for a spatially defined (rather than sectoral based) rural policy by examining the policy construction of rurality and how this will impact on three aspects of rural planning policy: the conceptualisation of the urban-rural relationship; managing rural settlements; and rural development. The paper concludes by developing wider lessons from the Irish example in the application of the EU discourse of spatial planning to rural regions, and the difficulties associated with developing and implementing spatial policies in a deeply contested rural arena.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed unprecedented interest in Europe in the formulation of spatial strategies for territorial development (Faludi, 2001; Healey et al., 1997; McEldowney and Sterrett, 2001; Shaw et al., 2000). As recorded by Albrechts et al. (2003), the motivations for these new efforts are varied, but the objectives have typically been to articulate a more coherent spatial logic for land-use management, resource protection, and investments in regeneration and infrastructure. Typically, therefore, spatial planning frameworks embrace a wider agenda than regulatory approaches to land-use management in an attempt to secure integrated policy delivery and more effective linkages between strategic and local planning. The driving forces behind this high profile for spatial strategies have been outlined by Albrechts et al. (2003, p. 115) and include:

- The ‘competitiveness’ agenda, positioning regions in a European and global economic space;
- Socio-cultural movements and lifestyle changes that focus voter and lobby group attention on environmentally sustainable resource management and the quality of life/environment in places;
- The reassertion of regional and local identity and image formation in the face of globalisation and the European integration project;
- The search for new modes of multi-level governance and a government reorganisation agenda involving decentralisation and the formation of alliances.

This current enthusiasm for strategic spatial planning undoubtedly owes much to the completion of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999 and its subsequent political endorsement (Murray, 2003). Through the EU spatial planning process a new discourse of European spatial development is taking shape, with the definition of a new policy discourse, new knowledge forms and new policy options (Richardson, 2000). ESDP promoted concepts – such as polycentric urban development, balanced spatial development, a new urban-rural relationship and transnational planning – are being increasingly translated and applied into individual member state’s national and regional policies and strategies. As Faludi (2001) argues:

As a strategic document, the ESDP wants to be ‘applied’ rather than ‘implemented’. Rather than giving shape to spatial development, application is the shaping of the minds of the actors in spatial development (p. 663).

Since the publication of the ESDP, a growing body of literature has emerged related to European spatial planning. Much of this literature is focused on the influence of the ESDP on city regions and urban policy in individual member states (for example: Atkinson, 2001; Healey, 2004; Lambregts and Zonneveld, 2004; Krätke, 2001; Turok and Bailey, 2004). Much
less attention has been paid thus far to the influence of the ESDP on the formulation of spatial strategies and plans for rural areas (although see: Hadjimachalis, 2003; Richardson, 2000). Within this context, this paper aims to explore the formulation of a national framework for spatial development in the Republic of Ireland, and in particular to examine the expression given to rural development and planning issues. In December 2002, Ireland’s Department of Environment and Local Government (DOELG) formally published the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020, which is intended to provide for the first time, an explicit national framework for dealing with spatial issues. ESDP promoted concepts have been instrumental in providing a new vocabulary in Irish planning discourse, particularly given the lack of tradition in regional and spatial planning in the state. However, although polycentric urban development and economic integration of urban regions may readily apply to the core of the European territory, limited research has been undertaken on the implementation of the ESDP in peripheral regions. In this regard, all regions in Europe are not starting from the same point of implementation. For example, Richardson and Jensen (2000) have outlined the negative Nordic response to a perceived urban bias in the ESDP, which fails to reflect existing geographies and lived realities. Similarly, in the case of Ireland – with a large dispersed rural population, a weakly developed urban system outside of the Greater Dublin Area, with poor transport links and residential consumer preferences which have generally favoured lower density models – the relevance and scope of the ESDP may appear to be limited.

Inevitably, much of the National Spatial Strategy focuses on the future role of Dublin and the need to counterbalance its dominance, and indeed much of the spatial framework favours an urban discourse. However, given that (as recorded in the 2002 Census) approximately 40 per cent of the Republic of Ireland’s population lives in villages of less than 1,500 inhabitants and the open countryside, the NSS has also provided an opportunity to formulate a national framework for rural planning concerns. Although the overall proportion of the State living in rural areas has been declining, the rural remains a large and politically important constituency. However, rural planning policy in Ireland has been an increasingly contested area of public policy in recent years, and a vexed relationship exists between local planning authorities and many rural communities exemplified by the current debate surrounding managing rural settlement growth. This article aims to review recent policy developments by ‘unpacking’ the National Spatial Strategy and assessing its implications for the formulation of rural planning policies. Accordingly, this article explores the following themes: firstly, the paper will be located within a discussion of spatial development policy in rural Europe, and secondly, the key components of the National Spatial Strategy will be outlined. The paper will then evaluate the NSS as a basis for formulating a differentiated rural policy, followed by a discussion of the Strategy’s emphasis on a new urban-rural relationship. Issues surrounding the management of rural settlements will then be highlighted and the relationship between the NSS and rural development will be considered. Finally, conclusions will be developed to identify wider lessons in applying the EU discourse of spatial planning to peripheral (and rural)
regions and the difficulties associated with developing and implementing spatial policies in a deeply contested rural arena.

2. Spatial development policy and rural Europe

Fundamental transformations have taken place in Europe’s rural economy and society, and new patterns of diversity and differentiation are emerging within the contemporary countryside (Marsden, 1999). Given the depth and prolonged character of crisis in the agricultural sector, some commentators have suggested that rural areas are experiencing a shift from a ‘productivist’ to a ‘post-productivist’ era in the countryside (Halfacree, 1997; Hadjimichalis, 2003). In this post-productivist phase, rural localities are now places that people from outside come into to consume the diversity of things that now make and constitute rural space (Gray, 2000), and as Marsden notes:

This is a general process of externalisation of the consumption countryside, one which exhibits a wide range of external relationships and is subject to wide-ranging demands (not least from new residents, developers, tourists, food consumers) (1999, p. 506).

In this sense, Halfacree (1997) suggests that post-productivism may signal a search for a new way of understanding and structuring the countryside, as non-agricultural interests move central in processes shaping rural space.

In this context, in both the EU and member states, a policy discourse has emerged which envisages a fundamental shift in rural policy from sectoral support policies (predominantly agriculture) to territorial development and spatial approaches (Moseley, 1997, 2000; Shortall and Shucksmith, 2001). This policy shift is a recognition that spatial strategies and policies can integrate sectoral dimensions to public policy delivery (agriculture, housing, employment creation, transport, etc.) and offer a holistic approach to balancing the economic, social and environmental processes which shape Europe’s rural areas. Throughout the 1990s, rural development theory and practice was firmly focused on local development and bottom-up approaches to face the challenge of the continued re-structuring of the agricultural industry, exemplified by the EU’s LEADER Programme (see for example: Amdam, 1995; Moseley, 1997, 2000; Ploeg et al., 2000; Ray, 2000, 2002; Scott, 2002; Shucksmith, 2000). The essential elements of this approach to rural development are identified by Moseley (1997) and Ray (2000) and include: a territorial and integrated focus; an endogenous development accent; the use of local resources; and local contextualisation through active public participation. Reflecting and in parallel to European policy discourses, in the Republic of Ireland a suite of territorial rural development initiatives have been advanced in partnership with rural communities since the early 1990s, such as: the Pilot Programme for Integrated Rural Development (1988-90); the EU LEADER Programmes (I, II and LEADER+) (1991-2006); area-partnerships for social inclusion (since 1991); and the National Rural
Development Programme (2000-06). This increasing public policy involvement led to the publication of the Rural Development White Paper in 1999, and a commitment to sustainable rural development.

More recently, the current wave of interest in Europe in spatial strategies for territorial development has provided a new point of reference for thinking about and shaping rural space. The publication of the ESDP in 1999 has supplied a new vocabulary for rural spatial planning and has enabled policy-makers in member states an opportunity to ‘rethink’ spatial policies for rural Europe. The key elements of the ESDP have been well documented elsewhere (see for example: Faludi, 2000; Tewdwr-Jones and Williams, 2001) and can be distilled as (CSD, 1999, p. 11):

- Development of a balanced and polycentric urban system and a new urban-rural partnership;
- Securing parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge;
- Sustainable development, prudent management and protection of nature and cultural heritage.

In contrast to the emphasis on local development in the 1990s, the current policy proposal of the EU is to tie rural areas much more into their urban and regional contexts and “transform the countryside both physically and socially into images and identities of those who consume rural resources” (Hadjimichalis, 2003, p. 108). In this regard, the ESDP calls for the strengthening of the partnership between urban and rural areas to overcome “the outdated dualism between city and countryside” (CSD, 1999, p. 19) and to provide an integrated approach to regional problems. As Tewdwr-Jones and Williams (2001) argue, this focus on core-periphery (or urban-rural) relations necessitates an analysis of territory, rather than periphery, urban or rural alone. Therefore, a regional approach often represents a more meaningful scale of action in terms of labour and housing markets, and of daily leisure activities (Healey, 2002), and can encompass the following sets of relations (Bengs and Zonneveld, 2002): home-work relationships; central place relationships; relationships between metropolitan and urban centres in rural and intermediate areas; relationships between rural and urban enterprises; rural areas as consumption areas for urban dwellers; rural areas as open spaces for urban areas; rural areas as carriers of urban infrastructure; and rural areas as suppliers of natural resources for urban areas.

However, both this policy direction and the ESDP’s construction of rurality are contested. Hadjimichalis (2003) argues that from a rural perspective, a strong urban bias is evident in the ESDP. Firstly, he suggests that cities are constructed as the sole driving forces and motors of regional development, which could lead to further agglomeration and a widening gap between urban and rural areas. This raises questions relating to the future of rural territory and space, particularly for population movement, if non-urban areas are constructed as areas of agriculture, green tourism and environmental protection (Richardson, 2000). Secondly,
Hadjimichalis is critical of the ESDP’s polycentric urban model, which may be relevant in flat, economically mature north-central EU countries like north-central France, Germany, Benelux and Denmark, but it marginalizes rural and peripheral geography such as south-eastern Europe and Nordic countries. And thirdly, Hadjimichalis criticises the urban-rural partnership for submerging small rural towns into their large counterparts, as urban needs predominate. As Richardson observes:

The construction of rurality in this discourse raises many concerns for those with specific interests in rural development. Within this discourse, rurality is partly defined in a relational way – in relation to the urban – in partnership, but also in a way that subsumes the rural into a new European regional political economy. Cities and regions are the principal units of implementation of the ESDP’s policies (2000, p. 66).

3. Strategic spatial planning in the Republic of Ireland

Since the early 1970s, regional planning can be described as a missing tier in Irish spatial policy. Previously in the 1960s, there was a brief flirtation with regional planning in the State which culminated with the Buchanan Report in 1968. This report presented the argument for promoting growth centres at both national and regional levels. However, its recommendations became diluted as industrial policy increasingly favoured diffusion rather than concentration as the Industrial Development Authority implemented a policy of dispersing new industrial employment to small towns and rural areas in the early 1970s (Johnson, 1994; Murray et al., 2003). This was followed by a period in the 1970s and 1980s when inter-regional policy was of diminishing importance (CEC, 1999) and national economic rather than regional goals were the imperative. However, with the Republic of Ireland’s well-documented impressive economic growth in the 1990s (see for example: Breathnach, 1998; Walsh, 2000; Clinch et al., 2002), the issue of regional balance within the State again emerged. Although Ireland can meaningfully be regarded as a region of the larger EU economy, the interest in the regional distribution of economic activity within the country remains high. Although it is clear that Dublin is the only city in Ireland that is of sufficient size to compete at a European level, Clinch et al. contend that: “policy makers are continually faced with the question, explicitly or implicitly, how much national economic growth should be traded off for a better regional balance?” (2002, p. 96).

The need for a national spatial framework was identified in the Government’s National Development Plan in 1999, establishing as a priority the goal of delivering more balanced social, economic and physical development between the Republic of Ireland’s regions, which in recent years had witnessed an accelerating dominance of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). This perspective was reinforced in background research for the NSS which illustrated the scale and pace of transformation within the State during the period 1990-2000, and included (DOELG, 2001, p. 5):
- The number of people living in the State grew by 250,000 to nearly 3.8m, the highest population level since 1881;
- The number at work increased by 500,000;
- The number of cars on the road increased by 50%;
- Waste volumes have grown by 50%;
- The value of annual exports has grown six-fold.

Within this context, preparation work on the NSS commenced in January 2000 and, while its publication was anticipated in late 2001, a General Election during mid 2002 delayed its release until the end of the year. Planning is very much a political activity and thus the sensitivities attached to the possible designation (and non-designation) of growth centres would undoubtedly have placed the spatial strategy at the centre of political controversy in the run-up to voting day (Murray, 2003). The NSS sets out a twenty-year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth on an inter-regional basis. The spatial strategy is clearly influenced by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (Committee for Spatial Development, 1999), both conceptually and in adopting the EU spatial planning discourse. In this regard, ESDP-promoted concepts such as encouraging balanced spatial development, a new urban-rural relationship and polycentric development, can be detected throughout the Irish spatial framework. The ESDP, therefore, has offered the potential to reformulate spatial planning at the national level in Ireland and has provided policy-makers with alternative ways of defining urban and rural problems (Tewdwr-Jones and Williams, 2001) – this is further discussed below in relation to rural planning in Ireland and the emerging discourse of rurality in EU spatial policy. The NSS aims to guide Government departments and agencies in public policy formulation and investment decisions which have an explicit spatial dimension, and to set a national context for spatial planning including the preparation of regional planning guidelines and county and city land-use development plans.

The spatial strategy is comprised of three key elements. Firstly, the NSS aims to promote a more efficient Greater Dublin Area which continues to build on its competitiveness and national role. However, it is recognised that it is not desirable for the city to continue to spread physically into the surrounding counties. Therefore, the NSS proposes the physical consolidation of Dublin supported by effective land-use policies for the urban area, such as increased brownfield development, and a more effective public transport system. Secondly, the Strategy designates strong ‘gateways’ in other regions. Balanced national growth and development is to be secured with the support of a small number of nationally significant urban centres which have the location, scale and critical mass to sustain strong levels of job growth in the regions. The National Development Plan 2000-06 had previously designated Cork, Limerick/Shannon, Galway and Waterford as gateways, and the NSS further identified four new national level gateways: Dundalk, Sligo, and two ‘linked’ gateways of Letterkenny.
Undoubtedly the designation of gateways was underpinned by political pragmatism. The gateways originally designated in the National Development Plan, with the exception of Galway, are located in the south and east of the State, which are the most prosperous regions in the Republic of Ireland. The designation of the four new gateways in the NSS allows for a more inclusive process, involving the border, midlands and western regions. However, questions can be raised concerning whether these latter four gateways have the critical mass to secure balanced regional development; for example, Dundalk and Sligo have populations of approximately 32,000 and 19,000 respectively, compared to Cork and hinterlands with 350,000 and Limerick and hinterlands with 236,000. This would imply that considerable development is required in this second tier of gateways before they contribute to balanced regional development. Furthermore, the number of gateways designated (eight in total) may prove too many in a small economy to effectively develop clusters of economic growth and agglomerations, which have access to large labour markets and sub-supply sectors that are needed to counterbalance the dominance of the Greater Dublin Area.

Thirdly, the Strategy also identifies nine medium sized ‘hubs’, which are to support and be supported by the gateways and will link out to wider rural areas. The hubs identified include Cavan, Ennis, Kilkenny, Mallow, Monaghan, Tuam and Wexford and two linked hubs comprised of Ballina/Castlebar and Tralee/Kilamey. These three elements are complemented in the Strategy by mention of the need to support the county and other town structure and to promote vibrant and diversified rural areas. The settlement hierarchy is further developed with its relationship to the proposed national transport framework based on radial corridors, linking corridors and international access points. As recorded by Murray (2003), the NSS is very much skeletal in design and thus in terms of implementation further work is acknowledged as being necessary. In this regard, provisions were made in the recent Planning and Development Act 2000 (Government of Ireland, 2000) for the State’s eight Regional Authorities to prepare statutory Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs) to give full effect to the principles outlined in the NSS. The Regional Authorities were established in 1994, however, their responsibilities have been limited and public profile has been poor. Again, similar to the formulation of a national spatial framework, RPGs are a new instrument in the Irish planning system, and perhaps provide an opportunity to assist in invigorating regional governance in Ireland.

4. The NSS and rethinking rural Ireland

Historically, the fate of smaller settlements and rural areas in Ireland has received less than significant attention from economic and physical planners. Rural areas have often been “perceived largely as scenic backdrops to the drama of urban based investment in infrastructure, industry and services” (Greer and Murray, 1993, p. 3). This perspective was
reinforced with the view of the rural arena equating solely with agriculture as a productivist space with a lack of development pressures on the countryside. The result of this policy standpoint has led to two contradictory trends. Firstly, a physical planning ethos has developed which has favoured urban concentration and its perceived virtues, such as promoting a greater efficiency and economy in the provision of services and the role of urban industrial growth in regional development (Murray, 1993). However, in contrast to the professional planners’ ethos, rural areas have occupied a much stronger role in national political discourse. For example, the successful campaign against the proposals of the
Buchanan Report (outlined above) was largely based on the likely impact on rural areas of concentrating development in a limited number of designated urban centres, unlike the Regional Industrial Plans which replaced the Buchanan proposals that were, to a considerable extent, focused on delivering industrial employment to small towns and rural areas. The second trend has been the operation of a liberal planning system in rural Ireland, described as one of the more lax rural planning regimes in Europe (Duffy, 2000), facilitating the proliferation of one-off dwellings in rural areas and incremental change in the Irish landscape (Johnson, 1994).

However, Ireland’s rural communities are undergoing rapid and fundamental changes: the agricultural sector continues to restructure; the economic base of rural areas is diversifying; new consumer demands and practices have emerged; there is a growing concern for the environment and increased pressure to include the environmental dimension in decision-making; and some rural communities are under intense pressure from urbanisation, while other areas continue to experience population decline. Within this context of change and new demands on rural space, rural sustainable development has become a highly contested and divisive concept. For example, housing in the countryside, environmental directives for landscape protection, potential wind-farm development, and access to farmland for recreation, have all been marked by high profile and polarised debates in the popular media. As McDonagh (1998) argues, in this era of what is increasingly being referred to as a ‘post-agricultural’ society, there is an urgent need to question the understandings of the term ‘rural’ in Ireland and whether there is a coordinated policy direction for the changing future of rural areas. The National Spatial Strategy has thus provided a timely opportunity to reformulate rural planning policies reflective of the changing realities of rural living in contemporary Ireland.

The Strategy aims to set out in broad terms how rural areas will contribute to achieving balanced regional development and three areas of policy are identified (p. 51). Firstly, the Strategy highlights ‘Strengthening the Rural Economy’ as a key policy goal. The NSS recognises that the role of traditional rural based sectors (agriculture, forestry and fishing) will continue to provide a base for the rural economy, but also outlines the importance of tailored responses in differing local contexts in relation to tourism, enterprise, local services and natural resource sectors. Secondly, the Strategy identifies ‘Strengthening Communities’ as a policy area, in particular calling for new approaches to underpin the future vitality of rural communities. The NSS proposes two main types of responses: (1) settlement policies are needed that take account of varying rural development contexts (this is further discussed below); and (2) enhanced accessibility must be linked with an integrated settlement policy. Thirdly, the Strategy identifies the importance of ‘Strengthening Environmental Qualities’ of rural areas, and highlights the linkages of sensitive development and conservation of natural resources with the rural economy, in particular tourism development. Although a commitment
to these three policy areas – economy, communities and environment – seems unquestionable at a national level, the interpretation of these broad goals into detailed planning policies at a local level is likely to be a contested arena. Research from Northern Ireland (see Murray and Greer, 2000) and England (see Owen, 1996) suggests that planners often favour restraint policies for rural settlement planning as a selective interpretation of what constitutes sustainable planning practice. In these cases, restrictive rural planning policies with goals such as reducing car dependency and landscape protection are often promoted rather than policies which are aimed at diversifying the economic base of rural areas or sustaining rural communities. Therefore, how these broad policy goals (and the mediation of policy objectives that are potentially conflicting) are translated into local authority development plans will have profound effects on planning policies for rural areas, suggesting the need for enhanced understanding of the inter-relationships between economic, social and environmental processes within rural localities.

In addition to these broad policy themes, the NSS also provides a typology of rural areas to identify different types of rural areas and to reinforce the need for differing policy responses appropriate to local contexts. The typology is based on a commissioned background report prepared by NUI Maynooth and Brady Shipman Martin (2000) who based their analysis on demographic structure, labour force characteristics, education and social class, sectoral employment profiles, performance of the farming sector and ‘change’ variables (e.g. population change, changes in numbers at work, etc). However, although the typology was largely derived from socio-economic characteristics, perhaps surprisingly assessment of landscape character and capacity and settlement patterns were absent. The different types of rural areas identified in the Spatial Strategy are as follows:

1. Areas that are strong: these are mainly located in the South and East where agriculture will remain strong, but where pressure for development is high and some rural settlements are under stress;
2. Areas that are changing: these include parts of the Midlands, the Border, the South and West where population and agriculture employment have started to decline and where replacement employment is required;
3. Areas that are weak: these include the more western parts of the Midlands, certain parts of the Border and mainly inland areas in the West, where population decline has been significant;
4. Areas that are remote: including parts of the west coast and the islands;
5. Areas that are culturally distinct: including parts of the west coast and the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking areas) which have a distinctive cultural heritage.

This typology is significant in that it appears to represent a first step towards developing a spatially defined rural policy rather than a sectoral (essentially agricultural) based approach which has predominated in the past. The typology provides the basis for a differentiated policy process which reflects the diversity of rural Ireland, enabling planning policies to be tailored to
specific regions or localities. This is a belated recognition that new patterns of diversity and differentiation are emerging within the contemporary countryside (as outlined by Marsden, 1999) and that the key to understanding rural areas is the avoidance of easy assumptions of homogeneity (McDonagh, 2001). As asserted by McDonagh, rural areas in Ireland are dynamic and they have become arenas for conflict and tension, sites for consumption as well as production activities – however, not all rural areas have the same capacities or undergo change at the same time or pace. Planners at a local authority level must respond to this ‘recasting’ of rurality in the national spatial framework, by avoiding the ‘one size fits all’ approach which has been prevalent in rural settlement planning and recognise that planning policies for rural areas should reflect the diversity of the challenges facing rural communities. Importantly, as noted in the NUI Maynooth/Brady Shipman Martin report (2000), the boundaries of the various rural area types do not correspond with established administrative boundaries, including regional and local authorities. It will therefore be “important to devise mechanisms that will on the one hand allow nuancing of policies within such administrative areas to reflect their diversity, and on the other facilitate coordination in policy across administrative boundaries” (NUI Maynooth and Brady Shipman Martin, 2000, p. ix). The remainder of this article will briefly examine how this policy construction of rurality in the National Spatial Strategy will impact on three aspects of rural planning: (1) the conceptualisation of the urban-rural relationship; (2) managing rural settlements; and (3) rural development.

The urban-rural relationship

A clear example of the adoption of the ESDP’s spatial planning vocabulary can be seen in relation to the urban-rural partnership for territorial development. This challenge to the separation of urban and rural in spatial planning discourse has clearly been translated into the Irish spatial framework:

National and international evidence also demonstrates that rural areas have a vital contribution to make to the achievement of balanced regional development. This involves utilising and developing economic resources of rural areas … while at the same time capitalising on and drawing strengths from vibrant neighbouring urban areas. In this way rural and urban areas are seen as working in partnership, rather than competing with each other (DOELG, 2002, p. 36).

The primary locus of the ‘new’ urban-rural partnership are the designated gateways and hubs that “have the capacity to support the stronger urban-rural structure needed to drive the development of these other regions” (p. 49). In some senses, the term ‘gateways’ has replaced an earlier lexicon of regional development in the Republic of Ireland in designating ‘growth centres’ in the 1960s, acting as a public-friendly metaphor for a two-way interdependent relationship characterised by a complex ‘space of flows’ (drawing on Hadjimichalis, 2003). However, similar to the 1960s experiment with growth centres, it is unclear if the new gateways can act as effective development nodes capable of dispersing
economic growth. Indeed, Healey (2002) suggests that the idea that towns and cities are the key development nodes in a region and that they disperse development around a territory needs serious questioning: “each region is likely to have its own relational and distributive specificities. Failure to recognise these leads to the disjunction between policy imagery and lived realities” (p. 337). Furthermore, for designated gateways and hubs to develop the necessary critical mass needed to contribute to ‘balanced regional development’, it is probable that restrictive rural settlement policies will be required to facilitate the growth of larger settlements in the hierarchy, suggesting the submergence of rural interests and demonstrating little affinity with rural communities. The implications of the NSS for rural settlement planning are further discussed below.

Managing rural settlements

Dispersed rural settlement growth over the past thirty years is a distinctive feature of many rural areas of Ireland (McGrath, 1998) and recent years have witnessed increasing difficulties in addressing the issue of housing development in the countryside. Rural settlement patterns are predominantly comprised of single dwellings in the open countryside with residents usually unconnected to agriculture, but who often have family roots in the locality and a strong attachment to place. The proliferation of dispersed single dwellings (or one-off housing) in the countryside has been an issue for many years. Indeed, commentators such as Aalen (1997) and McGrath (1998) have argued that the planning system is unable to respond effectively to rural settlement growth. In a critique of rural planning, both commentators suggest policy is driven by the priorities of a few individuals, an intense localism, and the predominance of incremental decision-making. Similarly, Gallent et al. (2003) classify rural planning in Ireland as a laissez-faire regime, suggesting that: “the tradition of a more relaxed approach to regulation, and what many see as the underperformance in planning is merely an expression of Irish attitudes towards government intervention” (p. 90). The debate surrounding dispersed rural settlement has become increasingly contentious both at a local and national scale. Analysis undertaken during the preparation of the NSS suggests that between 1996-1999 over one in three houses built in the Republic of Ireland have been one-off housing in the open countryside, and highlights that the issue of single applications for housing in rural areas has become a major concern for most local planning authorities (Spatial Planning Unit, 2001). This increased scale and pace of development has resulted from a number of factors including: the demographic recovery of many rural areas; a cultural predisposition to living in the countryside (Duffy, 2000) and a perception of the quality of life in urban areas; the relative lower costs associated with developing a one-off house (Clinch et al., 2002); increased mobility; and a desire for living in a rural environment, in particular with good accessibility to urban centres (Spatial Planning Unit, 2001).

In essence, the rural housing debate is characterised by contestation and conflicting constructions of rurality, with on the one hand conservation interests and many planning
officials favouring restrictive policies as a means to protecting landscapes and reducing car dependency, and on the other hand community development interests and many elected local councillors who favour more lax policies to enable greater social vitality and to protect the further loss of rural services. Indeed, the issue of granting planning permission for housing in the countryside raises fundamental questions surrounding the politics of planning in rural Ireland, including the relationship between national and local planning policies and spatial strategies; the relationship between planning policy and development control decisions; and the noticeable worsening in relations between local authority planning officials and elected representatives evident in recent years. Within this context, the NSS recognises that there is a long tradition of people living in rural areas in Ireland, and outlines four broad objectives as a basis for a sustainable rural settlement policy framework (p. 105):

1. To sustain and renew established rural communities and the existing stock of investment in a way that responds to various spatial, structural and economic changes taking place, while protecting the important assets rural areas possess;
2. To strengthen the established structure of villages and smaller settlements both to assist local economies and to accommodate additional population in a way that supports the viability of public transport and local infrastructure and services such as schools and water services;
3. To ensure that key assets in rural areas such as water quality, the natural and cultural heritage and the quality of the landscape are protected to support quality of life and economic vitality;
4. To ensure that rural settlement policies are appropriate to local circumstances.

As discussed earlier, a positive development in the Spatial Strategy is the adoption of a differentiated rural policy, and this is reflected in its approach for housing in the countryside. Encouragingly, the Strategy calls for different responses to managing dispersed rural settlement between rural areas under strong urban influences and rural areas that are either characterised by a strong agricultural base, structurally weak rural areas and areas with distinctive settlement patterns, reflecting the contrasting development pressures that exist in the countryside. This is further developed in the Strategy with a distinction made between urban and rural generated housing in rural areas, defined as (p. 106):

- Urban-generated rural housing: development driven by urban centres, with housing sought in rural areas by people living and working in urban areas, including second homes;
- Rural-generated housing: housing needed in rural areas within the established rural community by people working in rural areas or in nearby urban areas who are an intrinsic part of the rural community by way of background or employment.

In general, the Strategy outlines that development driven by urban areas (including urban-generated rural housing) should take place within built up areas or land identified in the development plan process and that rural-generated housing needs should be accommodated in the areas where they arise. However, current planning practice at a local authority level
suggests that this distinction may be difficult to implement due to definitional problems and property rights. As an alternative to dispersed single housing in the countryside, the Strategy places considerable emphasis on the role of villages in rural areas. The NSS suggests that villages have a key role to play in strengthening the urban structure of rural areas (for example in supporting local services and public transport) and as providing an important residential function for those seeking a rural lifestyle. In this regard, the village is viewed as a more ‘sustainable’ option for development than dispersed housing. However, this perspective offers a narrow interpretation of rural sustainability such as reducing car dependency and the unnecessary extension of infrastructure, and fails to recognise community infrastructure and networks and the social vitality that exists in many rural areas that reflect the lived experiences of rural residents. Although sustainable development principles have been actively discussed in relation to urban development, further debate is necessary concerning how sustainability can be appropriately applied to rural areas which moves beyond restrictive settlement policies to a proactive engagement with the nature of rurality in Ireland. While the NSS is careful to avoid detailed policy prescription on rural housing (and thus avoiding additional political controversy at the time of publication), more recently the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government have produced Draft Guidelines for Sustainable Rural Housing (2004). These are further discussed below in relation to implementing the NSS.

*Rural development*

As the agricultural sector continues to restructure and decline in relative importance in the national economy, strengthening the rural economy is identified as a key spatial goal in the NSS. The Strategy states that it will be necessary to secure agriculture where it has the capacity to remain strong and viable, by maintaining the maximum possible number of family farms, while at the same time ensuring that smaller farms have the opportunity to supplement their farm income through off-farm work. Furthermore, the Strategy highlights the need for diversification of rural employment options including: resource-based development in sectors such as forestry, marine and natural resources; tourism development, through enhanced access and promotion of a tourism product and complementary visitor experiences; and protecting landscape, water resources and habitats (presumably linked with tourism development). Within this assessment of rural development opportunities a number of limitations can be identified. Firstly, the Strategy contains a rather narrow view of rural diversification, limited to farm diversification and resource-based development. Greater recognition could have been given to the role of community-based initiatives such as the EU LEADER Programme, and more significant attention could have been directed to enterprise development in rural areas, particularly how development plans and planners could address barriers to promoting indigenous rural development. Secondly, the emphasis on rural tourism as an alternative to farming is again limited and as Lowe *et al.* (2001) suggest, can often lead to the shifting of local employment from one vulnerable sector to another. And thirdly, the
Strategy provides little guidance for planners at a regional and local authority level as to how the planning system and planning policies can contribute towards the diversification of rural areas. In this regard, the setting of diversification policies within the context of a vision statement for rural Ireland may have provided a more coherent direction for rural spatial policy and provide a basis for a positive planning approach to rural development.

5. Implementing the National Spatial Strategy

To achieve implementation of the strategy’s objectives, the NSS outlines the importance of ‘establishing a driving force’ behind the national strategy, which includes: the Government underpinning its status and mandating its full implementation; embedding it in the programmes of all relevant departments and agencies; and assigning clear responsibility for supporting its delivery (p. 119). More specifically, a key role in the process of implementation is given to Regional Authorities in the preparation of more detailed Regional Planning Guidelines, and Local Authorities in the preparation of development plans at county level – both of which should demonstrate that their policies are consistent with the NSS. At a national level, several initiatives have emerged that further develops the NSS and two in particular – the Government’s Decentralisation Programme for the civil service and Draft Planning Guidelines for Sustainable Rural Housing – demonstrate difficulties with implementing a national framework resulting from the contested nature of rurality constructed in the spatial strategy¹.

The Government’s Decentralisation Programme for the Civil Service was announced in December 2003 by the Minister for Finance in the annual budget. This programme will involve over 10,000 civil servants and eight Government Departments relocating from Dublin to 53 centres in 25 counties. The potential benefits of the decentralisation programme are outlined in a recent report from the Decentralisation Implementation Group:

The dispersal of jobs from Dublin has obvious advantages for securing a better regional balance. It will help the economic and social development of the chosen centres and their catchment areas. Decentralisation can provide high quality jobs for regions that have not benefited as much as Dublin from recent economic success (p. 12, 2004).

Although ‘decentralisation’ is cloaked in the rhetoric of balanced regional development, the programme appears less than consistent with the Government’s spatial strategy. The NSS is based on selecting a number of gateways to act as key development nodes capable of counterbalancing the Greater Dublin Area. However, rather than selecting centres for civil servant relocation on the basis of gateways and hubs designated in the NSS, a policy of dispersal has emerged, which includes small rural towns, underpinned by political realities and pragmatism. In this instance, although planning discourse in Ireland – following the EU vocabulary – favours concentrated development and critical mass, the political importance of
rural communities has significantly shifted policy goals. Undoubtedly, the decentralisation programme has the potential to benefit rural communities – as one councillor commented in relation to proposed civil servant offices: “it’s the factory that will never close”. Nevertheless, for these benefits to be harnessed, local involvement should be central in the implementation process.

A further development in the implementation of the NSS has been the publication of Draft Guidelines for Sustainable Rural Housing. The intention to produce guidelines for rural housing was signalled in the NSS, ensuring that dispersed rural housing in the countryside was to remain a high profile issue and a deeply contested feature of the planning policy arena. The public debate intensified with the emergence of the Irish Rural Dwellers Association (IRDA), a lobby group campaigning for a loosening of planning restrictions for housing in the countryside. The IRDA developed a high profile and vocal campaign at both local and national levels, arguing that planning policy and officials place too much emphasis on the environmental dimension of rural housing and fail to recognise the importance of community viability and traditional dispersed rural settlement patterns. Environmental groups and interests have, in turn, suggested that this perspective favours the short-term needs of the individual rather than the ‘public good’. Under intense pressure from rural lobby groups and both local and national politicians, the Draft Guidelines, published in March 2004, suggest that the Government is shifting to a less restrictive position on housing in the countryside. In summary, the guidelines provide that: (1) people who are part of and contribute to the rural community will get planning permission in all rural areas, including those under strong urban-based pressures, subject to the normal rules in relation to good planning; and (2) anyone wishing to build a house in rural areas suffering persistent and substantial population decline will be accommodated, subject to good planning. In this context, it is worth noting that the term ‘good planning’ refers to issues surrounding siting, layout and design, rather than planning in a strategic or spatial sense.

6. Conclusion

The success of the Irish economy during the 1990s has been well-documented, and indeed, provides an inviting model for new EU accession countries in Eastern Europe, keen to emulate Ireland’s success in achieving rapid economic convergence with the EU average. However, much less international attention has been given to the impact of economic growth on spatial patterns of development and the changing relationships and functions of urban and rural areas. In this context, there are valuable insights and lessons that can be identified from Ireland’s recent experiences of rapid economic growth and policy response. The emergence of a National Spatial Strategy has been a highly significant and welcomed development in Irish planning practice, providing for the first time a national and regional framework for spatial planning at a local authority level. In addition to exploring the contemporary role of Dublin
within the State, the NSS also enabled an opportunity to reformulate rural planning. By developing a rural typology, the Strategy acknowledges the existence of varying ruralities, and has provided the basis for a differentiated planning response and a spatially defined (rather than sectoral based) rural policy. In addition, by exploring the urban-rural relationship, the NSS can facilitate an integrated approach to regional problems overcoming the often artificial division between urban and rural policies.

Application of the European Spatial Development Perspective principles was central in the formulation of the NSS and in particular provided a new vocabulary for Irish spatial planning, including ‘polycentric development’, ‘balanced spatial development’, and a ‘new urban-rural partnership’. However, (drawing on Healey, 2004) the nature and appropriateness of the concepts of place and space being deployed need questioning. In particular, the relational construction of gateway cities as development nodes and rural space requires further analysis. For example, Richardson (2000) argues that the emphasis on cities and regions in the ESDP as the drivers of development and foci of policy attention, threatens the identity of rural areas. The Irish experience suggests that further attention at a European level should be given to considering the future role of rural space within the EU’s wider urban dominated spatial perspective. This is particularly important in the context of EU eastern expansion and the likely changing processes that will rapidly impact on Eastern Europe’s rural areas, such as agricultural restructuring, and increased pressure from tourism demands and second home ownership from Western Europeans.

Similarly, Irish planning discourse, at times, appears ‘out of step’ with mainstream political discourse where ‘the rural’ occupies a central position in local and national politics. Although the ESDP readily applies to the reality of the core of the European territory, in this respect the EU vocabulary appears less appropriate in developing spatial policies in peripheral and rural regions. In the case of Ireland, this is demonstrated in the difficulties currently being experienced in implementing the NSS in the face of continued political pressure and lobbying from rural interests – for example, with the Government’s recent programme for civil service decentralisation, which has dispersed the relocation of civil servants much wider than the spatial strategy’s designated gateways and hub urban centres. Therefore, there is a need for policy makers in peripheral and rural regions of the EU to critically evaluate the usefulness of ESDP concepts and to assess the impacts of applying these concepts in rural geographies. In the Republic of Ireland, uncritical ‘concept transfer’ has failed to recognise important local relations, networks, nodes and identities (Healey, 2004).

A key theme to emerge in the case of the Republic of Ireland is the lack of vision and clarity regarding the future role for rural areas and subsequent new uses for rural space in this post-productivist era. Although the NSS gives limited attention to rural diversification, emphasis is placed on the potential of tourism in rural areas, suggesting a consumerist vision for rural
Ireland. Clearly, though, the most contested aspect of new uses for rural space and rurality in Ireland relates to future housing development in the countryside. In contrast to, for example England, where rural lobby groups have long campaigned for restrictive settlement policies, in Ireland expression is more likely to be given to the freedom to build in rural areas and a resistance to interference in private property rights. As Marsden (1999) suggests, rural space is increasingly playing a key role in the political economy of the modern consumerist state and new demands on rural space are evident not only from agricultural interests, but also rural dwellers unconnected to farming, new rural residents, tourists, environmental groups, and (generally small-scale) developers. Both the issue of managing rural settlement and the limitations in linkages between planning and rural diversification often leads to the perception that ‘planners stop things happening’ in rural areas, suggesting the need to replace a sense of negativity and for planning policy to adopt a more positive and inclusive engagement with rural aspirations.

Notes
¹ Other initiatives include the Strategic Rail Review and a review of guidelines for preparing development plans.

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