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PRESS RELEASE

**SEMINAR EXAMINES KEY ISSUES INFORMING NATIONAL
POLICY ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SPATIAL STRATEGY**

GOVERNMENT APPROACH TO NATIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY WELCOMED

**NIRSA - NATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL AND SPATIAL ANALYSIS
ESTABLISHED AT NUI MAYNOOTH**

A seminar today, **Thursday 1 November 2001**, at **National University of Ireland, Maynooth**, examined some of the key issues being identified under the Government's **National Spatial Strategy (NSS)** which will have a major impact on emerging types and patterns of development at national, regional and local level over the next 20 years. In particular, the seminar assessed the prospects for achieving balanced regional development, which is a core objective of the National Development Plan, and examined the appropriateness of the concepts that underpin the work on the strategy to date. The occasion also marked the launch of **NIRSA, the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis**, which has been established at NUI Maynooth in collaboration with researchers in five other institutes (Waterford Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Sligo Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick) to provide a unique national facility promoting research on the dynamics of spatial relationships and how these affect regional development.

Formally launching NIRSA **the Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Mr. Noel Dempsey, TD., welcomed the establishment of NIRSA and stressed that he was particularly pleased that a Government initiative in support of research that was led by the Department of Education and Science and the HEA had ramifications across all Government departments and especially his own. In a time when the Government was putting the final touches to its National Spatial Strategy (NSS) he said that " ... it was essential that fundamental and focussed research informed that strategy". He described the National Spatial Strategy as an initiative of immense importance that has the potential to significantly enhance the effectiveness of the entire spectrum of public policies and strategies.**

"This Strategy will provide the long-term framework for achieving balanced regional development which will also be sustainable in relation to society, the economy, the cultural heritage and the natural environment", he said. **"It will significantly influence where people will live and work, the quality of their lives**, the capacity of society and the economy to cope with the pressures of globalisation and also the capability to exploit opportunities presented by new technologies and new patterns of production and

consumption”, he added. He went on to say that “... the Strategy will enhance the Peace Process by facilitating greater integration of the economies of the Republic and Northern Ireland”.

Professor Gerry Boyle, Head of the Department of Economics at NUI Maynooth and Director of NIRSA, spoke about the structures, funding opportunities and research agenda of NIRSA. He pointed out that *NIRSA* had been established under the Higher Education Authority’s Programme for Research in Third Level Institutes with substantial exchequer and private funding under the National Development Plan. The Institute will promote research on the dynamics of spatial relationships and how these affect regional development, and which will inform policy development and analysis at national, regional and local level. Professor Boyle said that “...the initiative to support research on the significance of space in economic and social development is **very timely in the context of the National Spatial Strategy** that is being prepared by the Government to guide patterns of development over the next twenty years”.

***NIRSA* is a unique and highly innovative initiative that is both inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional.** It will bring together researchers from the disciplines of Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Sociology and Mathematics. It is also a collaborative venture involving NUI Maynooth, Waterford Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Mary Immaculate College/University of Limerick, Sligo Institute of Technology and the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. **Its research focus will extend from the local domain to regional, national and international contexts.**

***NIRSA* Research Associates have already made substantial contributions to the research programme commissioned by the Department of the Environment and Local Government for the National Spatial Strategy.** Furthermore, the Institute is **currently assisting many City and County Development Boards in the preparation of City and County strategies for development.**

Professor Jim Walsh, Head of the Department of Geography at NUI Maynooth and Chairman of the Board of NIRSA, presented the findings of the recent research work carried out by NIRSA on the National Spatial Strategy, and on the prospects for achieving balanced regional development. He welcomed the approach set out in the recent Consultation Paper on the National Spatial Strategy published by the Government, saying that **it represents a pragmatic response to the objective of achieving balanced regional development.** He suggested that previous attempts to devise a strategy for balanced regional development relied on growth centres and the attraction of inward investment and that this approach, which was characterised by spatial selectivity, failed in Ireland and in other countries. **“The National Spatial Strategy for the 21st century must be inclusive and sustainable”**, he said.

Professor Walsh went on to say that **“the National Spatial Strategy will need to be co-ordinated with the recently completed strategy for Northern Ireland so that an All-Ireland framework for spatial**

development can be implemented. New institutional arrangements will be required to ensure that the NSS is implemented effectively. A unit such as the recently established Spatial Planning Unit in the Department of the Environment and Local Government will need to be given overall responsibility to oversee the implementation of the strategy. It will require the support of structures that will facilitate inter-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination and co-operation”. “In addition, an enhanced range of responsibilities will need to be assigned to Regional Authorities while at the local level City and County Development Boards will be required to devise strategies with a more explicit spatial focus for their respective areas”, he added.

Commenting on the results of recent research undertaken at NUI Maynooth Professor Walsh made the following points:

- **The fundamental cause of differential rates of economic growth between and within regions is variation in productivity levels,** with the highest levels associated with activities that are most frequently found in large urban centres.
- **Dublin is the principal gateway linking Ireland to Europe and the global economy.** The assemblage of supporting structures in the Dublin city region has underpinned most of the economic expansion over the last decade.
- **None of the other cities has the capacity to become a significant component in the European urban system.**

Professor Walsh said that a major challenge for the NSS is to provide the conditions that will, over a number of years, facilitate the emergence of a new urban structure that will include a significant counter attraction to Dublin. This may require **vigorous promotion of some radical proposals such as a multiple centre development zone linking Galway, Limerick and Cork with extensions to many other towns.**

In order to achieve sufficient critical mass to sustain development and to maintain vibrant populations enjoying a high quality of life **it will be necessary to secure greater co-operation between towns that have traditionally been competitors.**

The research to date has revealed some new realities that the National Spatial Strategy will attempt to address. There are many issues that require further research.

The National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, NIRSA, is a strategic response by NUI Maynooth and the collaborating institutions to promote research on questions that will greatly influence the types and patterns of development, and the resultant quality of life of people throughout Ireland, in the future. It represents a major addition to the research infrastructure in Ireland, which will significantly enhance the quality of research on regional and spatial aspects of development.

Other speakers at the launch included the Chairman of the HEA, Dr Don Thornhill, Professor Brendan Whelan, Director of the ESRI, Dr Seamus Smyth, President of NUI Maynooth and Dr Tom McCarthy, Dean of Research and Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth.

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