

**Address by Mr. Michael Kitt, T.D.,  
Minister of State at the Department of the  
Environment, Heritage and Local  
Government**

**at the 2009 ICLRD Annual Conference**

**Letterkenny,**

**Thursday, 22 January 2009**

Mayor, Minister, distinguished guests,

A dhaoine uaisle,

Tá an-áthas orm go bhfuil deis agam cúpla focal a rá anseo inniú in éineacht leis an Aire Ó Murchú. Cé go bhfuil fadhbanna san eacnamaíocht domhanda, tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach nach gcaillimid ár misneach agus go bhfeicimid go bhfuil fós deiseanna iontacha ar fáil chun an oileán ina iomláine a fhorbairt ar bhealach inbhuanaithe eacnamaíoch agus shóisialta.

At the outset, I wish to convey Minister Gormley's apologies for not being able to be here. He has been occupied over the past couple of days with Government meetings regarding plans to address the unprecedented economic situation we find ourselves in. Nevertheless, I do know that he very much wanted to be here to see and hear about progress and initiatives in regional development on both sides of the border and indeed more importantly on cross-border issues, and he has asked me to pass on his best wishes for the conference.

The discussions and debates envisaged for this conference are timely. Since last year's conference, we find ourselves in a vastly different economic situation, which has potentially profound implications for the country, for our economy and ultimately for the lives of our citizens. However, in such times, we must look for and grasp the opportunities to plan for the future and to implement those plans in a practical, balanced and cooperative manner.

Governments, not just on this island, but across the world, are grappling with deteriorating economic circumstances – but I don't want to spend my time

focussing on the negative. I'd rather concentrate on what we can do, individually and collectively, to pull ourselves out of this recession and make the most of the opportunities and advantages that we have at our disposal.

Our relative size can put us at a disadvantage, but it also enables us to be flexible and adaptable – traits that enabled us to create the Celtic Tiger. Therefore, there is an onus on us all to query and question how we operate, how we spend the taxpayer's money and whether we can do things better and more efficiently. As policy makers, we need to know:

- where we are in terms of delivering sustainable development?
- are our policies reflective of the reality on the ground?
- how can we grow our economy and the quality of life of our citizens in a sustainable way?

These are big questions, but I believe that this is where spatial planning plays a key role. Its many components can build a comprehensive picture which provides us with:

- an evidence-based rationale for future development – what needs to be done, where it should be done and why it should be done;
- key information which enables us to prioritise and target State investment, both hard and soft infrastructure; and
- the overall vision to create competitive and dynamic cities and regions which will help improve quality of life in economic, social and environmental terms.

In global terms, we're a small nation on a small island. In order to withstand and recover from economic shocks, we must maximise our strengths and

ensure that we are well-positioned to grasp the opportunities that we have or that come our way.

As well as our shared cultural heritage, we also have strong (and indeed growing) economic links with Northern Ireland. The reality we must all face is that we are operating within an all-island economy and so we have to start thinking in those terms. We are stronger when we work together - we can achieve more through collaboration than competition. This is well demonstrated in cross-border initiatives such as the Newry Dundalk Twin City Initiative and the North-West Gateway Initiative and Minister Murphy will outline some aspects of these initiatives in his address.

In order to put firm and positive strategies in place for all-island collaboration on spatial planning, it is crucial that it is founded on a shared vision - mutual agreement on what we want to achieve and how we can do it. This is why the Framework for Collaboration on Spatial Strategies on the Island of Ireland is critically important. It is built around three main themes and objectives:

- putting into action a focused range of regional and local spatial planning initiatives for key development areas identified in both my Government's National Spatial Strategy and in Northern Ireland's Regional Development Strategy;
- a prioritised programme of highly strategic and targeted investments to support key aspects of both spatial strategies; and
- a programme of research to further deepen our knowledge of development patterns trends and their drivers on an all-island basis.

I must stress that the Framework for Collaboration will be challenging – it asks us those questions I set out earlier - but the potential benefits arising from greater collaboration are enormous. Therefore, we must see it as a starting point which will require commitment, energy, support and clear actions from all stakeholders – central and local Governments, Government and State Agencies, the private sector, academia and NGOs.

Both my own Department and Minister Murphy's are leading by example. My Department is undertaking an update and refresh of the NSS to assess where we are, six years into the 20-year spatial framework and, perhaps more crucially, where we're heading. Given the significant economic and social change in the last six or seven years and the uncertain short- to medium-term future, we feel it is timely to undertake this refresh. It will also closely tie in with the statutory reviews of our Regional Planning Guidelines which are to be undertaken this year and which translate the principles of the NSS into regional and local policies and targets. It also links in with the review of the Regional Development Strategy which Minister Murphy and his officials are driving.

The NSS Refresh will stock take what has been achieved, learn from best practice – what is working and where can we do things better, identify the challenges over the next few years and set new and clear priorities for action. The overall aim will remain of achieving more balanced regional development so that all regions can fully harness their development potential and that the country and island as a whole continues to grow.

Cities and larger urban areas that are attractive, competitive, sustainable and dynamic are one of the key drivers for regional development. International research clearly shows that successful countries and regions must have successful cities and urban areas at their core. As well as bringing economies of scale, good linkage between businesses and a concentrated skilled workforce, competitive cities contribute to the formation of competitive regions by acting as economic engines that promote regional growth and employment.

The process of updating and refreshing the NSS will look at our network of cities, our gateways and hub towns and set out what needs to be done to assure and accelerate their development as drivers for their wider regions and their more rural environs. Challenging questions will also need to be addressed within the NSS update and refresh process about the roles that rural areas must play in the wider context of regional development.

The NSS refresh, the review of the RDS and the endorsement of the Collaborative Spatial Framework are interlinked and interdependent. In these uncertain and challenging times, this interaction is needed more than ever.

Lest you think that we spend all our time planning and strategising in the Custom House in Dublin, I would like to outline that we are also facing up to the real challenges around facilitating and guiding development to the right locations and ensuring that development happens in a joined-up and effective manner.

One of the Department's recent initiatives is the Developing Areas Initiative. We have identified 48 fast-growing urban and suburban areas in the Republic which are under development pressure in terms of economic or social demand and where there is a lack of, or a need for, more joined-up central and local actions and governance to meet that demand in a co-ordinated way. We have identified the range of hard infrastructure – roads, water services and so on – as well as the softer infrastructure – the schools, amenities, community facilities - needed in these areas and the sequencing for that infrastructure. Our next and more critical challenge is to ensure that the resources are available and prioritised to deliver it to them within what is available at central and local levels.

Before I finish and give the platform to Minister Murphy, I would like to emphasise the importance of tomorrow's Plenary session of the North South Ministerial Council in Magee Campus, Derry. The focus on cross-border opportunities dovetails totally with the work of this Council and I would encourage Minister Murphy and all our Ministerial colleagues, North and South, to highlight the many positive interactions and to provide a shared and agreed approach to further embed collaboration and coordination for the good of both jurisdictions and the overall growth of the island's economy.

I wish you all well with the conference and my thanks again to the ICLRD for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh. Slán agus beannacht.

ENDS