



Project: Northern Sparsely Populated Areas Foresight 2020
Policy road map

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NOTE

Policy road map for the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas

The Policy Road Map for the NSPA is part of a process identifying the shared ambitions, opportunities and challenges of East Finland, North Finland, North Norway, Mid Sweden and North Sweden. The objective is to create the basis for a dialogue between this group of regions and European institutions.

The actions listed have been defined on the basis of a scenario exercise organised in 2008/2009, and involving the Brussels representation offices of the regions of North Finland, East Finland, North Norway, North Sweden and Mid Sweden and civil servants, politicians and researchers from the concerned regions. Representatives from the European Commission and the Swedish Ministry of Enterprise also attended the workshops and provided inputs and reactions.

The focus is on the role EU policies may play in the general regional dynamics of the NSPA and on how the NSPA may position their initiatives in favour of more innovative, sustainable, robust and prosperous towns and communities in the wider European territorial context. The ambition is to demonstrate that, while NSPA economies require specific treatment in some respects, they provide important inputs to European industries. Building on existing strengths and identified resources and by implementing some targeted measures to overcome key demographic and transport related obstacles it is possible to significantly increase the contribution of the NSPA to European overall levels of economic performance.

The Road Map also presents a strategy on how to profile the NSPA as a natural component of the European territory, with a predominantly prosperous economy. This strategy should be considered in combination with the ambition for the NSPA in 2020 and examples of good practice presented in the report *Strong, Specific and Promising: Towards a Vision for the NSPA in 2020*.

We would like to thank all the workshop participants and persons having provided valuable reactions and comments on earlier versions of the road map.

Introduction

The purpose of the NSPA Vision is to ensure that these regions shall be part of the solution rather than the problem when confronted with the major foreseen European and global challenges in the 2020 horizon.

Among these challenges, one may in particular mention

- **Globalisation**, creating new opportunities for trade and industrial production, but also an increased competition, requiring all regions to carefully position themselves on the basis of their assets;
- **Climate changes** that can reduce the agricultural production potential of regions exposed to drought, threaten local ecosystems and increase the frequency with which extreme weather conditions occur;
- Rapid increases in **energy prices** that may on a mid to long term basis result from the increasing discrepancy between fossil energy production and demand, and pressures to reduce emissions of green house gases;
- Low birth rates reinforcing the ageing processes and eventually leading to **population decline** in large parts of Europe. Combined with rapid population growth outside Europe's borders this can lead to migratory pressures and difficult integration processes.

Additionally, the uncertainties in the geopolitical situation, especially in relation to Russia, may have a significant impact on development perspectives for Europe. As the only EU border region to Russia together with the Baltic States, the NSPA has a specific role to play in this regard.

In many regards, the NSPA are at the forefront of these main European challenges:

- Their economies, where exports of primary goods play a major role, have been particularly exposed to global fluctuations in market prices. There are long traditions of adapting to changing economic contexts, and of creating institutional infrastructure minimising the social impact of these necessary adjustments;
- As an Arctic and Sub-Arctic region, they are particularly exposed to rapid climate changes in the polar areas;
- In terms of energy, the NSPA has a major potential in terms of energy production, both renewable (hydropower, bio-energy) and fossil (gas in the Barents Sea); on the other hand, it is particularly dependent on fossil energy for transport;
- The NSPA has been experiencing population decline in a number of peripheral communities for a number of decades. It therefore has particular experience dealing with the challenges this entails, especially in terms of public service provision.

1. Fully exploiting NSPA resources

The end of cheap fossil energy and the increasing awareness of the obligation to adopt sustainable modes of production create a change of paradigm for all development policies. The consumption of non-renewable resources has caused an increasing neglect of many less profitable sources of energy, food and industrial raw materials. Typically, a concentration of agricultural production to the most fertile and climatically advantaged regions has been made possible with the intensive use of pesticides, fertilizers and machinery. The flipside of this evolution has been that the geographical extent of agricultural lands and commercially exploited forests has been reduced. Areas such as the NSPA have seen a major contraction of their “used space” as a result of this.

This now has to change, as illustrated by the recent focus on the bio-energy production potential of the NSPA. The full exploitation of NSPA forestry and agricultural resources is therefore high on the agenda in the 2020 horizon. This obviously does not imply a return to past forms of agriculture. It is rather about designing new sustainable modes exploitation of maximising the energy and industrial raw materials delivered by the NSPA, while minimising the energy consumption and carbon footprint of these activities. Allowing such new forms of production to emerge has major implications in terms of settlement patterns.

The NSPA in particular has a great potential for energy production based on biomass, wind power and waste heat from industrial plants. An optimal exploitation of these resources, in terms of regional socioeconomic benefits as well as creation of wealth, first presupposes basic research focusing on the specific conditions of the NSPA. The northern higher education and research institutions already have a proven track record in this respect, which can be built upon. Secondly, institutional and business innovations are needed to improve the production and consumption of energy. Social and economic research in these fields and the experience gained from the implementation of innovative solutions are potential export products of NSPA regions.

The NSPA nature is not only a source of raw materials and energy, but also the main asset of the tourism industry. Fully exploiting the resources of the NSPA therefore also implies preserving the landscapes and ways of life on which the regions build their reputation. A sustainable long-term strategy for tourism development needs to incorporate the fragility of NSPA ecosystems and the uncertainties connected to climate change.

The NSPA includes Sápmi, the cultural region traditionally inhabited by the Sámi people. Its organisations and representatives have highlighted their specific interests with regards to the use of NSPA resources, which do not always converge with the modes of exploitation advocated by other groups. One of the objectives assigned to the expert group appointed by the national governments of Finland, Norway and Sweden in 2001 was to establish a more satisfactory legal framework for the settlement of these conflicts. This group put forward a draft Nordic Sámi convention in November 2005, which is still under discussion. The NSPA development strategy shall incorporate the advances made in these exchanges and ensure a full participation of Sámi institutions and organisations in the formulation of its strategic objectives.

It is a strategic objective for the NSPA in the 2020 horizon to identify strategies to maximise the sustainable exploitation of NSPA forestry and agricultural resources, in view of adapting to a changing situation on the world markets in the food and energy sectors. Corresponding policies must not jeopardise the growth potentials of the so-called “experience economy”, including tourism activities. They shall be grounded in the European ambition to develop holistic ecosystem based approaches to the management of human activities, with a focus on

sustainable social systems. This ambition raises specific concerns in the NSPA regarding the Sámi indigenous people, their traditional ways of life and culture. The fragility of the Arctic and Sub-Arctic environments of the NSPA, the challenging climatic conditions and the long distances need to be highlighted.

The NSPA is one of Europe's most important areas with regards to mineral resources, both in terms of mining and oil and gas extraction. Pursued efforts to extract these will reduce Europe's dependency on imports from the rest of the world, the disruption of which could have major consequences for European manufacturing industries. These risks have been highlighted in the November 2008 communication from the European Commission on the Raw Materials Initiative. From the NSPA regions' point of view, the economic benefits of the exploitation of mineral resources have furthermore been limited, when compared to the market value of the extracted ore and refined products. For these different reasons, it is necessary to design an EU policy for mineral resources.

The NSPA shall promote the formulation of a strategic EU mineral policy, based on projections on the needs of European industries, the production potentials in different parts of Europe and beyond. The purpose of such a policy shall be to ensure a sufficient and stable supply of European industries, to promote environmentally and socially responsible modes of extraction and to improve the contribution of mineral resource exploitation to the long term economic development of the concerned NSPA regions.

International pressures to intensify oil and gas exploration and extraction in the Barents Sea are likely to increase. The coast of North Norway will be particularly exposed to the environmental hazards connected to these activities, but their development directly or indirectly affects all of the NSPA. The NSPA shall actively promote European policies giving regional stakeholders a significant role in the design and implementation of policies surrounding the exploitation of natural resources.

The NSPA can also boast some of the Europe's largest fisheries, both in terms of capture and aquaculture. These activities are vulnerable to overexploitation, variations in fish populations and migration patterns and to rising energy prices. It is therefore a challenge to organise these activities in a sustainable way, both with a sufficient economic predictability for local communities and a constant adaptation to the evolution of the stocks. Aquaculture techniques are constantly being improved and developed, and constitute a major economic opportunity for NSPA coastal areas.

The NSPA shall emphasize the regional dimension in European and national fishery policies and encourage sustainable forms of capture and aquaculture that combine high socio-economic benefits with a low energy consumption and carbon footprint. The economic and social benefits that can be drawn from the exploitation of possible new fish resources appearing in the NSPA as a consequence of climate change need to be analysed. The international dimension of the fishery sector also needs to be emphasised, as a major source of employment in the processing and commercialisation sectors and as an important component in the supply of food across Europe.

2. Managing demographic trends

Decreasing population is the central challenge of the NSPA. Contrary to what is suggested in many European maps, this challenge occurs in specific localities and not in the regions as a whole. Most NSPA cities experience strong demographic growth.

Some of the local demographic decline is an adaptation to changing economic conditions. It therefore does not necessarily call for policies seeking to maintain current settlement patterns. Controlled depopulation however presupposes that the demographic decline is accompanied, to ensure an acceptable access to public and private services for the remaining population. Continued efforts to improve service provision structures are needed, especially through new forms of cooperation between public and private sectors, including the social economy.

Many NSPA localities experience a paradoxical situation, where the lack of available labour with adequate competencies is perceived as the main limitation for economic development. This is partly related to the out-migration of youth and women. To reverse these trends, special attention needs to be paid to education opportunities and place attractiveness. Attracting these groups would also help reducing the mismatch between the employment opportunities and the professional profile of the job seekers. Combined efforts to improve training and lifelong learning opportunities and to attract persons with the right competencies are needed.

A range of NSPA opportunities for growth and development are not exploited because of a lack of labour force with adequate competencies. Targeted efforts in view of improving competence levels of the local population and attracting foreigners and nationals with appropriate professional profiles are therefore needed. This implies improving the knowledge of factors currently reducing the propensity of workers to settle in the NSPA and designing policies addressing these issues. Such research should also focus on novel housing and commuting strategies combined with advanced solutions to provide services and promote social networking in sparsely populated areas, and on the particular needs of women and youth.

The strategic objectives of the NSPA related to the exploitation of natural resources however have implications in terms of settlement patterns. One therefore cannot rely on the market alone to identify settlements of which the existence would no longer be justified. The NSPA needs a settlement strategy which is based on the political ambition to ensure a long term sustainable exploitation of resources. This implies taking into account not only the current demand situation, but also foreseen future trends.

The current and future exploitation of natural resources shall be organised around harmonious communities. This implies a balanced representation of genders and age groups. More generally, the principles of the European model of society shall apply as basis for economic development, with a good access to public and private services.

Drawing experience from its history of single industry towns, the NSPA shall design and implement proactive policies to preserve the social dimension in economic development initiatives. This should in particular be done through improved partnerships involving the civil society as well as the public and private sectors, including the social economy. Local and external research and development institutions also need to be mobilised, in a Triple or Quadruple helix perspective.

A strategic settlement policy, focusing on foreseen future opportunities and labour needs, shall help ensuring that economic development projects can be built around existing communities. The NSPA can be a driving force in Europe formalising the link between regional policy and the geopolitical ambitions of Europe, as an economic growth organised around dynamic local communities in the NSPA can be a particularly efficient tool to promote integration and cooperation with North-West Russia. The instruments required to implement a strategic settlement policy however need to be defined, and the corresponding financial means funded.

3. The economic focus of the NSPA: knowledge economy and process/manufacturing industries

The NSPA has a proven track record in developing a wide range of globally competitive, knowledge intensive products and services, not least in terms of high technology products based on available raw materials. The regions of Västerbotten, Troms and North Ostrobothnia have all exceeded the threshold of 3 % of GDP spending devoted to R&D set by the “Barcelona target” in 2002. Northern Ostrobothnia is even well above this level, as it could boast a 7% share of R&D spending in 2005¹. When it comes to the proportion of employment in Knowledge Intensive Services (KIS), North Sweden, North Norway and Mid Sweden rank respectively 9th, 11th and 14th among the 300 ‘NUTS 2 regions’ of the European Union and EFTA². The general level of education is as high as the national average, including the rural parts of the NSPA. This in the case of the Finnish NSPA implies that the performance of the educational system is among the highest in the world³.

The knowledge of the processes having lead to these high levels of achievement however needs to be systematised and exploited for future development strategies. This in particular relates to governance structures, including private-public cooperation schemes, knowledge systems and the accumulation of know-how in small, peripheral settlements. Quality of life finally appears as a decisive factor when it comes to attracting and keeping persons with key competencies.

Evidence shows that only settlements within commuting distance from a town or city offering a range of public and private services have avoided demographic decline over the last 15 years. The few exceptions in this regard concern some settlements with a particularly well-developed tourism industry. Diffusion effects from the main centres are on other hand difficult to identify: There is little evidence of economic growth dynamics initiated in NSPA towns and cities and then extending to other parts.

The main strategic objective of the NSPA is to ensure that all settlements to be developed have access to a sufficient range of services. The main role of larger towns and cities for the overall development of NSPA regions lies in their capacity to cater for the needs and expectations of the inhabitants in terms of services. They can however not be expected to function as “growth poles”; growth dynamics must be encouraged in each individual settlement where in-commuting to a larger town or city is not an option. The role of public authorities can in this regard be expected to increase if the current problems on the international financial market persist.

¹ Sigrid Hedén et al. (2008) *National overviews of regional innovation policies and case studies in the Nordic countries*, Nordregio WP 2008:2, <http://www.nordregio.se/Files/wp0802.pdf>

² Eurostat (2008), p. 4.

³ OECD (2008) *OECD Rural Policy Reviews: Finland*, data from OECD Pisa evaluation 2006.

A main limiting factor preventing local NSPA entrepreneurs and in-migrants from implementing economic development ideas is the lack of available capital. This situation may be accentuated with current uncertainties on the global financial markets. To compensate for this, the ambition of the NSPA is that part of the income generated from the exploitation of its natural resources should be allocated to an organisation making funding available for economic development projects in the region.

Multiple types of activities can be developed. The production of high value added products on the basis of local natural resources can be encouraged, as illustrated by certain segments of the existing process industries. A number of limiting factors must however be kept in mind. On the one hand, the lack of available labour force makes it difficult to envisage certain types of industrial projects. On the other, the vertical integration of multinational corporations involved in the exploitation of NSPA natural resources can make them more prone to position processing and manufacturing activities in more central areas with cheaper labour. The development of industrial activities in the NSPA must therefore be targeted at carefully selected projects adapted to the diversity of local conditions.

Knowledge intensive research and development activities are by contrast less dependent on external limiting factors. The success of a range of initiatives, particularly focusing on local specific competitive advantages such as within car testing, remote sensing, marine bio-spectring, forestry, environmental technology (cleantech) or telemedicine, illustrate the capacity of the NSPA to host world leading research and development environments. Further improving the thematic focus of higher education institutions and their capacity to create spin-offs could further improve the competitive position of the NSPA in this regard.

While the export of raw materials from the NSPA implies that a large part of their potential value added goes lost for the regions, the structural obstacles to the development of more extensive processing and manufacturing industries can be difficult to overcome. Constant efforts must be made to sustain the competitive edge of existing industries. However, development strategies must also be cautious and incorporate limiting factors deriving from the lack of available workforce and the strategic interests of relevant multinational companies. A further focus on knowledge intensive research and development activities may, by contrast, appear as a relatively easier path to follow, with higher potential gains for the region. Their development however requires capital to be made available to local entrepreneurs, for example through a fund financed by income generated by the exploitation of natural resources.

Both process industries and knowledge intensive research and development require a range of supporting services, of which a larger production could be produced within the NSPA. This would contribute to diversify the labour markets and generate more robust local economies. Creating the basis for a more extensive NSPA service sector must be a strategic objective for NSPA research and higher education institutions, so as to develop the necessary competences.

Creative sectors such as film and music production can be significant sources of growth, as exemplified by the "*Filmpool nord*" in Luleå, by the series of successful initiatives in the media, design and electronic game development sectors and by the cultural festivals organised in these regions. Regional strategies need to further explore the economic development perspectives made possible by the internet information and communication technologies, precisely identifying current limiting factors and identifying measures to compensate for these. The numerous success stories demonstrate that peripheral and sparsely populated regions can participate fully in the creative economy.

The tourism industry is in a unique position when it comes to stimulating growth and development in more remote parts of the NSPA, as it is the only sector which has proven capable of generating demographic growth beyond the commuting area of large towns and cities. The infrastructural challenge of managing peak transport flows and seasonal variations in population numbers however presuppose a substantial involvement of public authorities. Climate change creates potential opportunities, as skiing conditions deteriorate in continental Europe, but may also require new types of strategies to be designed in the NSPA.

The NSPA considers the tourism industry as the main instrument to promote a sustained human presence in some peripheral and remote parts of the NSPA, potentially in combination with other economic activities. This however requires pro-active infrastructural policies and efforts in terms of branding the NSPA as an attractive winter and summer destination.

4. Infrastructure strategies for the NSPA: Intra-regional coherence and global connections

Infrastructure strategies are of particular importance in a peripheral and sparsely populated region such as the NSPA. The challenge is twofold: on the one hand, bringing the resources of the NSPA out to European and global markets in an efficient way; on the other, improving the intra-regional coherence of the NSPA, by facilitating access to services, general mobility and commuting.

The dependence on fossil energy is a significant weakness of the NSPA concerning both freight and passenger traffic. While the development of rail infrastructure may efficiently reduce this dependency in Sweden, with its population and economic activities concentrated in relatively few settlements, the challenge is greater in Norway and in Finland. It is important to facilitate a shift in favour of more sustainable modes of transportation with the least possible negative consequences for NSPA industries. Policies promoting inter-modality, combining local road transports, long haul train transport and sea ports are needed to prepare for a foreseeable mid- to long-term increase in fossil energy prices.

A central political objective is to identify of win-win situations, allowing the NSPA to provide the infrastructure needed for its industrial development while at the same time facilitating daily mobility and commuting. The railway projects along the Bothnian corridor, creating a new high speed rail connection between Kramfors and Umeå to be finalised in 2010, provide good examples of such win-win situations. The Bothnian corridor is a strategically important transnational element of in the freight transportation system of Europe. This corridor runs along the Swedish and Finnish coasts of the Bothnian Sea, connecting east-west and north-south transnational axes in Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia. However improved connections along this axis would also make it possible to create larger and more robust labour markets, to organise public and private service provision more efficiently and to improve the mobility of the population within their region.

At the transnational level, the Bothnian corridor connects to the Northern Axis, which runs from Narvik to St. Petersburg through Haparanda and Vartiu. This link is part of the Northern Dimension Partnership on Transport and Logistics to be made operational by January 1st, 2010. It has a global dimension as a component of the Northern East West (NEW) freight Corridor project, whose objective is to develop an intermodal transport corridor between North Western China, Russia and the North American East Coast. The Northern Axis also connects with the ViaBaltica infrastructure development project along the Finnfive highway, linking East and North Finland to the Baltic States, Poland and Germany.

On each side of the Gulf of Bothnia, at the level of Umeå and Vaasa (Kvarken Region), the Bothnian corridor is crossing the ViaNordica axis (E12) which runs from Helsinki to Mo i Rana in Norway. In combination, a further development of the Bothnian corridor and the ViaNordica (E12) would make it possible to envisage a variety of industrial integration scenarios across the NSPA and beyond and facilitate exports.

In order to increase the interaction between the eastern and western shores of the Gulf of Bothnia, and facilitate flows along the ViaNordica (E12), discussions on the possibility of establishing a fixed link between Umeå and Vaasa are ongoing. This would further increase the relative weight of this East-West axis in the transport system of the NSPA.

The Bothnian corridor is also of importance for the North East Cargo Link, which is the east-western rail freight transportation axis running from Trondheim to Saint-Petersburg through Östersund, Härnösand, Vaasa (Kaskö) and Mikkelä.

Finally, to the south, the Bothnian corridor connects with the Nordic triangle, which links the Nordic countries and their capital cities to each other and improves connections to central Europe and between the EU and Russia.

Therefore, even if Norway has no major national corridor, more pro-active policies may be developed exploiting the connections in directions of the Bothnian corridor while taking full advantage of the Northern Maritime Corridor and the strategic position as European gateway to the emerging transcontinental Arctic corridors. Already today the railway infrastructure along the Bothnian Corridor is used for frequent transit transports of fish between Narvik and Oslo in Norway.

These initiatives illustrate the ambition to combine the diversity of transport potentials in the NSPA and to develop transit traffic from Russia. More projects based on an integrated NSPA view on transport strategies can be developed, looking at the socio-economic benefits of industrial transport projects in a wider perspective.

The NSPA shall address the challenge of increasing energy prices, so as to minimise the long term threats to settlement patterns and to economic development. This perspective shall prevail when seeking to improve the coherence of the regional transport system. Developing the possibilities to commute using public modes of transportation is a main instrument to increase the sustainability of regional transportation systems. Actions making freight transports less dependent on fossil energy are also a strategic Community interest, insofar as they contribute to making NSPA resources available to European industries and markets in a long term perspective.

Congestion is a major limitation to economic development in the NSPA. This particularly concerns the mining sector, which requires infrastructure capable of handling large volumes. The development of the Bothnian corridor is largely justified in response to the specific needs of the mining industry. Rather than being a corridor in the general sense, as an axis along which various types of economic activities are being promoted, the Bothnian corridor is a response to concrete obstacles to industrial development.

The Bothnian Corridor furthermore illustrates the different geographic foci of the NSPA, developing interactions both with Eastern and Western Europe. It facilitates access to the major emerging markets of Russia and the Baltic States. It also allows for a more efficient provision of fish to Polish processing plants, which are among the largest in Europe. The other side of the Bothnian corridor connects the NSPA to the markets and industrial centres of Western Europe. The Bothnian corridor

therefore has an important symbolic value, as the meeting point of the two main north-south axes of Europe converging in the NSPA.

The NSPA is however still suffering from the lack of internal integration, as illustrated by the absence of air connections between its three national parts. The potential socio-economic benefits from establishing such a connection are important, improving the range of service activities in the NSPA and the capacity to initiate economic development projects. Experience has however shown that such transnational lines are not profitable on the short term. Subsidised connections can therefore be considered as a tool to improve the “critical mass” of NSPA regions and their economic capacity.

While great uncertainty surrounds infrastructure projects involving Russia, the need to improve the quality of these connections is undeniable. This is both strategically important from an economic point of view, ensuring that Europe gets a privileged access to North-West Russian natural resources, and geopolitically to promote the functional integration of the region. The EU therefore needs to weigh the short uncertainties of these projects up against the strategic long term interests.

In European contexts, the NSPA needs to highlight that current major infrastructure projects are not primarily regional policy measures seeking to reduce the isolation of peripheral regions. They are answers to concrete problems of congestion limiting economic growth and of insufficiently developed transversal East-West connections.

These projects can be designed in such a way as to increase the sustainable mobility of the NSPA population, improve the performance of NSPA labour markets and strengthen the transnational functional integration within the NSPA. The objective of the NSPA is to promote these wider perspectives on infrastructure improvements. This also includes the integration with Russia in the Barents Region. The EU should consider these connections as an instrument in its neighbourhood policies, promoting economic, social and institutional integration with NW Russia, thereby justifying a specific European involvement in their development.

5. Branding the NSPA as a Strong, Specific and Promising region

The overall objective is to demonstrate that the NSPA has the capacity to make efficient use of EU regional development incentives, producing results that can

- (a) make a significant positive difference, as compared to letting the market forces thrive without public interference, and
- (b) provide a long term economic added value for the concerned regions and for the EU as a whole that, in relation to the sums invested, is at the same level as metropolitan regions or other more densely populated areas.

This implies that the NSPA should be marketed as a region with high industrial performance and a generally strong economy. At the same time, certain specificities related to the structure of the production and to the low population densities, imply that the markets alone do not necessarily draw all the benefits from existing potentials. Specific measures are also required to ensure that economic development occurs in ways that are compatible with the European model of society, with balanced communities and a satisfactory access to services.

The capacity to adapt to changing economic contexts is another aspect of the strength of the NSPA. The dynamic research and development sector of the region pay testimony to the efforts made to

develop knowledge economy related dynamics in the region. Beyond the wide range of research linked to the NSPA primary resources and process industries, innovative solutions have also been developed in relation to climate change, telemedicine, elderly care and technical solutions for distance work. The NSPA has thereby shown a capacity to transform some of its handicaps into assets.

The NSPA shall profile itself as a Strong, Specific and Promising region. The objective is to highlight that development policies implemented in these regions will not only contribute to the objective of territorial cohesion, but will also make a significant contribution to increasing the overall economic performance of Europe. The strength of the NSPA so far lies in the performances of its different components; the NSPA remains an entity in the making, of which the relevance for European policy making must be further demonstrated.

Branding the NSPA is not a marketing process, but rather about changing the self-perception of people living in these regions. First, profiling the area as an entity in the European context shall help promoting networking between economic and institutional actors, as well as between NSPA research environments. Secondly, the shared understanding of NSPA challenges and opportunities will demonstrate the importance of attracting skilled foreign workers to this area. This implies actions facilitating the integration of in-migrants and showing the values of multi-culturalism, but also highlighting the assets which make the NSPA an attractive living environment. Thirdly, a branding process will need to emphasise the diversity of the NSPA. Not only do NSPA regions have different and complementary economic profiles. There are also very different development challenges to be addressed in large urban regions and in isolated rural settlements, in coastal areas and in the inlands. Branding the NSPA is therefore a process leading to the emergence of a shared conscience of belonging to a specific part of Europe.

Branding the NSPA is important in relation to Europe, to demonstrate that these regions are a significant component in continental economic development dynamics and that their shared issues justify references to the NSPA in EU policies. The branding process must however also be targeted at the populations and actors of the regions themselves, both to ensure that it is grounded in local realities and to change the self-perception of these regions.