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The 'region' has been a prominent focus of economic development studies for many years, fuelling conceptual and political debates about the relevance of this particular scale of activity as a unit of analysis and a site of social activity. Although these questions are still far from resolved, the nature of the debate has shifted decisively towards a larger, more compelling question – namely the scope for *sustainable* development in capitalist societies. In this new context, the role of the sub-national scale – regions, cities, localities – looks set to be as controversial as anything we have seen in the economic development debates of the recent past. Sub-national actors, particularly city mayors and state governors, have played an especially important role in the US for example, where they have sought to fashion an alternative vision to the Bush White House, which emasculated the federal state in this area, seeking to prevent it from advancing the cause of sustainability. In many other parts of the world, in developed and developing countries alike, sub-national actors often find themselves way ahead of their national governments, which can be positive if they act as forerunners of progressive policies that are eventually mainstreamed throughout the country. On the other hand, this vanguard role can be problematical if the sub-national space remains an isolated island of innovation, a 'little victory' that can be easily reversed by a recalcitrant or hostile national government. Uneven development within a multi-level governance system – whether it be in the EU, China or the US - clearly creates threats and opportunities for sub-national actors, the outcomes of which are empirical and contingent matters.

Though there is a literature that examines how *regional* scale activities contribute to sustainable development (for instance Hardy and Lloyd 1994, Benneworth et al. 2002, Chatterton 2002, Lafferty and Nardolavsky 2003, Haughton and Counsell 2004, Mainwaring et al. 2006, Zuindeau 2006), it is dwarfed by the literature devoted to the role of regions in economic development. Indeed, given the large amounts written about local and national approaches to sustainable development we could easily be forgiven for thinking that the regions are the weakest link in the governance landscape when it comes to sustainability.

This special issue lends some support to this view, especially where regional scales of governance lack legislative powers or financial resources. In such cases, lip service tends to be paid to issues which might broadly come under the sustainability banner, but little fundamental change in policy direction seems to emerge. The mood music switches, but that's about all. Elsewhere, however, the story is different, with some regional authorities taking great care to think through their approach to sustainable development and experimenting with innovative ways for embedding it in a whole of government approach and seeking to use various forms of power (persuasive, purchasing, regulatory, guidance) to influence the behaviour of business, communities, individuals and government itself. The resulting picture is one of hugely varying commitment across different types of regional authority.

This themed section on *Sustainable Regions* arises out of the Regional Studies Association annual conference on this theme in 2005. The theme Sustainable Regions is to us an important one, even if the phrase itself will almost inevitably leave some uncomfortable. We say this with great confidence in the knowledge that both words in the title individually seem to excite considerable terminological debate over their definition, analytical power and hidden assumptions. Joining them together just adds fire, and as with the term 'sustainable cities' is sure to be seen by some as an oxymoron. More than this, the sustainability literature in particular is full of accounts of multiple understandings, conflicts, and confusions. As important as some of these debates are, we don't propose to get too mired in them here. Rather, we treat the term 'sustainable regions' as simply an invitation to engage in critical analysis of how issues around sustainability have informed thinking and practice in diverse regional contexts.

Taking our lead from Phil McManus's discussion of relational geographies, where regions are seen as actively constructed and understood in multiple ways and with diverse geographies, we do not seek to reify 'the region' as a necessary or unique analytical scale. Instead we see value in thinking about regions as a prism for understanding how ideas about sustainable development work through at a variety of scales and across a range of sectors. This fits in neatly with the argument in Morgan's article that there has been an unhelpful privileging of scalar matters in recent regional literature, with too little attention to understanding the wider ways in which policy approaches are constructed and understood (see also Allmendinger and Haughton 2007). There is a clear link here to recent debates on the tensions between bounded, territorial and unbounded, relational spaces in the special issue of this journal on 'Whither Regional Studies?' Vol 41.9 (see Pike 2007). This work collectively suggests the need to develop practices and understandings that transcend narrow understandings of sustainability, regions or sustainable regions.

The multiple guises of sustainability in the regions

Several threads unite the papers in this collection. One is a commitment to combining theoretical insight with empirical evidence to interrogate a broadly based conception of sustainability issues. The second is an emphasis on attempting to understand the diversity of ways in which policy processes are adapting to some of the messages coming out of sustainable development debates. Thirdly, there is a shared optimism that sustainable development is changing the tone of some policy debates in positive

ways, allied to concerns about the extent and pace of change to date. Finally, all the papers point to the barriers to more far-reaching change and in two cases (Rob Krueger and David Gibbs, and Phil McManus), a strongly voiced concern is that when push comes to shove, *economic* interests usually prevail in making key decisions.

More than this, however, several key findings emerge from the articles in this collection. Firstly, the articles highlight the contrast between the rhetorical commitment made in various government and partnership strategies to some sort of regional sustainability, and the slow incremental shifts in institutional mindsets and changed practices. It is not always and everywhere thus, however. Rather, in most places and policy sectors, we can find evidence of both innovation and inertia, of vision and compromise, of policy aspiration and bureaucratic asphyxiation, stifling anything that requires a major change, especially in how existing funds are allocated.

Our second observation is that policy experimentation is often more widespread than it might initially seem to the critical researcher - it's just that it often happens outside the narrow constructs of 'sustainable development' policy as this is conventionally understood. For instance, Graham Haughton and colleagues (this issue) find it difficult to identify much that is distinctive in formal sustainable strategies, but note that the thinking within these strategies does infuse other strategies and wider policy development, often contributing to distinctiveness emerging in other sectors. In many ways this is perhaps much as one might hope for - it is not necessarily that we would expect a distinctive 'rhetoric' of sustainability, given the way the debate has evolved in official circles, but we might expect it to promote innovative ways of aspiring to ensure sustainability thinking permeates wider policy processes.

This tendency is evident particularly in the articles by Betsy Donald and Kevin Morgan. Donald (this issue) argues persuasively about the need to examine the organisation of sustainable food systems and corporate supply chains, not just individual firms or regions. This approach involves analysing how things connect at a broad level, in this case covering farm practices, distribution, production, retail, eaters and waste management. Adopting this perspective, she argues, helps make connections between 'sustainability' and other societal issues, such as food scares, scarcity and costs, obesity, and rural poverty, tracing the links across different policy issues. Morgan (this issue) likewise shows how policy innovation needs to be analysed across supply chains, in this case using the example of public procurement practices and the 'greening' of school meals. What these articles reveal is how aspects of sustainability are selectively drawn upon by policy-makers to justify sometimes quite radical departures in practice. Both authors use these insights to engage with the spatial dimension of sustainable food systems, one focusing primarily on the private sector and its supply chains, and the other on the public sector and its supply chains. In doing so, they open up new possibilities for analysing how sustainability thinking infuses practices in multiple, diffuse ways, requiring an analytical mindset which is not caught up in narrow understandings of how policy scales, sectors and actors operate. Both articles then are suggestive of how distinctive policies do not necessarily emerge singularly out of 'sustainability' discourses, but rather are constructed across multiple discourses, such as social justice, poverty, and health, where sustainability is one strand among many.

Thirdly, and related to the above, it is interesting to see how changing approaches to implementing more sustainable policies can have diverse ideological and conceptual underpinnings. Rob Krueger and David Gibbs (this issue) for instance critically engage with how ideas about 'smart growth' embody a distinctive market-led discourse for addressing sustainability issues, which seeks to 'incentivise' the market to pursue 'sustainable options'. They note how this approach has proved much more popular in the US than Local Agenda 21 (LA21), which has met with at best a tepid response in most US cities. It is the multiple understandings of environmental and sustainability issues which stand out most clearly from Phil McManus's (this issue) examination of the interplay of the wine, coal mining and equine industries in the upper Hunter Valley in Australia. Perhaps inevitably, tensions have emerged as a consequence of the different environmental expectations of the three industrial sectors. For the present, politicians appear to favour coal industry arguments about economic growth and jobs over environmental concerns, echoing some of the issues raised by Krueger and Gibbs. Adopting a more normative stance than any of the other authors in this special issue, McManus, argues that 'environmental' issues should be to the fore in sustainability issues, and makes his assessment of regional sustainability accordingly. By contrast, Kevin Morgan (this issue) is critical of 'narrow and emasculated' *environment-led* interpretations of sustainability in UK policy circles, arguing that governments and businesses alike find it easier to address these issues than social and economic problems.

Fourthly, there is an interesting pattern that 'sustainable' regional policies are often not being articulated through the discourses of sustainability, which politicians fear do not resonate as well with the public as they might. London's congestion charge, for example, is emphatically a major policy initiative that seeks to support behaviour patterns which are more sustainable, seeking to shift travelling patterns in favour of public transport rather than the car, and privileging cars which pollute less over vehicles. But it is a policy which is not being sold as 'sustainable' but as 'anti-congestion', where the green message is just one among many rationales. Perhaps for politicians and policy makers too, there is a degree of caution about engaging in policy change through the discourse of sustainability precisely because of the concept's breadth and malleability, which makes it vulnerable to cooptation and selective reworking to particular political agendas by very different interest groups.

Finally, it is interesting how debates around regional sustainable development are grounded in both local and global perspectives. At the international level, it is clear that there is considerable exchange of ideas going on between regions and nations. Rob Krueger and David Gibbs for instance note how smart growth ideas have been imported into the South East region of England, whilst Graham Haughton, Geoff Vigar and David Counsell (this issue) examine how the transfer of ideas between regions and nations has been facilitated by new communities of practice, keen to learn from elsewhere.

Conclusions

The five papers in this special issue all suggest that in their own ways that regional and local sustainable development ideas and practices are unlikely to be successful if they are seen as hermetically sealed and discrete. Sustainability ideas need to be porous and to leak out to shape and influence other policy domains. More than this,

we should welcome the potential for progressive ideas and practices from other policy domains that reshape our understanding of how sustainable development policies and practices.

The power of making connections conceptually and practically then emerges as a key theme of this special issue on Sustainable Regions. As Haughton and colleagues (this issue) note, new communities of practice are emerging at various sub-national scales that reflect both newly empowered scales of governance and official exhortations for better policy integration. What is critical here is that both new and existing policy communities around sustainable development are developing ways of working that are increasingly porous and multidirectional as they seek to make connections across policy sectors and policy scales. The challenge they still face however is to ensure that the noise created by the very diversity of conceptual and practical interpretations of sustainability and the wide range of actors do not combine to create over-burdened governance networks which fail to discriminate between progressive, innovative ideas, and more mundane practices and routines of acceptable 'business as usual' policy.

In conclusion it is perhaps worth making the obvious point that, without exception, all the papers in this special issue constitute work-in-progress, and as such they represent small vignettes of the sustainability debate in particular places at a certain point in time. One of the key questions to emerge from these papers – and a question which the Regional Studies Association is well-equipped to address - is what is the significance of local and regional action in the context of the global challenge of climate change? There are important debates still to be had on the prospects and pitfalls of identifying and then scaling up from successful local and regional sustainability actions. But equally important perhaps, there is an important debate to be had about whether we can develop and implement successful new approaches at a sufficient pace to address the challenges posed by the levels of climate change that scientific consensus seems to suggest lies ahead.

Acknowledgements

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